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Film: 'Miss... or Myth?' on Beauty Pageants

By VINCENT CANBY

Beautiful women or, rather, the differing ideas of what constitutes beauty in women are the shared theme of the two excellent documentaries that open today at the Film Forum 1.

"Miss... or Myth?," directed by Geoffrey Dunn and Mark Schwartz, is a straightforward, 60-minute reportorial account of the Miss California beauty pageant and of its counterpart, the feminist Myth California contest.

Topping the Film Forum program is Les Blank's 30-minute delight, "Gap-Toothed Women," which looks at and listens to women who happen to have a slight space between their two upper front teeth and feel just fine about it.

In documenting the history of the

The Cast

GAP-TOOTHED WOMEN, produced, directed and photographed by Les Blank; edited by Maureen Gosling; distributed by Flower Films. Running time: 30 minutes.

MISS... OR MYTH?, directed by Geoffrey Dunn and Mark Schwartz; photographed and edited by Mr. Schwartz; produced by Mr. Dunn, Mr. Schwartz and Claire Rubach; distributed by the Cinema Guild. At Film Forum 1, 57 Watts Street. Running time: 60 minutes. These films have no rating.

Miss California contest at Santa Cruz and of the Miss America pageant to which all Miss Californias go with hopes and busts held high, Mr. Dunn and Mr. Schwartz can't entirely avoid sending up the whole idea of American beauty pageants. Satire is built into the institution itself. As is known by anyone who's ever watched the Miss America show on television, nothing is much funnier or more disturbing than the intensity of the carefully rehearsed sincerity displayed by the women who participate.

Using a lot of archival footage to set the scene, "Miss... or Myth?" crosscuts between the Miss California contest of 1985 and the counterpart that was organized to ridicule what feminists see as the false values of all such contests. The film makers discover that sincerity is shoulder-deep on both sides, and that it's not all phony. "Miss... or Myth?" doesn't go for easy laughs.

Lisa Davenport, Miss California of 1985-86, at first takes a very haughty view of the women who have so nois-

ily expressed their dissatisfaction with the official pageant. "I hate to say this," she says (and then says it), "but they are not the example of womanhood I would like to follow. Many of them are fat. They don't take care of themselves. They're not even clean."

The principal spokeswoman for the opposition is Ann Simonton, a successful model as a teen-ager who, at 19, was gang-raped and now sees beauty pageants as promoting values that encourage rape in a society that debases women. As the climax of her protest (during which the counterdemonstrators chant "Dress meat, not women"), Miss Simonton puts on a bathing suit made out of pork ribs and slabs of other kinds of raw meat and splashes the steps of the pageant hall with a plastic bag of her own blood.

Eventually, even Miss Davenport seems to have some second thoughts. She recalls filling out her Miss America application form and feeling compelled to note that she once suffered from bulimia, though she credits the Miss America program with helping her to get over it.

Lee Ann Meriwether, who was Miss California of 1954 and Miss America of 1955, defends beauty pageants without whitewashing them. Other defenders of the Miss America contest talk about the pageant's scholarship program. Another woman calls it the "original" women's lib movement. Perhaps the most effective testimony is offered by Debra Johnson, an unsuccessful contestant at the 1985 Miss California contest, who po-

lently points out that in 62 years no "woman of color" has ever won the California pageant.

"Miss... or Myth?" also never lets the audience forget that the business of beauty pageants is business, the promotion of commerce (supermarkets, products, real estate developments) through the promotion of a comparatively narrow idea of beauty.