Abstract: Between 1920 and 1936, Romania evolved from a traditional agricultural society to a modern, cosmopolitan and consumerist one. Bucharest, its capital, synthesized these transformations. The Romanian pageant organizers competed in creating modern and relevant events displaying contestants who were close to the ideal woman, proving that their behaviour, morality, social standing are fit for the national and international norms. My paper will use gender studies and theories about nation and nationhood in order to explain the argument that beauty queens are viewed by the pageant organizers and aficionados as ambassadors not only of local, regional and national beauty, but also representatives of their cultures and nations. Therefore, they not only function as objects for contemplation and judgement, but also as powerful political, cultural, social and economic symbols. The newly born and prosperous Greater Romania sought to establish itself as an equal among the more powerful and certainly older Western European and non-European nations. One of the means to reach this goal, and arguably one of the most widespread and popular in Romania and abroad was using example citizens to showcase Romania’s qualities. Realitatea Ilustrată and Ilustrațiunea Română were the two magazines that organized two parallel Miss Romania pageants. Despite their rivalry and affiliation to two equally rival Miss Universe pageants, the idea of Miss Romania as an ambassador was the creed of both magazines. Miss Romania was warned that she is now the image of her whole nation and that it is her responsibility to represent Romania in all its greatness and beauty. Her role would be described as important as a sportsman representing their country abroad. The idea of Miss Romania as viewed in Interwar Romania was a very complex one. She could be described as a harbinger of feminine emancipation (both as an accolade and as a patriarchal critique), a pawn in an eugenics game fed to the masses as a means to control and reinvent the population, or an object used as a symbolic currency in political and capitalist exchanges. Her role as an ambassador is the most articulated and recognizable purpose of Miss Romania and can therefore be described as an excuse or starting point to every other aspect related to beauty pageants.

Keywords: beauty, nation, beauty contests, pageants, Miss Romania, Interwar Romania

Throughout history, the idea of beauty – like any other notion – was remembered, forgotten, amended, erased, accepted, rejected or embraced along the eons with the academic instruments accepted or at hand. Culture shifts from emotional to pragmatic response, from emphasis on form, components, essence or meaning, and thus notions such as beauty can be accepted as such or contested as unscientific, if not simply ignored and deemed irrelevant, conventionally thought as spiralling around subjectivity and objectivity with their own various understandings and definitions. Arthur Pontynen argues that limiting the aesthetic notion only to the subjective-objective dichotomy is to reduce knowledge to “meaningless experience”, an expression, he adds, of power and violence.\(^1\)

The idea of nation is no less ethereal than the one of beauty. It could be viewed as either a process or a result of an intense, controlled and yet chaotic process of narration of history. Alongside the ideas of nationalism and nationality, the nation are recognized for being highly difficult, if not impossible to explain in clear terms that are acceptable for all the facets and versions of the three concepts. Benedict Anderson identifies the three key impediments in clearly defining these concepts once and for all. The first is the discrepancy between the general progressive character of the researchers of nation and the archaic – and perhaps obsolete – one of the nationalists. The second is the shift of identity concepts that traditionally made individuals claim one identity or the other, but now are much more diffuse. The third, is the divergence between the meanings as understood politically and philosophically. All in all, communities are imagined and reimagined and continue shifting from traditional binary patterns to a complex and ethereal identitary chaos that shapes our present society.

The idea of nationhood be it global, national, regional, local, or related to political power or interests, is not an issue endemic to Romanian beauty pageants. Beyond the aesthetic and emotional elements such events entail, the political dimension, even though it may not be explicitly displayed, is built on feelings of nationalism, in an on-going and eternal game of power. Colleen Ballerino Cohen, Richard Wilk and Beverly Stoeltje point out that cultural meanings are “produced, consumed and rejected” within the proceedings of beauty contests, and where all types of “cultures and structures of power are engaged in their most trivial but vital aspects.”

Homi Bhabha views the idea of narrating a nation in Western history, as a metaphysical creation of an idealistic and highly symbolicconception of a culture or state. Even though this idea is not palpable in any way and is subject to reinterpretations, its power is symbolic and its effect triggers our innermost emotions of belonging and loyalty. Bhabha identifies in the nation’s wider liminal image a duality between the language of the nation builders or writers and the lives of those who follow the tenets established by the first group. This dichotomy expresses a reality that extends far beyond the limits it was given by conventional history. The awareness of this transitional cultural temporality within a nation’s timeline, Bhabha argues, is increasingly bypassing the firm certainty with which history has been traditionally described.

The concept of narration is born through a process of cultural signification, that has more to do with life than polity. Bhabha describes nation, or nationness, as a connection point, bridging the idea of Heimlich, love of one’s own space, opposed to the one of Unheimlich, the fear of the Other, added to a larger social context of belonging to a certain class, morality and ideology. Reading the nation also means reading the changing discourses throughout history, which not only give a sense of temporality and a more exact timeline for

---

3 Ibid., 5.
4 Ibid., 8.
6 See Ibid., 1-2.
7 See Ibid., 2.
the concept’s evolution, but also reveal the mechanisms within and beyond the rhetorical aspect of nation building, deconstructing, or reinventing. The picture of the nation, that starts from the “Janus-faced ambivalence of language” and aims to start a “Janus-faced discourse on nation.” It is thus important to understand the complexities of the concept and understand its inherent dimension of uncertainty because history is written while it advances in time. In the same way, the idea of nation is being defined at the same time when it actively functions in the public psyche.

The modern concept of beauty pageants was constructed in the United States in the beginning of the twentieth century, after public bathing was acceptable for women, and thus it was proper to judge a beautiful woman beyond a photographic portrait. Due to their very carnivalesque nature, beauty pageants have never been strangers to controversy, (melodrama) and discord. These were even more pungent at the dawn of the pageant practice as there were no clear lines between which official event was the official, one (like Miss Universe, for example) and what was actually required from the organizers, participants, the public, their sponsors and the general public.

The history of beauty pageants is vague and particularly difficult to trace on a timeline not only because, with its subjective objectivity, is impossible to appease all voices that seek to define it, but also because it is considered a part of the small history, the history of social behaviour, that is not worthy of mention historically. Therefore, even though the twentieth century has been by far the most well-documented historically, the sources of how and when beauty pageants started crossing borders around the world are scarce and at best anecdotal. The best guess would be that the idea spread to outer US territories and, then, eventually in Europe, and was well received especially in England where it best fit the already existent and very much alive rituals of crowning festival queens.

During their first decades, American beauty contests were always associated with fairs and other such events held usually at beach resorts with contestants that were looking for an easy gateway to Hollywood, using the one quality they were experts of: their physical appearance. Yet, from its inception, the purpose of such events was not a mere display of frivolous women or even the modernization and the democratization of society. It was, in fact, nation building, in an attempt to appropriate and reinvent the idea of what the American girl—and subsequently any young woman of marriageable age—was to represent.

In the Interwar era, beauty contests themselves were not created on strict patterns following trends and social requirements. On the contrary, they were specifically created to create, suggest and in some ways impose new ways, practices and social relations. Beauty contests showed how the changing beauty ideals were constructed and promoted in order to fit the requested pattern. Historically, beauty has always been a preoccupation of humankind and there are countless stories, legends or myths that start with or contain a significant plot of choosing the most beautiful from a certain group, mostly of women. From Greek mythology with the Golden Apple of Discord and the subsequent Trojan War, to fairy tales like Snow

---

8Ibid., 3
9See Ibid.
11Ibid.,3-4.
White, women are portrayed as constantly, and often aggressively, looking for confirmation of their physical attractiveness, which is most of the times considered as their one and only valuable asset.

The beauty pageant trend in interwar Romania was started by two magazines from two rivalling press trusts: on one side was *Ilustrație Română* (*The Romanian Illustration*)\(^\text{12}\), and on the other, *România Ilustrată* (*The Illustrated Romania*)\(^\text{13}\). They both organized a beauty contest entitled *Miss Romania*, but each one affiliated to another international organization. *Ilustrație Română*’s contest winner was qualified for *Miss Europe*, and subsequently she was given the chance to participate to *Miss Universe*. In *Realitatea Ilustrată*’s case, the winner would be qualified directly to a parallel *Miss Universe*, held in the beginning in the United States, and then in Europe.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the international pageants were organized according to financial possibilities, social structures or agreements. There was no officially fixed global and the ritual followed the same generic steps and guidelines – aggressive promotion, presenting the finalists, the description of the contest, final impressions from the contestants and sometimes the jury, the detailed account of international participations, extensive interviews with the winners or the runners up, all adorned with a myriad of illustrations and portraits.

The two rival magazines did not even mention their competitor and they regarded the international pageants to which they were affiliated to as the one and only, the best of the best and of utmost importance. They were never out of material to publish, as they were the only media officially recognized by the two rival international committees: before, during, and after the contests, they would dedicate entire issues to all the events related to the pageant. These special issues devoted more than half of their pages to beauty queens.

The first Romanian to participate to *Miss Universe* – Galveston (and Brussels) was Magda Demetrescu in 1929. In 1930, Mariana Mirică. After a one year hiatus due to incredible unfortunate events that occurred in succession\(^\text{14}\), and in 1935, Dorothee Cristesco in Brussels\(^\text{15}\). For *Miss Europe-Miss Universe*\(^\text{16}\), the first to participate was Mărioara Gănescu in 1929 (Paris). In 1930 Zoica Dona participated to Miss Europe (Cannes, Paris and Rio de Janeiro), in 1931 Tanță Vișoaranu (Paris), in 1932 Lilian Delescu (Nice), in 1933 Dina Mihalcea (Madrid), and in 1934 Hélène Dona (Hastings, England).

---

\(^{12}\) *Ilustrație Română* was a weekly supplement of the *Universul* (*The Universe*) newspaper. See *Ilustrația Română* II. 45 (30 October 1930) for a detailed illustrated of the *Universul* palace and publications. The newspaper appeared between 1929 and 1939. It was a complex source for both illustrated news, images from all over the world and cultural, scientific and humorous articles. See I. Hangiu, *Dicționarul presei literare românești 1790-1990* (*The Dictionary of Romanian Literary Press 1790-1990*), (Bucharest: Editura Fundației Culturale Române, 1996), 237.


\(^{14}\) Including a delay in electing the final *Miss Romania* to participate internationally until the fourth runner up, Erasia Peretz was eventually sent to Galveston, a terrible sea storm and, as the delegation arrived in the United States, an incredibly ill-timed railway workers’ strike that delayed the arrival even further, and thus Peretz missed the deadline to the regret of both the Romanians and the *Miss Universe* jury.

\(^{15}\) *Miss Universe* was moved to Europe after 1932.

The goal stated in every call for participation, ad and articles about beauty queens was to represent Romania internationally, just as athletes do. They were supposed to show how sophisticated and developed Romania was and possibly increase the level of admiration for both the country and its people. Even though none of the beauty queens had the chance to speak directly to the press or the public (they were seldom filmed \(^\text{17}^\)), all interviews were published in the magazines, thus in writing or generally unrecorded public speeches only, and their only real representation was through still images), they had to be exemplary in their conduct and general expression.

All the interwar Miss Romania winners that participated abroad were recognized and, most of the times, celebrated when they travelled abroad during their Miss year or shortly before or after the international beauty pageants. For this reason, Romania not only elected its best candidates for the most beautiful girls in the world, but they used them to invent a certain model of national beauty that was not necessarily the original, bucolic, traditional Romanian woman. This model was designed to fit the Western ideals of womanhood and their main purpose was to give Romania a better image (or an image where it was virtually unknown). Their beauty was utopic, they were generally described as ingénues, tender, and they would be compared to either flowers or delicate animals that encompassed these qualities, such as deer. They were portrayed as both modern (dressed to the latest Paris fashion) and traditional (featured in various national costumes, endemic to their area or not, but with national symbols such as the flag). They were generally presented as modest and with very little artifacts, but they were also described as legendary (the goddess), fairy-tale (the fairy). Usually their description insisted on their artistic, romantic nature on one side, but also not forgetting the qualities of the modern woman: emancipated, elegant, cultivated, athletic. They represented the complex interwar Romanian woman, symbol both of a society with tradition and nobility, keeping some qualities from the aristocratic woman and of a capitalist world, the middle-class, bourgeois woman.

Realitatealilustrată published many various accounts of Miss Universe 1929, LisIGoldarbeiter’s visit to Romania and her travels throughout Romania alongside Miss Romania, Magda Demetrescu. In 1929 they travelled to Western Transylvania, to

---

\(^{17}\) Beauty contests were consistently echoed in Romanian Interwar literature, press and cinema. See Bujor T. Ripeanu, *Filmul documentar. 1897-1948 (The Documentary Film. 1897-1948)* Bucureşti: Meronia, 2008:
BăileHerculane, Timișoara and Arad, and RealitateaIlustrată published a thorough account of the journey. The two beauty queens are accompanied by the magazine’s reporters as they are constantly being photographed and greeted by “thousands and thousands of onlookers, young and old, men and women who did not tire of admiring them.” A month later, RealitateaIlustrată publishes an article entitled The Modern Woman, dedicated to Goldarbeiter. The author addresses the critiques of women’s cult for beauty and states that as women always strive to be beautiful and, consequently, men always desire women to be so, it cannot be said that men hate beauty contests. Even Monsignor Jean Lavalle, the Southern United States Monsignor and the Galveston bishop met with them and held special services for the beauty queens. Nevertheless, she adds, a young woman can remain a bourgeois girl, even if she participates to a beauty contest, and thus the author expresses her wish to be considered as a full-blown modern woman:

I wish to be considered as a modern girl, not because I am proud of my image and look, but because I compel myself to be a human in all the senses of the word, a human that has courage, seriousness and enjoyment of life alike.

In 1930, RealitateaIlustrată wonders if, after the great Miss Romania of the year held a fashionable and royal resort, Sinaia, there is a chance to choose just one of the beauties that gathered from far and wide, the young woman who will be able to “carry the poetry and beauty of the Romanian woman, so glorified by poets” in her body, eyes and smile. A month later, the magazine features an article about the elected Miss Romania, Zizi Teodorescu, “a distinguished intellectual” announcing she was holding a series of conferences and she will also hold a travel journal.

On the other side of the rivalry, IlustrațiuneaRomână boasted with a list of illustrious intellectuals, professors and artists that participated in some fashion to its Miss Romania 1930, with such names as Stelian Popescu, or Victor Eftimiu, alongside various officials representing national, local or regional institutions, writers, jurists, architects and sculptors. This cast of distinguished names associated with Miss Romania was not endemic to this particular pageant or even with the magazine, as both Miss Romania pageants endeavoured to justify themselves socially, politically and intellectually, to be viewed beyond their economic and capitalist goals as agents of prosperity and development.

---

18 A Romanian spa town.
19 Two large, important cities in the area.
20 “Miss Universe și Miss România la BăileHerculane, Timișoara, Arad” ("Miss Universe and Miss Romania at BăileHerculane, Timișoara, Arad"), RealitateaIlustrată, III.38, 5.
21 Ibid.
22 “Femeeamodernă” ("The Modern Woman"), RealitateaIlustrată, III.48, 29.
23 Probably Magda Demetrescu, as it refers to herself as a beauty queen that has participated to Galveston that year.
24 Ibid.
26 RealitateaIlustrată, IV.164 (20 March 1930), 11.
28 The “Universul” Director.
29 Playwright, poet and publicist, at the time General Manager of the National Theatre.
In January 1931, *Ilustrațiunea Română* presented a part of the candidates for *Miss Romania*, and described them with visible national (and racial) pride, as Romanian women who “not only once caught the admiration of foreigners for their charm, cuteness, sculptural beauty, and that so seductive ‘specific’ of our race.” Even though the winner was not yet elected, the author was sure that she would carry the fame of Romanian beauty abroad, with physical gifts and will know how to put up a good fight. *Miss Romania* would be granted the chance to participate a month later to *Miss Europe* in Paris, judged by connoisseurs of beauty and participate to glamorous events, receptions and balls, and she would surely make a very good impression with the confidence that Romanian beauty has been celebrated in the arts:

The ambassador of national beauty will meet at the Grand Opera ball everything most exclusive that France’s capital can offer: she will be celebrated there as on the Riviera coast, where she will travel with the other misses – like a true queen of beauty, living in festive moments the pride of an entire nation.

A few months later, she will surely qualify for *Miss Universum*, that will be held in South America, in “Chili,” where she could win “fabulous prizes worth almost 3 ½ million lei” along with the crown that is a perpetual temptation. She will travel across the world, “waving our tricolour as an accomplishment of the right acquired in this field as well in line with the other states.” Her participation to the Chile *Miss Universe* alongside the European *Misses*, the article concludes, is just another proof that Romania is by no means inferior to other countries when it comes to beauty and the magazine legitimately aspires to gain the best results that are congruous with their great efforts.

According to Stoeltje, this type of annual local, regional, national and international “popular and ubiquitous class of ritual events” where girls are pseudo-crowned for their beauty abound with “earmarks of Euro-cultural chauvinism.” Pageants represent an opportunity for local communities to display their value on a wider and more diverse stage, at the same time boasting with their community and acquiring ideas and funds for further development or enrichment. In other words, create alternative ambassadors whose main use was both to boast local, regional, or national pride and to create an international positive image for the locality represented by each beauty queen.

Yet, the very idea of the locality cannot be exactly defined or described, in relationship with itself, nor with the Other. Homi Bhabha proposes a more complex, *Janus-faced* view on the issue of location and nation, acknowledging its various and at times diverging facets. He thus attempts to transform the boundaries between these facets into border spaces that would paint a much more complex and accurate picture of the inner workings hiding behind either-or representations. It would thus be a fallacy to only see beauty pageants as scientifically accurate equations, without understanding what lies beneath

---

30 “Un grup de candidate care au participat la ziua de 18 ianuarie la marele nostrum concurs de frumusețe” (“A Group of Candidates who Participated on the 18th of January in our Great Beauty Contest”), *Ilustrațiunea Română*, III.4 (22 January 1931), 10-1
31 Ibid., 10
32 Ibid., around 21,000 dollars, today roughly 321,000 dollars today.
33 Ibid.
and beyond the culture of using young women as symbolic currency for representational purposes. The gains are not only political and economic; they extend well within the social psyche, in a society’s innermost, subconscious thoughts. The formulas used in taking advantage of malleable minds must be thus metaphorical, poetic, and in some way repetitive, in the same way as rituals have been used throughout history. This type of cultural psychoanalysis can be used to identify, define and, perhaps correct Pavlovian reflexes force-fed unknowingly to the populous.

In this way, rituals become political instruments that serve the goals of the powerful or the nation and culture builders. The rituals where social and political issues are metaphorically enacted on a seemingly unrelated stage are necessary, Stoeltje adds, because in order for a social change to occur or be accepted by the public, it must be acted out in a ritual bearing its symbols the way they have always been enacted since premodern times. This way the people can bypass the generalized fear of change and of the new and different, thus maintain the feeling of safety and control. Consequently, these secular rituals are a conservative effort to prevent a controversial social group from challenging the status quo.36 Moreover, as the boundaries between the numerous elements, constituting beauty pageants are often blurred and there is no clear distinction between the individual, aesthetic and moral ideal, and the masses, pageants never cease to be challenging.37 In the same way, the Miss Romania organizers on both sides sought to boost their material and symbolic profits and increase the stock value of Romania and, possibly, their particular regions, by using the beauty queens as harbingers of beauty, prosperity and development. In other words, they functioned as representational currency in an exchange of political, social and economic values.

37Ibid., 11.