4 Toddlers and Tiaras: American Beauty Pageants in Australia
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"Little Miss Perfect Pageant, where all your dreams come true.
Little Miss Perfect Pageant, where the special one is you.
There are citrus colored rainbows on the other side.
Hop on your magic carpet and take a wild ride.
If you think it and you want it, dream it, then it's real!
You are what you feel."
(Sung by Michael Galanes, Little Miss Perfect, Lifestyle YOU channel).

Little Miss Perfect, otherwise known as the Supreme or High Point title pageant winner stands in line with five ‘full glitz’ runners-up. These Perfect Misses all have fake tans, false eyelashes, hairpieces, flippers (a dental plate of fake teeth), acrylic nails and a full face of stage make-up. Before the pageant they have had their legs, eyebrows and armpits waxed, many have had facials and pedicures and a few mothers have even injected their daughters with Botox. Finally, these little girls have been coached on the perfect way for a female to walk and talk and have had classes to hone their ‘talent’, which is most often dancing or singing. Displayed within a portfolio of photoshopped photographs, these Stepford children are touted as the epitome of female perfection.

This article will argue that Australians investment in American cable television’s ‘full glitz’ children's beauty pageants is evidence of the way in which Australia takes its cultural cues from the United States. It will posit that American beauty pageants, with the support of the Australian viewers of cable television, subversively endorse society’s demeaning stereotype of the perfect woman. Social commentator, Nina Funnell (2011:1) states that, ‘Equating a girl's self-worth with her appearance is a dangerous and destructive game and one that the media encourages girls to play from a very early age.’ These little girls are women-in-training in a society condoning both the objectification of women and the expectation of women to have docile, pliant and artificial personalities. The final line up of ‘perfection’ on television shows like Toddlers and Tiaras and Little Miss Perfect underlines lingering gender inequality.

Hilary Levey (2009:199) has argued that, 'Unlike beauty pageants, little research has been done to explore the complex world of child beauty pageants'. This article aims to fill a lacuna in scholarship on American child beauty pageants with reference to Australia’s responses to televised versions of these contests. While the Australian media has been disapproving of hosting
American child beauty pageants in Australia, this belies the popularity of American child beauty pageants on Australian cable television. Rather than being reviled by disturbing images of sexualised cookie cutter children in American child beauty pageants, many Australians are fans of television shows that promote this focus on what Corrinne N. Connolly (2011:17), identifies as the ‘ideals of perfection and beauty, with an accompanying emphasis on sexuality.’ Indeed, it was the reported 1.8 million Australian viewers of Toddlers and Tiaras that led the Texan owner of Universal Royalty pageants, Annette Hill, to stage a child beauty pageant in Melbourne in July 2011. Hill (2010:1) announced on The Oprah Winfrey show, ‘The reason we are going to Australia is we have so many fans down [there]. They really want us to come.’

Airing on the Lifestyle YOU channel in Australia, Toddlers and Tiaras, in its fifth season, and Little Miss Perfect, in its second season are broadcast in high rotation, daily, on Australian cable television with repeat (or encore) episodes often dominating the channel. Although many viewers have blogged that the show is ‘disgusting’, they often simultaneously report that it is ‘compulsive viewing’ and discuss in intimate detail, each episode, adding to the show’s ratings and media interest surrounding child beauty pageants. This response has been discussed by Lindsay Lieberman (2010:747) in her ‘Call For Statutory Regulation of Child Beauty Pageants,’ who argues, ‘Today, the controversy of child beauty contests is reflected in the fact that as the industry grows nationwide and attracts more participants, impassioned ridicule and criticism develops simultaneously through the media and internet’. Toddlers and Tiaras has spawned numerous Facebook sites, both for and against the show. The eponymous Toddlers and Tiaras and Take Toddlers and Tiaras off the Air, both have thousands of followers. In addition to this, contestants from the show have their own fan pages. Eden Wood and Taralyn Eschberger are both described on their sites as ‘International Pageant Superstars’. This substantiates Lieberman’s (2010:746) discussion of the way in which, ‘the child pageant industry enjoys heightened success and widespread popularity’ despite them being ‘commonly criticized for such outlandish and destructive practices [including] Girls clad in revealing costumes strut[ting] and danc[ing], remov[ing] pieces of their wardrobes and wink[ing] at judges’.

There were, initially, criticisms of America’s Universal Royalty pageant in the Australian media. In Daily Views (2011:1) pointed out the way in which the company ‘specializ[es] in beauty contests of life-like dolls with false eyelashes and perfectly coiffed hair.’ Pull the Pin protesters, headed by founder, Catherine Manning, campaigned to ban the pageant in Australia, organising a rally at Parliament House in Melbourne on 24th May, 2011. Members were interviewed and pictured with signs stating, ‘Let children be children’. They argued that their protest concerned the fact that, ‘pitting young children against each other in a competition based on physical beauty instils harmful messages in children, including that their looks are their currency and that it’s ok to judge on physical appearance.’ Manning (2011:1) substantiates her claims by pointing to, ‘opponents includ[ing] The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists, numerous women’s and children’s rights organisations, child development experts and academics, and the majority of
the community: about 95 per cent according to numerous polls and callers to talkback programs who are overwhelmingly in support of action.’ In addition to this, Dr Michael Carr-Gregg, (2011:1) an Australian psychologist and expert in adolescent mental health has been very vocal in the media about beauty pageants, going on record numerous times to state, ‘In my view if you were to say to me that you put your child in that situation I would absolutely suggest to you that it’s bordering on child abuse...These children will not come out of this unscarred psychologically and we’re all sitting around rather like voyeurs watching it happen...There’s something really quite obscene about that.’ This supports Lieberman’s (2010:740) argument that, ‘Society recognises the detrimental effects of child beauty pageants. Family therapists report that pageants interfere with healthy child development’ and yet, as Henry A. Giroux (2003:36) estimates, ‘more than one hundred thousand children under the age of twelve compet[ing]’ in the United States.

However, the stoush between TV stations vying for exclusive rights to the Universal Royalty pageant in Australia and to the six-year-old star of Toddlers and Tiaras, Eden Wood, pulled focus from beauty pageants’ endorsement of society’s oppressive ideals of female beauty. In any beauty pageant, conforming to a narrow ideal, based on appearance is rewarded, while non-conformity is punished. Levey (2009:199) argues that, ‘child beauty pageants can be described as ‘an event with the purpose of rewarding children based on their appearance and personality’. Children’s beauty pageants prepare little girls for a future of pleasing people: initially they are trained to please judges, coaches, parents and their audience. The inference is that later in life they will move on to pleasing their partners and husbands. As Giroux (2003:36) argues, ‘the culture of child beauty pageants functions as a pedagogical site where children learn about pleasure, desire, and the roles they might assume in an adult society’. In addition to this, child contestants are taught that there is no room for individuality. If a girl wears black shoes, instead of the preferred white ones, she compares unfavourably with her identical counterparts and will not win the pageant. In this way, females are judged on a very narrow concept of beauty. Most importantly, A Feminist’s Stand Against Toddlers and Tiaras (2011:1) points out the disturbing way in which beauty pageants encourage the ‘depersonalization of women into objects of desire, instead of individuals with complex personalities.’ This is mirrored in the rows of children who, from the tops of their identical barrel curled heads to the tips of their matte, white Mary Janes, are an unsettling mix of June Cleaver and Anna Nicole Smith. As Connolly (2011:11) argues, beauty pageants ‘encourage disregard for girls through [their depiction of society’s] notions of feminine girlhood.’ These children are in training to fit this image of the ‘perfect woman’ that society promotes and in turn, they are becoming enslaved to superficial concepts of beauty.

However, as Melissa Henson (2011:79), Director of Communications and Public Education for the Parents Television Council, posits, ‘it’s not just our daughters being affected by these images. Boys and adult men are also learning to value women only for their sex appeal.’ Voyeurism is encouraged at every level in pageants as women are judged on their outward appeal and how closely they conform to the ‘perfect woman’ stereotype. The pageants ‘encourage disregard for
Brittani Hensel (2010:1) argues, ‘it is repulsive that as women we complain about the disparity between men and women, but we as women will encourage our children to participate in behaviour that directly correlates with the disparity we’re trying to prevent...Choosing to teach children that beauty is on the inside does not correlate with having them prance around with makeup that’s four inches thick.’ When women accept the narrow and demeaning stereotype of the perfect woman, they are preparing themselves and their daughters for a lifetime of unhappiness: ‘we are setting them up for plastic surgery and botox injections.’ There is compelling evidence from child specialists that it is ‘developmentally inappropriate to teach a six year old to pose like a twenty year old model’ (Liberman, 2010:753) and the American Psychological Association study (2010) on the early sexualisation of young people showed clear associations between participating in these types of events and ‘the development of body issue problems, eating disorders, depression, anxiety disorders and mood disorders.’

Australians’ interest in American child beauty pageants suggests, as Dr Karen Brooks (2011:1) states, that we subscribe to the ‘subjective and superficial evaluation’ of women. In Universal Royalty pageants, the beauty category is the most important. If two children tie in a pageant, their beauty points trump all other categories in the quest for the overall winner. Julie Parker (2011:1) argues that, ‘These sort of pageants do nothing more than tell little girls that their worth is entirely tied up in what they look like, how much they weigh, how expensive their dress is and how sparkly their teeth are. It’s a breeding ground for warped body image and self esteem.’ As Manning (2011:1) argues, ‘Girls are already bombarded with narrow beauty ideals in our culture, from Disney princesses and Barbies and Bratz dolls, to music video clips telling them they should behave like grown women. We should be combating the message society sends our girls that they’re ‘not enough’ – not foisting beauty competition culture on them.’ The way in which dolls like Barbies, Bratz and Disney princesses are dressed and marketed is not only damaging to young girls, it further endorses this narrow stereotype of the ‘grown up’ woman.

The emphasis on dolls and dressing up in pageants is also disturbing for the way in which it encourages passivity. Child development experts point to a difference between playing dress-up and making a career out of it. Mark Sichel (2011:162), a New York based licensed clinical social worker states that, ‘Little girls are supposed to play with dolls, not be dolls.’ In child beauty pageants the girl becomes a ‘Barbie for adults’. They are dressed, undressed, repeatedly groomed and positioned on stage with a variety of backdrops and props. Little girls are often carried to and from the performance space by adults, much like carrying a doll out of a toy store. Playing dress-up ‘is normal and healthy, but when it’s demanded, it leaves the child not knowing what they want,’ Sichel (2011:162) states, ‘accentuating their appearance with such accoutrements as fake hair, teeth, spray tans and breast padding causes the children tremendous confusion, wondering why they are not okay without those things.’ These children grow into women who still feel that they need these artificial devices to be complete. Amanda Drucker (2011:1) points out that they are...
taught that their only value is aesthetic as they ‘will only be successful in life if they conform to society’s ideas of beauty.’

Furthermore, this can lead to the Cinderella and/or Pretty Woman complex that second wave feminism was campaigning against in the 1980s and 1990s. The former is where women wait passively to be swept of their feet by a man. The latter concerns women waiting to be ‘saved’ by the target of their affection. The emphasis on waiting in both of these syndromes is what makes them dangerously passive afflictions. What follows is the expectation that women will be eternally grateful and unconditionally love and serve their husband, who has been their saviour. Toddlers and Tiaras has featured the embodiment of both of these complexes in their pageants. One toddler was dressed as Julia Roberts in the film, Pretty Woman.

Melissa Henson (2011:1) described the scene by stating, ‘like Roberts’ film character just before she hits the streets, the toddler is shown strutting back and forth on stage wearing thigh-high PVC boots, a blond, bobbed wig and a white tank to connected to a tight blue mini skirt at the midriff by a large silver hoop.’ The toddler’s mother, Wendy Dickey defended her choice to dress her child in this way by arguing that her daughter “had no idea she was dressed as [a hooker] anyways’ (Henson, 2011:1). As a mother, Dickey stressed that her daughter had worn a brown and white spotted dress from the ‘classy’ scene in Pretty Woman, but that the TV show did not choose to run this footage. The media chose to promote the ‘hooker’ outfit as it makes a more salacious story, than a toddler in a conservative outfit. This was taken a step further when the media reported that Dickey was going to auction the outfit to raise money for Georgia Right to Life, an anti-abortion organization. Assisting in the perpetuation of the Pretty Woman complex, Mrs Dickey demonstrated that she was convinced by the attractiveness of the narrow stereotype of female perfection that translates across media cultures into private spaces. She felt her child had the best chance of winning a pageant if her daughter appeared flirtatious and helpless. It is important to note that her child did, indeed, win the pageant and so her convictions about an ideal picture of femininity were correct.

This mini ‘Pretty Woman’ emphasises the ‘adultification of children’ in American beauty pageants that Neil Postman identifies in his article ‘The Disappearance of Children’. Postman (1982:52) argues, ‘Children no longer dress as children but wear much of the same styles of clothing as adults, just in miniature versions.’ In this way, little girls are morphed into tiny, sexualised women in beauty pageants. Indeed, Giroux (1998:36) argues that ‘within beauty pageants, children are equated with adult women’. Little girls are dressed as some of the most sexualised stars in Toddlers and Tiaras. Lindsay Jackson dressed her daughter, Maddy as Dolly Parton complete with large fake breasts and padded butt and two year old Mia was dressed as Madonna, complete with breast-cones and a dance routine to ‘Like A Virgin’. In a similar move to rewarding Wendy Dickey for dressing her child as a prostitute from Pretty Woman, Maddy and Mia both took out the top
award for dressing as Dolly and Madonna, respectively. Connolly (2010:11) sums this up when she states that, ‘On these shows, the girls are depicted embracing stereotypical female roles and behaviours, when they are portrayed as sexualized mini-adults, dressed in scanty outfits and posed seductively for the camera’.

As part of the line up on the Lifestyle YOU channel, Toddlers and Tiaras aims to attract a young female demographic, especially newlyweds and young mothers. The Lifestyle YOU channel is a mix of lifestyle and reality television programs with many female presenters and themed days, such as ‘Love You Wednesdays’ and ‘Marry You Fridays’. It is hard to miss episodes of Toddlers and Tiaras as they are broadcast multiple times every day of the week. With the introduction of the Lifestyle YOU + 2 channel, every show is also broadcast two hours later on a ‘sister’ station. Most often sandwiched between Trinny and Susannah and Supernanny, this channel ‘trains’ women to be perfect wives and mothers in true Stepford Wives fashion. Lifestyle YOU also broadcasts many ‘wedding’ shows such as Four Weddings, Say Yes to the Dress and Don’t Tell the Bride, which feed into the princess culture that is prevalent in both American and Australian culture for women. Pageants are, as Henson (2011:1) posits, a ‘training ground for superficial, self-centred princesses in the making.’ The Cinderella complex is the pinnacle of this princess culture. Peggy Orenstein (2011:12), author of Cinder-Ella Ate my Daughter: Dispatches From the Front Lines of the New GIRLIE-GIRL agrees: ‘Encouraging princess culture – however innocently – contributes to the sexualisation of girls…Sexualisation is not just imposing sexualisation on children before they’re ready and viewing girls as sexual objects, but also valuing a girl for her appearance over her attributes.’

As Emily Maguire (2009:35) points out, ‘princess culture in Australia is on the rise.’ Princesses are just a phase, but as Orenstein (2011:12) argues, ‘they mark a girl’s first foray into the mainstream culture…and what was the first thing that culture told her about being a girl? Not that she was competent, strong, creative or smart, but that every little girl wants – or should want – to be the Fairest of Them All.’ While all children want affirmation, princess culture teaches little girls to get that approval through their looks. This princess culture, a feature of the culture of pageantry in America, now pervades western society. Mary, Crown Princess of Denmark and Catherine Middleton are the icons of this tradition. Paramount to this princess culture are ‘Cupcake dresses’, those dresses that stick out from the waist like the top of a cupcake. All Disney princesses, from Beauty in Beauty and the Beast to Cinderella, herself, wear these dresses. These dresses look very much like the dresses the 1930s child actor, Shirley Temple wore in an effort to remain younger and child-like. All contestants in child beauty pageants are expected to wear an ornate cupcake dress usually beaded with crystals. These dresses are extremely expensive and again, subversively indicate that beauty is only available to the rich. The expensive coaches and talent training, the personal hairdresser and spa treatments leading up to the pageant are unavailable to many families. Without this level of ‘commitment’ as it is labelled, in Little Miss Perfect, contestants are at a disadvantage. Even these costumes promote a warped image of
femininity. Reports (Lambert, 2011:1) of a mother who put her eight year old on “an extreme crash diet involving eating fruit for only a week” was revealed as an attempt to stop her daughter ‘growing too fast and [not] fitting properly into her $1200 pageant dress.’ Parents can spend up to $30,000 a year on pageants. Most spend between $2700 and $3000 per pageant (Lambert, 2011:1). In this way, beauty is being purchased and girls learn that the more money one invests in their appearance, the more beautiful they appear to society.

Pageants are exploitative and promote a perverted image of the perfect woman. Orenstein (2011:12) writes that girls learn that to be beautiful and successful they must ‘Look sexy, but [not] feel sexual, to provoke desire in others without experiencing it themselves’. Child beauty pageants endorse the view that the picture of female perfection is a thin, attractive, congenial, pliant and harmlessly flirtatious girl. Drawing on Levey’s argument, Craig Lambert (2001:1) ‘wonders at the spectacle of “little girls sashaying across the stage” in special layered outfits that allow them to “rip off the jacket, then rip off the skirt. They’re put in revealing clothing and made to look older—this often helps them win….Pageants are a place where existing gender stereotypes are played out. They don’t create the stereotypes. But it’s a very gendered activity”’. American child beauty pageants teach females that the contestant who conforms most convincingly to the narrow stereotype of female perfection is rewarded. In the pageant world, these rewards take the form of a tiara, trophy, cash prize and usually an advertising contract.

So we are left with this picture: ‘Victoria, age eight, stands in front of the broad bathroom mirror practicing facial expressions. Her grandmother stands in the background, repeatedly instructing Victoria to open her eyes wider. ‘See how your eyes are squinty? That’s what we need to fix.’ Victoria reaches up and opens her eyelids wider with her fingers.’ (Athena, 2010:1) Australians are consuming American television series like Toddlers and Tiaras and Little Miss Perfect and even hosting American ‘full glitz’ beauty pageants such as the Universal Royalty pageant. These images of little girls dissatisfied with their appearance are infiltrating the Australian media via coverage of American child beauty pageants. These children are only rewarded when they are heavily made up, rehearsing their traditional talent and dressed in either a bikini or cupcake dress. Australian girls and women are, as psychologist Syd Brown (2011:2) points out, ‘learning basically that they have one characteristic which is of total primary importance, and that is their body and their attractiveness.’ The 1.8 million Australians, who watch the Ultimate Grand Supreme winner in Toddlers and Tiaras crowned each week, are conditioned to believe that the greatest rewards are given to those who strive for, and attain this narrow stereotype of the perfect woman.