

Published in: Kelly, P. and Kamp, A. 2014. A Critical Youth Studies for the 21st Century.

Leiden: Brill. (pp. 317-332)

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

FOSTERING COMPLICIT FEMININITY: EPOCH, EDUCATION AND THE YOUNG FEMALE BODY

Majella McSharry and Brendan Walsh

Introduction: Recent Practices and Historical Antecedents

Prior to 1878, post-primary schooling in Ireland was dominated by religious provision and throughout the 20th Century Catholic congregations, in particular, operated the majority of such schools. As we see below, there is much evidence to support the position that young, female bodies were heavily regulated in these schools. Historically, such regulation was as much a result of wider social constraint as it was particular to Catholicism. However, given that those girls who secured post-primary schooling before the advent of free education in 1966, and the majority of those that have passed through secondary schooling since then, attended Catholic convent institutions, they provide a useful starting place in surveying the regulation of the young, female body. They also allow us to identify to what extent traditional notions of femininity have succumbed to more hyper-sexualised versions of young women in a world where the body as commodity has become normalized.

This chapter seeks to explore the regulation of the schoolgirl body within the Irish secondary school landscape. In doing so it describes historic practices that reinforced stereotypical behaviours for young women of school and university-going age and discusses how these practices find striking resonances in contemporary schooling. Our focus is on one aspect of regulation – that of the body. Through the body, that form by which we so often seek self-definition and are defined, that to which we are so intimately bound, regulation becomes immediate and in some instances all-encompassing. Increasingly, for young girls in particular, it has become *the* form of expression – a public manifestation of personality, values and aspirations and to others, frequently, therefore, a symbol of threatened aggression, immorality and anarchy.

Regardless of the epoch schoolgirls have been the subjects of quite exaggerated regulation. The manner in which schools expect girls to dress, walk, eat, talk, socialize or move are all subject to a regime of regulations the object of which was to make young women conform to versions of feminine ‘ladylikeness’ that may or may not reflect wider socio-cultural expectations of women in the 21st Century. This discussion maps the embodied surveillance and regulation of girls within the Irish education landscape, drawing particular attention to the contradictions placed upon both classical and contemporary femininity.

In the late 20th Century feminist movements centered on rupturing normalized practices of sexism and gender stereotyping. A new era of girlhood emerged, not only offering girls opportunities to be autonomous, successful and self-stylised, but *expecting* them to be. Since the 1960s a neoliberal discourse has come to dominate the education and labour market agenda for girls, culminating in today’s presentation of girls as entrepreneurial and empowered. According to Harris (2005, 94), narratives of economic success, personal responsibility and “being the best you can be” are directed at young girls in particular. ‘DIY’ biographies of choice and success are defining features of post-feminist and third wave feminism: smart girls work hard but also play hard, embodying the characteristics of both. It is acceptable for them to maximize their entrepreneurial success on the basis of “entrepreneurial” (Coleman 2009, 8) expression. Girls in late modernity are socialized to realise that their tits, hips and lips are their power tools (Karp and Stoller 1999, 7). While Irish schools have tended to embrace the ideals of upward mobility for girls in terms of academic achievement, they have also often retained a conservative outlook on the sexualized assertiveness of young ‘ladies’ which is at odds with the hyper-femininity discourse of wider culture. This is not dissimilar to the tension experienced by girls attending religious schools in the 1940s where schools’ commitment to equipping girls for their dual lives in ‘ladylikeness’ and ‘domesticity’, was not easily synthesized with a proliferation of new world opportunities. It remains extremely difficult for young girls today to embody the identity of ‘lady’ which continues to be enforced as the dominant code within the school setting, given the competing hetero-sexualized and hyper-feminized demands that require girls to be sexy as well as successful in the 21st Century (Allan 2009). Commonly, schools still enforce a type of embodied femininity that hinges on bodily refinement and spatial confinement.

The latter part of the chapter will refer to data gathered in 2005 as part of research

focused on the embodied experiences of teenagers. The data that will be presented arose from one-to-one interviews with nine girls aged 13 to 16. Three girls attended a disadvantaged single sex girls' school based in inner-city Dublin, Ireland. Three others attended a private, fee paying girls' school on the outskirts of the city, while three others attended a lower-middle class co-educational school also located on the outskirts of the city. Their narratives evidence how powerful discourses of feminine performance continue to be played out and negotiated by young girls in their school contexts as they have been for at least a century. Aspects of their stories will be used to gain an insight into the contradictions encountered by young girls as they attempt to synthesize school based expectations of spatial and corporeal confinement with wider social idioms.

Regulation in Practice: Making the Victorian Schoolgirl in Ireland

While a pupil at Alexandra College, Dublin, Enid Starkie, later a Fellow of Somerville College, Oxford, was prevented from playing hockey by her mother who feared possible disfigurement but also because the game “made the ankles thick and over-developed the muscles” (Harford 2008, 31). Ladies who took to cycling in Dublin in the 1880s were subjected to verbal abuse from onlookers. It was considered unladylike, risqué and provided women with the opportunity to move about the urban landscape as they pleased; a means of movement that lessened the weighty restrictions of Victorian dress and was both physically and socially emancipatory. Indeed the ‘space’ allotted to the early 20th Century ‘modern’ schoolgirl was firmly-founded upon that allocated to her forbears. The preoccupations of the jazz-age were not articulated in school magazines in this period in the way the fashions of London’s Carnaby Street were in similar publications in the 1960s and historians will not find regulations such as those of the Dominican Convent School, Cabra, Dublin, appearing in boys’ schools of the time. Girls were forbidden, for example, from “purchasing novels of periodicals at Railway stations” or “to ever introduce such into the school;” they could not write home more than once weekly without permission while “useless and unnecessary correspondence with friends” was “not permitted;” they should leave their classroom at the end of a lesson “in turn” and “in order and silence;” strive to “acquire a ladylike manner, and a refined pleasing accent” all of which required “constant persevering effort;” at meals girls should “confine their conversation to those near them and thus ... avoid a loud unladylike tone in conversation;” silence was to be kept “at all

times” in the dormitories; pupils were “not allowed to stand looking out of front windows” or “to sit on the grass” (Burns and Wilson 1994, 30).

Similar restrictions were not uncommon in boarding schools of the time and reinforced the passive nature of the feminine. The language employed was unambiguous: the girls were ‘forbidden,’ ‘they could not’ and ‘were not allowed,’ they must ‘strive,’ be ‘ladylike,’ they must ‘persevere,’ they must ‘confine,’ they must ‘avoid.’ Analysis might suggest that these young women internalised an image of themselves as corralled, ‘made’ to requirements that originated in some other place, outside of their sphere of influence and often directly contrary to harmless behaviours appropriate to their age. Perhaps most interestingly however, in the context of this discussion, was the imperative that

it was contrary to all etiquette and ladylike demeanour to make use of vulgarisms, slang or certain phrases which, used by (the pupils’) brothers, would be harmless and inoffensive, but when spoken by young ladies, would betray a great want of self-respect and refinement. (Burns and Wilson 1994, 30)

Pupils who attended Dominican College, Dublin in the 1920s recall the threat of newspaper being sewn to the hem of a school skirt which “went above regulation length” (Dominican College 2000, 13).¹ Another recalled that she could not “remember the number of times I went home with bands of newspaper pinned to my skirt” (Muckross Mail, 1982). Such regulatory procedures were typical. As at Cabra school, a pupil at Loreto School, Co. Wicklow in the 1920s recalled that the girls were forbidden to talk in the dormitories but also “to read in bed at night as [she] had done for years” (Lee 2000, 12). She and her peers were forbidden to eat sweets, drink lemonade. In other words, what they put *into* their bodies was also regulated. They were “not encouraged to have views on any controversial topics.” Like others, she recalls that “worst of all” pupils had “to put on a bathing costume before having a bath.” A pupil at another school recalls that this rule was subverted by “only dipp[ing] the costume into bath water” (Burns and Wilson 1994, 24). These incidents reflect, certainly, regulation of the body often associated with religious-run schools but also demonstrate how such regulation could be subverted. Habits of

¹ In undertaking interviews for a separate study a ninety-six year old Dominican sister who had attended this school as a girl recalled that she was, on one occasion, the victim of this measure although she recalled that it was done more in good spirits and was less than effective as a disciplinary procedure.

dressing and undressing, guarding of the body, of intimacy, recur frequently in the stories girls tell of school life.

Movement and deportment were constantly regulated. As late as the early 1950s a Loreto girl recalls having to play the cello ‘side-saddle’ – a frustrating precursor to the guitarist discussed below – as there was “no way a Loreto girl could play it between her knees” while another recalls that, as pupils, the girls were told that they were “an elite corp bound together by the Loreto code” which was “distinctly ladylike even in the 1970s” (Lee 2000, 33). Significantly, this past pupil reflects that while Ireland “transformed itself throughout the 1960s and 70s” and the “whiffs of women’s liberation and hippie defiance wafted across the Irish sea,” her school remained in a “time warp.” Her “largely happy” ten years at Loreto “certainly resembled the 19th Century” more than they did the 20th. This view is reinforced by pupil from 1975 to 1980 who recalled the “dreaded divided (basketball) skirt whose divide only the most daring removed” and “the blue regulation knickers” (Lee 2000, 35). This comment hints at an area of school life that girls comment on repeatedly.² Writing in 2000, a past pupil of Muckross College in the late 1960s mused:

I often wince when I remember the uniform. No consideration was given to any evolution of the female form between the ages of four and eighteen ... if these garments were designed to protect us from too rapid a sexual awakening, they ... worked a treat.(Dominican College 2000, 33)

But, demonstrating the significance of this aspect of school life, of its uniformity over time, a century earlier a schoolgirl in Dominican Convent, Roscrea (1857-58), had been clothed in a “very ugly” uniform consisting of “brown cashmere dresses, tight fitting black jackets of the same material, white straw bonnets trimmed with cardinal red ribbon” (Dom. Archives RSA/127, 57).

While it is not surprising that female religious orders were tentative about the Girl Guide movement, fearing its “doubtful elements” such as “drill displays, camping out and public sports” which “may tend to unsex girls” it should be recalled that no such inhibitions ever cast

² While conducting the study alluded to at Footnote 1, almost all of the 25 interviewees made reference to how they disliked their school uniform.

shadows upon the many brigades formed in boys' schools (Dom. Archives, Cabra OPG/SSS/F 001-F, 007). This form of physical regulation is particularly marked in the memory of Valerie Barry who attended the school in the 1950s. Echoing the public response to lady cyclists seventy years earlier, Barry points to the appearance of female hockey players. They were not allowed to compete in the Leinster School Competition – the most prestigious competition of its type in the County – but “to this day” she does not know why: “was it unladylike ... or was it the gap between the black stockings and the shortened gymslip?” (Dominican College 2000, 28). In similar vein, a past pupil of Dominican College, Roscrea recalled that the girls were allowed small parties on Saturdays – “we had dancing and games” – but were “not allowed to twirl around in case our skirts [went] up” (Sacred Heart Archives Mount Anville, Dublin RAS/145). Four of the girls did later represent Leinster school teams and Barry was selected for the national team with whom she won twenty-six international caps.

Making the New Girl: Modernity versus Tradition?

Barry's comments about competitive sport – in Ireland, historically a male preserve – and those of the Loreto past pupil with her school's ‘time-warp’ reflect a discussion that was taking place in schools at the period. Girls' schools understood that changing times required that they interrogate their practice and assumptions. This became more pronounced in the late 1960s but as early as 1945 the Dominican order established a Commission to consider criticisms made by the Conference of Secondary Schools regarding convent education in Ireland. The Dominican Commission is interesting in that, reflecting the tensions that had concerned educators of girls since the 19th Century, coupled with the distinctly Catholic ethos of their schools, they wished to locate a ‘space’ for their pupils in a rapidly changing social context. Subsequent to WWII women throughout Europe had discovered new ‘spaces’ in the labour market and social activity more generally. The Commission, reflects a world on the verge of transition, a time of metamorphosis and its debate was infused with the tension and uncertainty that characterised a determined shift in the aspirations of women generally. How should these aspirations, increasingly articulated by school girls seeking new experiences and wider vistas, be managed? The “changed order” saw girls leave home earlier and enter into competition with men; it demanded a “two-fold education” that prepared her for “a few years of independent life earning her own livelihood” but also “to fulfil her specific natural function as woman, wife and mother”

(Dom. Archives, Cabra OPG/SSS/F008-F029). A dual role was perpetuated as was the definition of the female in relation to the male; the Commission notes that the school curriculum is “purely intellectual, and therefore does not suit the majority of ... girls who, unlike boys, develop ... to a higher standard when a large admixture of practical subjects is intelligently taught”. Because boys and girls are biologically different their education should have different objectives.

‘Showing Off’: The Body as Appendage

The female must regulate her education to compliment that of the male, she must also prove that she can regulate the domestic sphere of the male in exactly the same way as her Victorian forbear (see Burstyn 1984). According to the Commission, “a man wants a ‘homemaker’ – a girl who will be able to run his house, and be happy about it, on *his* income” (emphasis in original). Men are “frightened by a girl who shows no sense of the value of money or of the difficulty of earning money, or who ... seems to want a very high material standard of life” and while “economy is necessary,” men also “want their women-folk to have good taste and, above all, to know how to be attractive” as “men, apparently, like to be able to ‘show-off’ their wives ... (h)ence a girl should acquire the art of making the most of herself” (Dom. Archives, Cabra OPG/SSS/F008-F029). Again, it is not difficult to discern the undercurrent of regulation. Girls (would-be wives) should ‘make’ homes, but not on their incomes, they must be active in that they should ‘run the house’ but also be passive, ornamental, so that they might be ‘show[n]-off’.

The Dominican sisters appear to be resigned to these social requirements which they must accommodate. In this they are caught between encouraging girls to be independent, which they undoubtedly did, while having to remain cognisant of conventions pertaining to both their physical appearance and perceived social role. Even outside ‘space’ was defined in terms of submission, of making an Other of the self to suit the male. A wife should be “familiar with the great names” and “know something about” the history of art, music and literature. Such “familiarity” should be “the ordinary *equipment* of an educated woman” (our emphasis). The contemporaneous school curriculum, according to the Commission, neglected disciplines fundamental to such a role such as “Cookery, Needlework, Handcrafts [and] Drawing.” Modern girls were increasingly “light, irresponsible, pleasure-loving, ready to follow the latest fashion, lacking in womanly dignity and reserve” while “one of the most disturbing charges brought against them” was “indulgence in alcoholic drink” (Dom. Archives, Cabra OPG/SSS/F 008F,

029). This last observation, while replete with moral overtones belonging to the period, also, however, points again to regulation of what might be ingested and, in this, forms part of long history of the relationship between women and the governing of body shape and size.

These characteristics are inherently meaningless until understood as counter-images of the regulated girl/woman. Socio-historical contexts are important in understanding the ‘spaces’ occupied by the sexes, but these contexts are in themselves constructs. The counter-image manifesting herself here is also a construct, but it represents an active self-construction of womanhood within the limits and possibilities of the post-War period, indeed, in the post-flapper period. These girls, if the Commission’s observations accurately reflect the changing dynamic, were forging a new ‘space’, radically different and therefore threatening, to that constructed for them in previous decades. The Commission understood the tectonic shifts:

within the past twenty years Society has undergone a profound change ... the barriers between the sexes have gone; girls work side-by-side with men in office and factory; they claim the same freedom from control, the same right to ‘liberty.’

The parenthesis is significant as if the term ‘liberty’ referred to a state that existed, or ought to, outside the experience of Irish girls/women. It does not sit comfortably within the text reflecting, it appears, how uneasily the concept sits within the discourse of the Commission itself. The Commission’s response to the inappropriate curriculum of girls’ schools has a strikingly modern resonance: Dominican convent schools, it was suggested, should place less emphasis upon preparing pupils for the public examinations and concentrate instead upon “training girls to think, to judge, to choose.” This comment reflects a wider and deeper unease felt by many religions regarding the prevalence of the public examination system which, they felt, had increasingly replaced their more liberal humanist approach with a market-driven, utilitarian vocational model.

The extent to which Irish schoolgirls, regardless of school type, religion or background have embraced, or been allocated, this kind of liberty is the topic of the remainder of this chapter. How, in other words, have they continued to experience various forms of regulation, particularly bodily, and how are they negotiating a ‘space’ for themselves within the current school context.

Watching the Student Body

The regimes of control in operation in Irish secondary schools have always had commonalities with Foucault's description of the penal system. Foucault questioned if it was surprising that prisons resembled schools (1977). In both instances the minutest aspects of daily action are scheduled and regulated. He referenced the work of La Salle to demonstrate how temporal control regulated the physical movements of students in the 1700s: "At the last stroke of the hour, a pupil will ring the bell, and at the first sound of the bell all the pupils will kneel, with their arms crossed and their eyes lowered" (La Salle cited in Foucault 1977, 150). While schools today are somewhat less regimented, the temporal and spatial regulation of students continues to occur through timetabling, attendance monitoring, physical segregation, intelligence streaming, uniform policing, food surveillance etcetera. A "micro-physics" of power operates within schools, as in any other modern institution, allowing relations of power access to individuals, their bodies and their daily gestures (Foucault 1980, 151). Boys and girls have historically been subjected to many of the same disciplinary practices within schools. However, girls' bodies have always been monitored and regulated through stricter mechanisms than boys. The pervasive surveillance of women's bodies prompted Bartky's (1990a) theorization of "woman-as-Panopticon." The feeling of being watched or scrutinized results in women assuming self-protective body postures.

The girls who participated in the research from the two single-sex convent schools told of having to get changed for PE class in gym halls and locker areas. There was no designated changing space in either school which meant that they were acutely aware of being watched while undressing. They described a distinct lack of privacy and continually referred to feeling 'self-conscious' about teachers and peers watching them. The girls felt the need to develop strategies to cover or protect their bodies when changing. "I'd never take off something unless I have something else just ready to put on so I'm not standing there" (Sandra, aged 13) or "I get changed in the corner or else I have my shirt on and put my arms out and ... we all do it. You get changed underneath your uniform" (Chloe, aged 13). The girls' accounts are underlined by the vulnerability of nakedness and their discomfort around being watched by their peers. According to Molly (aged 13), "Everyone would cover themselves a bit or say 'don't look, don't look.' Usually I take off my shirt but leave it around my back and turn to the wall and just pull over my t-shirt and then take away the shirt." Perhaps even more unsettling was the discomfort of being observed by teachers:

I put my top on before I take my shirt off and I put my bottoms on under my skirt and then I take my skirt off. I don't think the teacher should be watching you when you're getting changed. It's not nice. (Eve, aged 13).

These young girls responded to being watched by trying to cover and conceal their bodies. Their response inverts the 1920s' swimsuit episode in girls' schools described earlier, indicating a continued convention that girls should not be naked, even amongst themselves. They essentially point to two forms of restriction. First, they are restricted physically by the requirement to change in communal areas as no space was provided in which they could be naked in privacy. Second, and arguably more fundamentally restrictive, is the social restriction on femininity which appears to require young girls to feel awkward and ashamed of their naked state. For Foucault their response indicates distinct "modalities" arising from uninterrupted supervision (1977, 137). Bartky criticises Foucault for being "blind to those disciplines that produce a modality of embodiment that is peculiarly feminine" (1990b, 448). In turning their backs, moving into corners and hiding beneath their clothes, the girls attempted to shield themselves from the gaze of onlookers. Their introverted response is characteristically feminine, indicating that there are specific "modalities of feminine bodily comportment, motility and spatiality" that arise from "the process of growing up like a girl" (Young 1980, 153). They tried to make themselves inconspicuous and invisible. At a time of youth when "biological growth alters pubescent bodies" – their "outer contours and inner sensations ... making bodily self-consciousness common" (McSharry 2009, 9) – the requirement to undress in communal areas serves to heighten girls' bodily awareness and any perceived physical flaws. Shilling (2003) draws on the work of Leder to explain how the body vanishes from our consciousness as we carry out the mundane routines of daily life. However, it reappears with a vengeance when we feel discomfort. Rather than asserting themselves as beautiful, articulate and unrestrained, as neoliberal discourses suggest, these girls were "unconfident in their bodies, timid and inhibited" (Frost 2005, 81). Even if they were confident about their bodies, the normalized gaze from teachers and peers evokes a ritualized response of hiding and shielding so embedded in school culture, that girls who shamelessly flaunt their bodies risk being reprimanded or rejected. Teen girl culture might expect girls to be sexy and sassy but schools still expect them to be regulated and refined.

Patrolling the Student Body

Different modes of surveillance to ensure students were in attendance and well behaved were employed within each of the three research schools. This is reminiscent of teachers patrolling the halls of residence in the 1920s as discussed earlier, even though more modern modes of surveillance are in operation today. The most sophisticated was the use in one school of a swipe card system where students were expected to clock in and out. This school was visibly peppered with security cameras prompting one girl to liken it to a prison, “It feels like a prison in here. I think they have cameras in the girls’ toilet at the sink area but I haven’t seen them” (Karen, aged 15). Karen’s comment is reminiscent of Foucault’s account of panoptic surveillance common in prisons in the 1700s. Security cameras act similarly to the panopticon’s central watchtower, positioned to make observation of the entire population possible at any given time. The students become permanently aware of an authoritarian gaze fixed upon them and regulate their behaviour accordingly. The security cameras function as a “laboratory of power” (Foucault 1977, 204) ensuring, among other things, complicit femininity. In this school, it is questionable as to whether cameras have actually been placed in the girls’ toilets. However even the rumour causes girls to control their movements and symbolically acts as an invasion of the girls’ most intimate school space.

There is probably no area in a school more infiltrated by hyper-feminine beauty practices than ‘the sink area.’ It was described by Sarah, aged 16, as the space where girls implement checks throughout the day as they balance competing feminine expectations of self-indulgence and self-doubt:

Some girls would get up at 6.15am to put on their makeup and do their hair. They think they have to look flawless for school. They have to look as perfected as their friends. I saw a first year in the bathroom last week topping up her eyeliner and mascara and foundation.

Girls’ beauty regimes at ‘the sink’ proclaim independent choice in the consumption and use of beauty products – a proclamation of a new feminism. However, this does not always sit easily with teachers, especially female teachers according to 13 year old Amy: “Miss Cotter is the worst. She has baby wipes in her desk and if she sees anyone wearing makeup she makes them

remove it there and then.” Most of the girls noted that even the teachers who did not tolerate students wearing makeup, wore it themselves. Therefore, their protests could not be viewed as a throwback to radical feminists’ resistance of capitalist commoditization of women. Rather, it is likely they saw the removal of makeup as a controlling and ‘uniforming’ mechanism for all students. The use of ‘baby wipes’ hints at the infantilization of these girls as they are stripped of their makeup, as well as their ‘perceived’ individuality, in front of their peers. Singling out female teachers as those most likely to patrol girls’ appearance is the likely by-product of a litigious society where male teachers are fearful to comment on young girls’ bodies. It is also a possible indication of female teachers own unquestioned indoctrination into the need for young girls to display a discernibly disciplined and refined ‘middle classiness.’

Skirting the Student Body

Beauty regimes that encourage the interpretation of the female body as ‘spectacle’ are often at odds with teachers admonishing demands on girls to be ‘demure and ladylike,’ to ‘smile pretty,’ to sit with their legs together (Bartky 1990b, 455). The proper placement of girls’ legs is particularly significant while skirts remain a central, and seeming indispensable, part of girls’ school uniforms. Enforcement of the gender-specific practice of skirt-wearing, “demands a particular type of gender performance” (Happel 2013, 93). As we have rehearsed, clothing functions to form a second skin on the body, to protect it from the vulnerability associated with nakedness. However, the school skirt demands *exposure* of body, albeit in meticulously monitored and pre-determined ways. One of the girls spoke specifically about the uniform skirt as a trigger for feelings of self-consciousness and discomfort: “I don’t mind the uniform. Well the jumper or the shirt but I hate the skirt. It’s so uncomfortable and when I get home I always change into a pair of jeans. I’d prefer to be able to wear trousers” (Shannon, aged 14). This was echoed by another:

I have short socks but I don’t wear them ... I wear tights. I just don’t like wearing little things because I don’t like showing off my legs or anything. The uniform skirt is long and it covers my knees. I’d never wear a skirt outside school. I’m not a really girly person ... I just wear tracksuit bottoms. (Eve, aged 13)

Shannon and Eve’s narratives bring to mind Entwistle’s (2000) work on the contrasting modes of

dress employed by women in the workplace and home environments. She noted a sharp distinction between the tailored and structured clothing worn to work and the loose, comfortable clothes worn at home. However, the uniform skirt is more significant than this. It points to a compulsory and imposed form of feminine expression based on an historical vision of a 'lady,' which remains relatively uncontested and unchallenged in many Irish schools. While skirts are a culturally normalized mode of feminine dress frequently used to project hyper-femininity and 'girl power,' the school uniform skirt symbolizes submission and imposition.

Skirts confirm 'traditional' gender identities and, as a result, have "implications for how girls are treated, viewed, and, most importantly ... for how they are able to move" (Happel 2013, 94). Skirts are physically restrictive and so is the knowledge about how to behave in them (Martin 1998). Girls are simply not permitted to participate in some activities when wearing a skirt, while wearing a skirt during other activities requires scrupulous attention to comportment and movement. This was explained by 15 year old Karen:

Skirts are obviously a nightmare in the winter and the school doesn't really want us wearing trousers. Like tonight we're going to the National Concert Hall with the choir and they're being so strict with the uniform. Even one of the girls, she's playing the guitar, with her legs wide open and they won't let her wear trousers. It's the 21st Century for God's sake. And when we're up there singing, they're not going to be thinking, 'Oh look, they're wearing skirts, they're a marvellous school.' They'd say, 'Look at them. They're wearing trousers and skirts, they're a marvellous school.' That's much better.

Karen attended a co-educational school, which is much more likely to offer girls the option of wearing trousers than single-sex girls' schools. However, she also stressed that wearing trousers was actively discouraged, especially for public performances. In the Irish context single-sex, fee-paying and middle-class schools continue to insist upon girls wearing skirts. Many 'vocational' and 'community' schools permit girls to wear trousers, albeit of an unfeminine and ill-fitting kind. Schools that wish to be viewed as middle-class are often reluctant to allow girls to wear trousers for fear of association with working-class androgyny.

The body indicates social class through moral euphemism, rarely naming it directly but associating it through interpretation (Skeggs 2005). The uniform skirt is associated with middle-

class respectability as well as ladylike femininity. In Karen's narrative, the girl playing the guitar is not permitted to wear trousers and it is almost certain that neither is she permitted to allow her legs to lapse apart, carelessly exposing herself. She must assume the position of a guitar player, while simultaneously protecting her modesty. She must be focused on her musical delivery and must maintain a ladylike comportment when doing so. Bartky (1990b) expostulates that the continued need for women to sit and stand with legs, feet and knees close together implies that society still maintains a double standard in relation to guarding the genital area: "A woman's tight and constricted posture" indicates a "body language that speaks eloquently, though silently, of her subordinate status in the hierarchy of gender" (Bartky 1990b, 455). As exemplified by the young guitar player, the body has "constraints, prohibitions and obligations" imposed upon it (Foucault 1977, 136). Even wearing tights would not permit her to relax nonchalantly into her chair for she must still negotiate the position of her legs. Tights require constant adjustment and fixing which must be done subtly or in private. Skirts and tights cause a discomfort that sees girls spending much of their time "attuned to and arranging their clothing and/or their bodies" (Martin 1998, 498). It results in what Eco labelled an "epidermic self-awareness" (1986, 192-94 cited in Entwistle 2003) where rather than forgetting that you are wearing a particular garment of clothing, you assume the exterior behaviour of one who wears the garment and it imposes a demeanour on the wearer. The school uniform, along with its required deportment, makes it almost impossible for young girls to forget the restricted nature of their embodied being.

Conclusion

It has always been a dilemma for schools on how best to regulate the daily actions that indicate the performance of femininity. In reviewing this topic we have been struck by girls' continued discomfort with the ubiquitous surveillance of their bodies in schools and by the equal determination of schools to insist that they conform to an appearance that, very often, is little in evidence in the world beyond the school walls. Since at least the mid-19th Century Irish schoolgirls have complained of the ugliness or restrictiveness of school uniform. They have noted seemingly arbitrary regulations concerning jewellery, makeup, footwear and skirt type and length. Unlike many European countries, the vast majority of schools in Ireland insist on a school uniform. Schools, while historically tending to reflect the wider changes in society regarding curriculum, physical activity and so on, tend to remain highly conservative in terms of

how young 'ladies' should present themselves physically. Schools continue to use surveillance and discipline to rework the appearance and behaviour of students so their bodies display a perceived 'acceptable, normative comportment' (Morris 2005). Against the backdrop of relative freedoms won by feminists in the last century and through the lens of 21st Century Ireland we can see how the modality of 'young lady' embedded in schools is strangely peculiar and overwhelmingly contradictory. We conclude by introducing an image that, for us, epitomizes an attempt by schoolgirls to undermine and subvert the neo-liberal/conservative contradiction in which they find themselves.



Figure 1: Rendition of T-shirt Image: SHAKE YO' VERITASS (reproduced with permission of the artist)

We were particularly struck by this strident rupturing of school discourse in an all-girls Dublin

secondary school where, in 2008, the sixth year girls (those completing secondary school in May of that year) produced a t-shirt which subverted both the school motto and the traditional image of the convent-educated girl (viewed in the Dominican Archives, Muckross Park, Dublin). The motto in question is '*Veritas*.' The girls reworked the motto – the very heart of the convent school ethos – to appear as '*Shake Yo' Veritass*.' As we can see the wording is the precursor to an image of a scantily-dressed young woman in knee-high socks, 'hot-pants' and a 'cut-off' t-shirt standing in a slightly provocative pose. The movement lines at her hips indicate that she is shaking her '...ass'. She is a third wave feminist – sufficiently educated to rewrite the words of convention and choosing hyper-femininity as her mode of expression. However this image is enigmatic: possibly optimistic or depressingly familiar? Certainly the girls utterly subverted the school crest, displacing the ancient motto with both hyper-sexualised image and vocabulary. They have defiantly stripped the body of its school uniform revealing the sexy girl waiting beneath. However, the extent to which this reflects a strident and self-conscious re-making of the body for modern young women about to embark on adult life or, in recognition that there is no unregulated space, submission to a new sexualised culture that treats the female form as trite imagery for general consumption we do not know. It begs the question of whether or not these girls have simply jettisoned one pre-ordained, doctrinaire, imposed image in favour of another equally restricted one. Are they merely swapping their school uniform with one prescribed by capitalist consumerism? Either way, we see how these Irish schoolgirls have moved beneath and between regulating discourses. But have they moved beyond them?

References

- Allan, A.J. 2009. 'The Importance of Being a 'Lady': Hyperfemininity and Heterosexuality in the Private, Single-Sex Primary School.' *Gender and Education* 21(2): 145-58.
- Bartky, S.L. 1990a. *Femininity and domination: studies in the phenomenology of oppression*. New York: Routledge.
- Bartky, S.L. 1990b. "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power." In *The Feminist Reader. Local and Global Perspectives*, edited by Carole McCann and Seung-Kyung Kim. New York: Routledge.
- Burns, O. and M. Wilson. 1994. *Dominican Sisters Cabra 1819-1994: Celebrating 175 Years*, Dublin.
- Burstyn, J.N. 1984. *Victorian Education and the Ideal of Womanhood*, USA: Rutgers University Press.
- Coleman, J. 2009. "An Introduction to Feminisms in a Postfeminist Age." *Women's Studies Journal* 23(2): 3-13.
- Dom. Archives, Cabra, Dublin, OPG/SSS/F, 001-F, 007.*
- Dom. Archives, Cabra, Dublin, OPG/SSS/F,008-F,029.*
- Dom. Archives, Cabra, Dublin RSA/127.*
- Dominican College, Muckross Park: A Century of Memoirs 1900-2000.* Dublin: Dominican College.
- Entwistle, J. 2000. *The Fashioned Body*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Entwistle, J. 2003. "The Dressed Body." In *Real Bodies: A Sociological Introduction*, edited by Mary Evans and Ellie Lee. New York: Palgrave.
- Foucault, M. 1977. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Harmondsworth: Peregrine.

- Foucault, M. 1980. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1927-1977*. Brighton: Harvester
- Frost, L. 2005. "Theorizing the Young Woman in the Body." *Body & Society* 11(1):63-85
- Happel, A. 2013. "Ritualized Girling: School Uniforms and the Compulsory Performance of Gender." *Journal of Gender Studies* 22(1):92-96
- Harford, J. 2008. *The Opening of University Education to Women in Ireland*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press.
- Harris, A. 2004. *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Routledge.
- Karp, M. and D. Stoller. 2005. *The Best Guide to the New Girl Order*. New York: Penguin.
- Lee, M. 2000. *Loreto Secondary School, Bray Commemorative Year Book 1850-2000*. Dublin: Loreto Secondary School.
- Martin, K.A. 1998. "Becoming a Gendered Body: Practices of Preschools." *American Sociological Review* 63(1): 494–511.
- McSharry, M. 2009. *Schooled Bodies: Negotiating Adolescent Validation through Press, Peers and Parents*. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham.
- Morris, E. 2005. "'Tuck in that shirt!' – Race, Class, Gender and Discipline in an Urban School." *Sociological Perspectives* 48(4): 493-514.
- Muckross Park Dominican Past Pupils' Union. 1982. *Muckross Mail 1912-1982*. Dublin: Muckross Park.
- Sacred Heart Archives, Mount Anville, Dublin, RSA/145.*
- Skeggs, B. 2005. "The Making of Class and Gender through Visualising Moral Subject Formation." *Sociology* 39(5): 965-82
- The Loreto Magazine. *Loreto Archives, Dublin*. <http://www.loreto.ie/archives/publications-from-the-archives> (Accessed 26 October, 2013)
- Young, M.I. 1980. "'Throwing like a Girl': A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment Mobility and Spatiality." *Human Studies* 3(2): 137-56.

