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Abjection, postfeminism and the makeover in *Miss Congeniality* (2000)

By Clementine Vann-Alexander

The makeover film is abject cinema because it sustains itself on the initial exclusion and eventual assimilation of the makeover's subject. By placing a transformation at the centre of its narrative, makeover films allow moviegoers to experience the pleasures and benefits of transformation vicariously, although the threat of abjection still looms. Kristeva stated that the safe and acceptable ways of being (known as the *corps propre*) are troubled by abjection, and that the realities of life threaten how we understand it.¹ The makeover uses abjection to establish who we do and do not want to be; shedding our abject aspects to become our best selves. The message at the heart of *Miss Congeniality* is that while there are multiple ways of living as a woman the route to happiness and fulfilment is to flee abjection through a particular performance of neoliberal femininity. This article focuses on the film's protagonist, FBI agent Gracie Hart (Sandra Bullock), tracking her progress from abjected failure to beauty queen, to see the role abjection plays in postfeminist portrayals of the makeover. Gracie's resistance to the makeover makes her subsequent post-makeover success more meaningful and bolsters the postfeminist outlook of the film by positing that even an unwilling individual can pursue the path to self-improvement through consumption. I will begin by briefly discussing postfeminism, drawing from Projansky. Then, I will then examine *Miss Congeniality*'s relationship to the abject in three of Gracie's key scenes; her introduction as a child in the film's opening scene, her makeover scene as conducted by FBI-hired beauticians

¹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: an essay on abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.

and stylists, and finally I will briefly discuss the Q&A portion of the pageant, so that we might track the film's relationship with abjection.

Postfeminism figures the feminist movement and feminist thought as abject; positioning itself as distinct from feminism yet unable to shrug off completely its connection, fixation, and fascination with it – similar to Kristeva's description of the abject as something that 'beseeches, worries, and fascinates' us.² Within a postfeminist society, the individual is encouraged to cast aside old feminisms and the parts of themselves that may be deemed ugly or outdated, to chase the unobtainable fantasy of 'having it all' to secure a place within the *corps propre*. As postfeminism prioritises the individual and self-improvement, makeover films celebrate and uplift aesthetic change as both a route to and a signifier of the abject being exorcised permanently.



Figure 1. a post-makeover Gracie assimilates into the *corps propre*, identical to her competition. *Miss Congeniality*, 2000, dir. Donald Petrie.

² Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 1.

Miss Congeniality embodies postfeminism through two of Projansky's 'interrelated categories of postfeminist discourses':³ linear postfeminism and backlash postfeminism. Linear postfeminism emphasises the dimension of time. It posits that there was a pre-feminism during which there were no discourses around or movements for gender equality, followed by a definite period in which feminism happened and was thought about (and went too far, linking it to backlash postfeminism), followed by a postfeminist period wherein feminism is finished and left behind. *Miss Congeniality* is a film that has its protagonist declare feminism to be dead due to the persistence of beauty pageants and, slightly over an hour later, has the same character state that taking part in a beauty pageant was 'one of the most rewarding and liberating experiences of [her] life'. Sherman's discussion of *Miss Congeniality* posits that the film embraces these complications in favour of a neoliberal femininity which prioritises success, ambition, and is only available to middle-class women.⁴ The exclusivity of this type of femininity is central to the film, as much like the pageant there can be many entrants but only one winner.

The film presents this category of postfeminism to its audience when Gracie says that beauty pageants make it seem as though feminism 'never happened', which not only implies a society that is past feminism, but one in which it had no impact whatsoever. Yet it also contains elements of backlash postfeminism, a reactionary turn that believes the work of feminism should be undone. Represented in the film through dialogue when Kathy Morningside (Candice Bergen) groups together 'feminists, intellectuals, and ugly women' to

³ Sarah Projansky, *Watching rape: film and television in postfeminist culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 67-68.

⁴ Yael D. Sherman, "Neoliberal Fertility in *Miss Congeniality* (2000)," in *Feminism at the movies: understanding gender in contemporary popular cinema*, ed. Hilary Radner and Rebecca Stringer (New York: Routledge, 2011), 80.

describe the pageant's opponents, backlash postfeminism exists within the structure of the film itself. Pre-makeover Gracie is shown to be unfulfilled and frustrated despite her successful career and ability to live independently *because* she is too strident a feminist to be pretty for the praise of men to escape abjection.



Figure 2. Unbrushed hair, food stains, eating ice cream at the bar – Gracie represents abjection. *Miss Congeniality*, 2000, dir. Donald Petrie.

The kind of postfeminism that *Miss Congeniality* presents in relation to abjection and identity is apparent from the film's opening scene: the end of childhood and the beginning of girlhood, also known as 'girling', which is intertwined with the abject.⁵ Butler uses the concept of girling to describe the moment expectations of gender performance are foisted onto someone by wider structures of power and normative society. With girling looms the threat of an abject identity; it is not simply that Gracie is expected to behave in a certain manner, but also that she is already failing at it without knowing, resulting in her being

⁵ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: on the discursive limits of "sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 232. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/leeds/reader.action?docID=1779047>.

excluded and mocked by her peers. The end of childhood caused by girling is not dissimilar to the period before the child experiences and then becomes aware of abjection as they develop the desire to individuate. However, while Kristeva positions abjection as ‘becoming’ in which the individual gains subjectivity by distancing themselves from the abject,⁶ girling is a process of *being made*. Abjection can be characterised by involuntary physical and emotional responses (crying, turning away), whereas girling is an act intentionally conducted and reinforced through structures of power.

Gracie is shown to embody abjection in multiple ways. First presented to us as a young tomboy, she sits alone on the playground, reading a Nancy Drew mystery novel. She wears rectangular glasses, a red t-shirt, jeans, and her hair in pigtails; her hair has texture and flyaways, and there is visible dirt on her trainers. While these details may not effuse abjection as the more extreme examples do, such as a corpse or excrement, Gracie is dressed markedly differently to the other girls shown in skirts and Peter Pan-collared shirts. These girls featured in this scene, the feminine yardstick against which Gracie is to be measured, the *corps propre* that renders Gracie as abject, are placed in the background of all the shots they are in, adding to Gracie’s visual exclusion. Here, abjection is entwined with identity and performances of gender from a young age, which reaffirms Kristeva’s notion of ‘lives based on exclusion’.⁷ Kristeva proposed the abject must be excluded but cannot be completely detached from the whole; society needs the abject to define itself as not-abject (or, *corps propre*). This is why Gracie’s peers reject her while she participates in larger structures (school, the FBI): her abject nature elevates others and secures their safe, clean existence by proximity. One recognises the abject; one is recognised an abject girl.

⁶ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 3.

⁷ *Ibid*, 6.



Figure 3. Ostracised and abjected, Gracie is markedly different to the other girls at her school. *Miss Congeniality*, 2000, dir. Donald Petrie.

A complication arises in the second way Gracie embodies abjection through her failure to adhere to a certain standard of performing girl. Whereas she is shown to be ostracised, the film fails to establish the alternative of performing ‘girl’ as either rewarding or appealing. The word ‘girl’ is used either directly as an insult or as a way of insinuating something weak or embarrassing repeatedly in this sequence. Furthermore, when Gracie actively labels herself as a girl by shyly confessing that she has a crush on the very classmate she saved from the bully she is rejected. Gracie is trapped; she can either move through the world on her own terms and be rendered abject for her lack of femininity, or she can risk making herself abject through attempting (and failing) to be read as sufficiently feminine. The film finds a solution through having Gracie seem to embrace her feminist tendencies while adhering to a strict beauty standard, embracing postfeminism.

Across makeover films, the makeover scene is a means of rendering the body as something that can be wholly understood and reformed to a person's choosing; that which is cast off and pruned through the makeover becomes abject, and what is left behind is an example of the power of aesthetics represented through the *corps propre*. It is not merely that the makeover scene imparts visual pleasure, but that those parts of the process reaffirm that the abject, uncontrollable parts of us are capable of being brought to order permanently. Akin to the experience of being abjected as was a child, Gracie has her makeover forced on her. She is dragged over the line into an acceptable standard of feminine performance and away from abjection. This unique twist on the notion that the makeover is a pleasurable fantasy allows a little bit of realism to peek in through the neoliberal postfeminist bubble in which all work pertaining to self-improvement is pleasure, rather than labour. Although Gracie finds pleasure and success as a direct result of her beautification, the film never fully detaches itself from the discomfort and effort required to perform a high standard of femininity. Some may see the active inclusion of discomfort and displeasure in beauty practices (painful waxing, dieting, hours of work) as a breath of fresh air, they are largely included as a comedic element that serve to underline how out of place Gracie is in the world of the *corps propre*.

Although the makeover is not always a pleasurable event – McRobbie's article on *What Not To Wear* and *Would Like to Meet* argues that the 'public denigration' of its makeover subjects is key to the construction of the show,⁸ and critical discussions of postfeminism highlight its association of beauty products with confidence and identity formation. Gracie's post-makeover professional, personal, and romantic success imply that she is one of the women who has been a victim of feminism, and that because the beauty within her was obscured, it was her fate to be attractive. Kristeva proposed that '[t]he body must bear no trace of its debt

⁸ Angela McRobbie, "Notes on 'What Not to Wear' and Post-Feminist Symbolic Violence," *The Sociological Review* 52, no. 2_suppl (2004/10/01 2004): 99, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2005.00526.x>, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2005.00526.x>.

to nature' to embody the cultural norms that are expected of us in the day-to-day.⁹ Makeover scenes stand as literal expressions of Gimlin's conclusion that 'the body is a site of oppression [...] because systems of social control operate through it',¹⁰ and in analysing them we can see the unruly, abject body brought to order and forced to transform into the *corps propre*. If the 'organic body cannot be trusted to remain intact and whole',¹¹ then the makeover scene functions exactly as Wilkinson argued, as a way of presenting the body as 'malleable' and therefore able to be brought under control.¹² Specifically, the body can be brought under the control of dominant Western beauty standard.



Figure 4. Gracie's makeover is a military operation, huge in scale and carried out with no remorse. *Miss Congeniality*, 2000, dir. Donald Petrie.

⁹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 106.

¹⁰ Debra L. Gimlin, *Body Work* (London: University of California Press, 2002), 141.

¹¹ Rina Arya, "The fragmented body as an index of abjection," in *Abject Visions: Powers of horror in art and visual culture*, ed. Rina Arya and Nicholas Chare (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 107.

¹² Maryn Wilkinson, "The makeover and the malleable body in 1980s American teen film," *International journal of cultural studies* 18, no. 3 (2015): 387, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877913513698>.

Staged in an air hangar and conducted by a fleet of beauticians, the makeover that Gracie undergoes to infiltrate the pageant is pivotal to analysing the film's understanding of beauty work and how the abject identity can be supplanted by the *corps propre*. The scene effectively uses comedy to sympathetically skewer the displeasure and discomfort that comes with beauty work, but the film believes all of that is worth the reward of the neoliberal feminine. As demonstrated through the slow-motion long take of a post-makeover Gracie in which the viewer is directed to admire her as she walks towards the camera. For Gracie, and the viewer the makeover's reward is the synthesis between the aesthetic change, the social benefit, *and* the career success that is the reward for emotional investment.

Immediately upon beginning the intensive process, beauty work connects with pain and discomfort, both of which are seen as comedic and necessary parts of the process. Gracie sits in a chair while her teeth are cleaned by a hygienist and her hair is painfully detangled by a professional, making pained noises and calling out for Novocain. The camera sits level with her open mouth and zooms out to reveal several beauticians working on her, placing the viewer's eye at Gracie's level and inviting us to see from her point of view, and to see the sheer amount of work needed to elevate someone to the highest standard of feminine beauty.

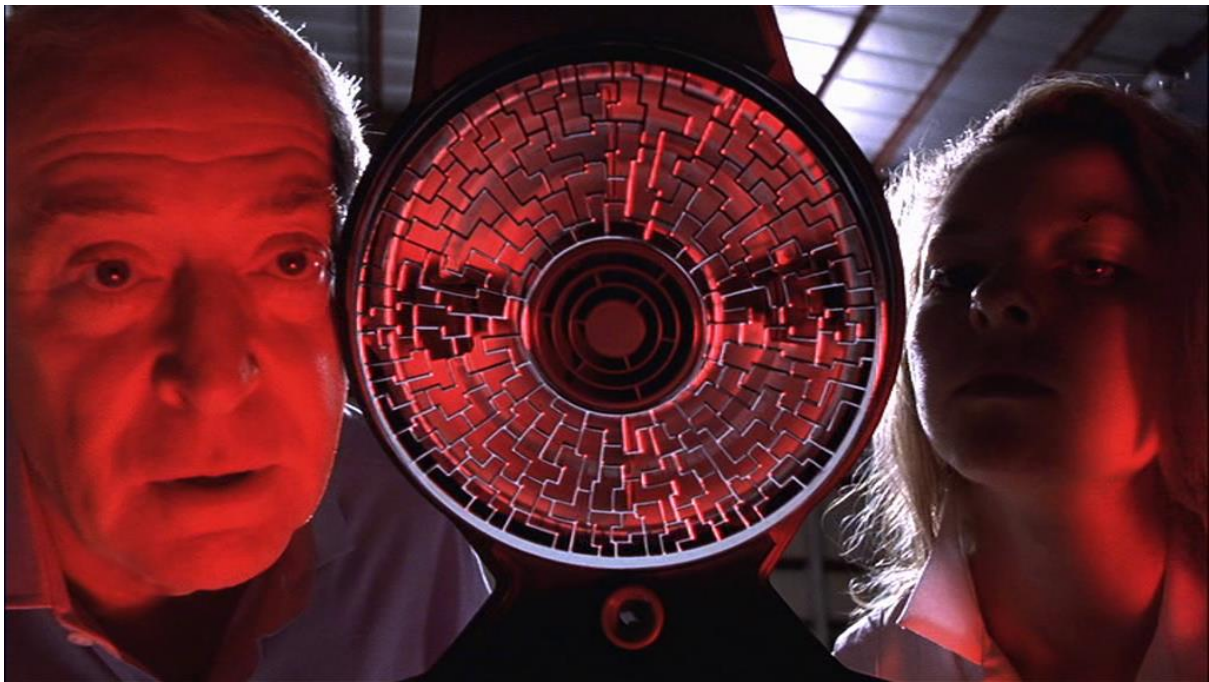


Figure 5. The audience is shown a variety of closeups to put us in Gracie's shoes as she undergoes the painful process. *Miss Congeniality*, 2000, dir. Donald Petrie.

Furthermore, another thing Gracie must painfully cast off to put abjection behind her is her body hair. The viewer is treated to multiple shots of her having her knuckles and legs waxed, as well as her off-screen howl of agony as she is subjected to a bikini wax. The act of

removing body hair, of having something naturally produced by the body be forcibly expelled, immediately causes me to think of Kristeva and the abject: it is the denial of and attempt to control the organic body in its endeavour to ensure our survival, and a representation of the contradictions inherent within neoliberal postfeminism. Gracie *can* choose whoever she wants to be, but she *should* choose to wax her body until it is completely free of hair to be accepted by the arbiters of feminine beauty. By using an unwilling and inexperienced makeover subject as the recipients for all these treatments, the film demonstrates the extremely narrow accessibility of neoliberal femininity to other women; should you want to achieve success in all spheres of life, as is implicitly required of you as a woman living under neoliberal capitalism, then *this* is all the work it will require, and lacking the time, money, or resources to do so is your fault.



Figure 6. After her makeover, Gracie finds that her beauty grants her power and success. *Miss Congeniality*, 2000, dir. Donald Petrie.

The makeover subject crossing the imaginary border into the *corps propre* and become integrated into wider society is not final. Once the beauty work has begun, it cannot stop if the adherence to standards of feminine performance and the *corps propre* is to be maintained.

To that point, the third and final scene focusing on Gracie discussed in this article interrogates her post-makeover identity and the tension between the traces of abject behaviour that linger within the post-makeover identity. Neoliberal postfeminism posits that the individual is capable of constant reinvention and self-improvement, and that they should seek it out in order to turn use their beings as a valuable commodity. Gracie's transformation proves to be a complex example what Bordo calls 'cultural plastic',¹³ a concept that imagines the body as a site for limitless reinvention, reinforcing a 'rhetoric of choice and self-determination' and typifies the way postfeminism envisions the body.¹⁴ This concept braids postfeminism and neoliberal femininity, as encapsulated in the pageant's Q&A. Asked what she would say to those who call pageants 'outdated and antifeminist', Gracie responds with the following:

'Well, I would have to say I used to be one of them. And then, I came here, and I realised that these women are smart, terrific people who are just trying to make a difference in the world – and we've become really good friends. I know we all secretly hope the other one will trip and fall on her face but wait a minute: I've already done that. And, for me, this experience has been one of the most rewarding and liberating experiences of my life.'

¹³ Susan Bordo, "'Material Girl': The Effacements of Postmodern Culture," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 29, 4 (1990): 654, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.act2080.0029.004>.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 656.



Figure 7. Gracie answers a question about people calling beauty pageants anti-feminist. *Miss Congeniality*, 2000, dir. Donald Petrie.

The film is trying to emphasise that Gracie's journey from abject to *corps propre* (pre- to post-makeover) is facilitated by her physical transformation and by the bonds she forms with her fellow contestants. But even this is not enough to prevent the sudden emergence of the abject identity amid the *corps propre* when Gracie threatens anyone who would hurt her new friends with physical violence. The negotiation between the abject and the *corps propre* break down, and a brief lack of self-surveillance results in the unfettered authentic self emerging. Gracie may blend in seamlessly with the gleaming and glossy finalists, but a small moment like this is a reminder to the audience that she is not changed. Grace positions herself as an outsider in her speech while simultaneously adopting an identical aesthetic to the other contestants. In a similar vein, Hersey acknowledges the conflict between the pre- and post-makeover identities presented in the speech and proposes that the transformation is merely temporary, stating that 'the audience does not expect Gracie to continue waxing her eyebrows

or eating celery after the pageant is over'.¹⁵ This analysis reads as tacit admission that both the audience and the film are aware of the difficulty of attempting to maintain an impossible beauty standard, and calling to mind the constant push-pull relationship between the abject, untamed body and our attempts to fence it in through maintenance and surveillance; it can elicit disgust from those around us.



Figure 8. Gracie's original abject persona threatens to shatter her *corps propre* identity. *Miss Congeniality*, 2000, dir. Donald Petrie.

To conclude, *Miss Congeniality* allows Gracie to embody an individualised definition of femininity that brings happiness and success through transformation. The film holds aesthetics over everything else because they are positioned as the only means through which one can move away from being abject and towards *corps propre*. However, abjection must return and serve as a reminder of the fragility of one's position as *corps propre*, in order to

¹⁵ Eleanor Hersey, "Love and Microphones: Romantic Comedy Heroines as Public Speakers," *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 34, no. 4 (2007).

emphasise the importance of adhering to beauty standards. Here, the makeover is another tool for individualising fulfilment that enables the film to drag characters back and forth over the abject/*corps propre* border how it sees fit.

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Author Biography

Clementine Vann-Alexander wants smear cinema's lipstick and look at the writhing insects beneath its rocks. A second-year postgraduate researcher based at the University of Leeds, School of Media and Communication, she is writing her PhD on the relationship between abjection, the makeover, and identity. She has a Spanish BA and a Film Studies MA, and previously interrogated portrayals of the monstrous-feminine by women horror screenwriters and directors in the early 2000s. Her current research proposes that psychoanalytic film theory can be used to interrogate the makeover film in new and engaging ways. Using five case studies, she considers the makeover from multiple perspectives through a multidisciplinary framework, including the makeover as a neoliberal postfeminist narrative, and the makeover as horror subgenre. Her principal research interests are femininities, beauty practice, horror films, Hollywood, psychoanalysis, gender performance, the monstrous-feminine, vicarious pleasure through film, and costume.