

Between Staging and Observation: Beauty in West German Newsreels and Roman Brodmann's *Die Misswahl* (1966)

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Beauty has long been neglected in film studies (cf. Hanich 2023). Taking the West German media landscape of the 1960s as a case study, this short paper examines how film shapes “human beauty,” navigating between “the pretty,” kitsch, and a more critical documentary beauty. It contrasts two opposing modes of documenting beauty pageants: newsreel coverage and Roman Brodmann's television documentary *Die Misswahl* (1966).

Although television was gaining viewers, newsreels remained part of cinema programs in the 1960s, covering national and international beauty competitions such as the Miss Germany contests. Their brevity demanded an entertaining aesthetic: skillful camera angles, soft-focus lighting, a fast-paced montage of highlights, and cheerful music. Beauty is staged primarily as “the pretty” in Rosalind Galt's sense (2011)—the decorative visual idiom traditionally devalued in film culture as superficial and feminine. The newsreel instrumentalizes it, reducing the young women to passive objects of display and producing a hierarchical regime of the gaze. This production of beauty also stabilizes normative images of women and offers a projection surface for an apparently unburdened national identity, normalcy, and growing prosperity in the young Federal Republic.

As an example of Direct Cinema (cf. Geng 2016), *Die Misswahl* breaks with this affirmative tradition. Observational camera work and a laconic, ironic commentary unmask the “production of beauty” behind the scenes: exhausted faces, grueling waiting, and physical strain, captured in harsh backstage lighting and longer observational shots. The paper asks whether the film locates a new form of “moral beauty” (cf. Diessner 2019) in the participants' unpretentious dignity and perseverance.

Following De Clercq (2013), the paper distinguishes beauty as a mere synonym for aesthetic pleasure from beauty as a specific, narrower aesthetic category. By contrasting framing, lighting, editing, and music in both formats, it shows how the documentary mode shapes differing concepts of beauty.

Does this fit a forthcoming conference, workshop, or publication? Suggestions and comments are welcome at wochenschau-forschung.de.

References

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