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# DISOBEDIENT BODIES

EMMA DABIRI

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PROFILE BOOKS

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First published in Great Britain in 2023 by  
Profile Books Ltd  
29 Cloth Fair  
London  
EC1A 7JQ

[www.profilebooks.com](http://www.profilebooks.com)

Published in association with Wellcome Collection

**wellcome  
collection**

183 Euston Road  
London NW1 2BE  
[www.wellcomecollection.org](http://www.wellcomecollection.org)

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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset in Dante by MacGuru Ltd  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 80081 792 0  
eISBN 978 1 80081 793 7



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# PREFACE

WE ARE OBSESSED with our appearances, but how many of us like the way we look?

Disobedient bodies recognise the forces of social control that shape our relationship to beauty – from the moment we're born, and throughout our lives – and resist them.

From a tender age, I learnt a huge tension existed between the pressure girls were under to attract and maintain male attention, through our appearance, and the shame that was attendant with any expressions of sexuality. This operated according to an essentially lose-lose dynamic, expressed between the perennial polarity of being labelled either 'frigid' or a 'slut'.

Meanwhile you were supposed to be pretty

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and clever because popular girls were both, but you couldn't be pretty and clever because everybody would hate you. So you had to be one or the other. All this, bearing in mind that if you were *just* pretty you ran the risk of being dismissed as a 'fuckin bimbo', but if you weren't, you were an 'ugly bitch'. And either way, you definitely couldn't have 'notions' (of grandeur). With local flavours – girls and women all over the world are subject to these pressures; in this case 'notions' is an expression of deeply ingrained Irish regulatory measures, alongside these shifting beauty standards, to keep people – particularly women – 'in their place'. But remember, you still had to attract male attention, cos you were hot, but hot without 'notions', of course.

It makes my head spin just thinking about it. Nothing, you could do, seemingly, was right. Just by virtue of being a woman you were in the wrong, however you behaved, however you looked. Ironically because it was itself entirely contradictory, there was no space to attend to the multiplicities, let alone the complexities or

indeed contradictions, of being a human being.

We need to recognise that the attention focused on our bodies – particularly female bodies – is accompanied by a deeply entrenched contempt for them, and that this is the result of specific cultural, philosophical and religious legacies. As well as a healthy dose of body hatred and misogyny, Western culture has in many ways been determined by a heavily visual paradigm, which has also helped to inform the shallowness of the beauty regime. In Western discourse there is a long tradition of imagining the body and the mind as inherently separate. Accordingly, the body is subservient to the mind. Disobedient bodies sense that there are healthier ways of relating to ourselves and are curious to explore them. A disobedient body is one that understands the interrelatedness of the two, recognising the body is no less valuable, and viewing the person as a whole, rather than comprised of oppositional warring entities.

By becoming disobedient, my hope is that we can, against all the odds, *take pleasure* in the

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experience of our bodies, outside of the restrictions and demands of a system that insists we hate and punish ourselves.

# INTRODUCTION

I CAN STILL SEE the line of us now, piled into a girlfriend's bathroom, some of us spilling out into the bedroom, jostling for mirror space, to apply the black eyeliner we all winged our eyes with, elbowing one another out of the way as we clamped our lashes with one of them gruesome mechanical-looking eyelash curlers you couldn't pay me to use today. And finally, finishing off the look with a slick of Rimmel Heather Shimmer.

I've always loved make-up, its application an ordinary, everyday invitation for the extraordinary. Today I have the shelves of an apothecary – with pots and jars, potions and creams, lipstick cases and gold-gilded compacts, creams and oils and paintbrushes. Same with getting dressed up – it's easy to achieve feelgoodness, with endless possibilities for transformation (although, to be fair, when I was younger I was generally in agonies over some imagined flaw highlighted by my outfit).

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After a long – and to me torturous – week of school, the weekend stretched ahead, heavy with the promise of two days of fun. On Friday night, excitement levels were at a pitch. No drama or drunken tears yet – if they were going to happen, which wasn't a given, but you never knew – all that was still a few hours away. In the early evening, in front of the mirror, we were simply filled with this sense that anything was possible.

That's the thing about youth. It's all uncharted. When I recall being fourteen or fifteen, it's suffused with a glow that was yet to be dampened. There's nothing like the enthusiasm of your early teens, and I think that's why my memories of this age are so vivid, in terms of atmosphere at least. There we were, at this age full of possibilities, starting to grasp our first fledgling glimmers of freedom – and I intended to make the most of them.

We relished the abandon of dispensing with our uniforms for a couple of days, yucky brown woollen jumpers ditched in favour of the clingy acrylic mini slip dresses that were all the rage in the nineties, denim A-line skirts and

skinny tank tops that we mixed with second-hand seventies flares, or raver sportswear and oversized baggy jeans, depending on where we were going that night. Dance music filled air that was scented with the acrid, unmistakable smell of hairspray, and, depending on how permissive the host's parents were – or if it was a free gaff – cigarette smoke too. Johnny Blues, before we got more sophisticated and switched to Silk Cut, before ascending to Marlboro Lights. But most vividly, I recall the sharp, tangy chemical fragrance of fake tan. Yes, I lashed on the fake tan as a teenager – even though I have a Nigerian father, my legs still achieved a uniquely bruised and pasty look. And inanyways,\* how could any natural skin colour compete with that specific streaky orange effect?

Getting ready doubled up as time for the

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\* This is Dublin vernacular. It's important to me that I don't 'translate' everything into standardised English, and continue to use Hiberno Irish expressions. Disobedience occurs in a multitude of ways.

plotting and planning: how to procure booze ourselves – after we had graduated from the dolly mixture of parents' drinks cabinets on to naggins of vodka – and what park to drink in before the disco, often revolving around the movements of fellas we fancied.

We were a relatively tomboyish gang of girls, getting into all kinds of skirmishes, but we were also boy mad. Well, I certainly was. Popularity with guys was in many ways our source of validation, conferring value and status on us. And so much of that popularity was determined by the way we looked: whether or not we were judged 'pretty', 'hot', or – to use Dublin parlance – whether or not we were 'rides' (I assure you, gentle reader, this term is not as explicit as it sounds to the unaccustomed ear). 'Ride', I want to add, is also a gender-nonspecific term – fellas were just as subject to categorisation as ride or not, but they seemed less vulnerable to its vicissitudes. Because boys are not judged primarily on their looks, a boy could occupy non-ridey status and still be with a hot girl, as his eligibility might be derived from an array

of other characteristics, like popularity, soundness, buzziness or, indeed, excelling in sports, while for us it was far more hot or not.

When in 1990 Naomi Wolf published her then seminal book, *The Beauty Myth*, I certainly wasn't reading it – but its relevance was vast. This was just two or three years before my friends and I were feeling the edges of our sexuality and power, and were grappling with how our bodies were seen – and subsequently valued. *The Beauty Myth* revealed the Sisyphean labour that drained women's attention and energy, operating as a pernicious tool of control, and how that informed the role and shaped the function of modern beauty practices. Wolf's book was described as exploring the 'obsession with physical perfection that traps the modern woman in an endless spiral of hope, self-consciousness, and self-hatred as she tries to fulfil society's impossible definition of "the flawless beauty"'.

I can see how our teenage obsession with our looks could be viewed as conforming to a kind of social control – paying the hair-and-make-up

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tax for women and girls that Zadie Smith has famously condemned. After all, on average, women spend up to four and half hours a week, ten days a year, or around two years over a lifetime, in front of a mirror. And yet, there is something else there too. After all, in these Friday-night get-togethers there was magic, transformation, ritual and a sorority that was one of the best parts of the night.

How might we possibly reconcile the reality of the joys and pleasures we can find in our bodies, and in rituals of beautification – as well as the whole sphere of female knowledge bound up in it – with the age-old and sometimes fraught feminist discourses, and the justified pushback against an overemphasis on our looks as not only a drag on our time, but a form of control? Especially now, at a time when it feels like these pressures are accelerating, not falling away?

While, thirty years later, we can still clearly recognise the undercurrents of what Wolf described, the ground itself has shifted. Women and girls have more opportunities and wider

horizons in many ways, but concurrently, the beauty demands have become turbocharged. Forms of control exist from the more pernicious to the explicit – one thinks of draconian legislation rolling back legal protection for woman, such as the Supreme Court decision in 2022 to overturn *Roe vs Wade*, the case that had until then ensured women’s liberty to choose to have an abortion without excessive government restriction – and often intensify during periods when women are becoming independent and asserting themselves politically and socially. Our current landscape is nothing if not contradictory.

Consider the images we see. Until at least ten years ago, media casting was mind-bogglingly limited. When my kids watch TV shows from before they were born, they are confused by why everybody is white. But when I was younger, that was the default. Women, and certainly beautiful women, were white, they were thin, and *everyone* was straight.

In the last few years, there has been a representational revolution. Across the media

– thanks to pressures to change coming from social media – we now see all types of people, and in regards to women specifically, we see women with different body types, Indigenous women, Asian women, Latinx women, Black women of all complexions, with all hair textures. We see queer women and non-binary people and transwomen. Women with tattoos and ‘unconventional’ forms of beauty. I think about how unrecognisable it is from the world that I grew up in.

Yet I wonder why, with all these advances, so many young people, and young women specifically, seem to feel under so much *more* pressure when it comes to their appearances, not less? Social media has enabled body-positive and diverse representation of people and bodies. It has created previously unimaginable opportunities for community and facilitated vast knowledge-sharing. For instance, the revolution in black hair culture, known as the natural hair movement, enabled global communities of black women to come together, digitally and from there physically at huge natural hair events, and reconnect

with knowledge about how to care for our hair in its natural form, which had been suppressed by decades of chemical processing.

As well as community and support, social media provides inspiration and information about healthy lifestyles and alternatives many of us might never otherwise encounter. Creativity in make-up is unparalleled, with YouTube tutorials and TikTok users inspiring with impressive technical skill, innovation and artistry. But our apps are also tools of profit and increasingly of social control. Notions of a sort of creative commons that might have been emerging have been replaced by the realities of platform capitalism. In tangent with or perhaps even superseding the widely purported 'community', divisive rhetoric is incentivised.

There are huge profits to be made; empires, principalities and queendoms to be built. There is also the far more pressing urgency of survival. As the cost of living (what a phrase, pause to consider its obscenity) crisis deepens, and job security is reinscribed into the realm of the mythical, social media promises not

just income, but potentially fame and fortune. Alluring for a generation who might see themselves represented in more TV shows and advertisements than ever before, but who are increasingly locked out of opportunities taken for granted by previous generations.

And of course, in concert with representation and diversity, social media has created beauty standards on speed. It has exacerbated competition and comparison, enabled our over-preoccupation with our appearances in the elusive pursuit of the endorphin rush and crash of likes – and the promise of concrete results for those deemed beautiful enough – as well as intensified body image disorders. But why has all the progress occurred simultaneously with such enhanced pressures? Are we witnessing the age-old reflexes that are triggered whenever there are developments that awaken women and marginalised people en masse to their power?

Which all begs the question: how are we to disentangle the pleasure from the pain?

Today, we don't only look in the mirror, we

look into our cameras – but they are far from the cameras of yore. They are miniature production companies and broadcast devices. We are not taking photographs for private family albums. Our images are for public consumption, pixels with the potential to catapult us to celebrity status. Such was the fate of Instagram model Cindy Kimberly, who boasts a mind-boggling 7 million Instagram followers. In late 2015, sixteen-year-old Kimberly was an unknown schoolgirl. However, this changed overnight when Justin Bieber happened across one of her selfies, which he reposted with the caption ‘Omg who is this!!’ This minor footnote in Bieber’s life had profound consequences for Kimberly, propelling her from babysitter to global sensation and model. Popular culture is teeming with such ‘fairy-tale’ examples. Prince Harry even claims he first became aware of Meghan Markle when scrolling through Instagram . . .

In times of extreme economic and environmental precarity, with the erosion of social safety nets, the fact that your face can make

your fortune takes on a new intensity in our visual economies.

We are now bodies constantly under surveillance. Every moment documented. Persistently under the scrutiny of our own watch, we analyse every angle of our face and contour of our body. Post-pandemic, we see our faces reflected back at ourselves across such a multitude of platforms – in the digital spaces where work, business, pleasure and education converge. Rather than being together physically, we are *broadcasting* – not only to each other and potentially to far bigger audiences, but crucially often to ourselves, a phenomenon dubbed ‘zoomification’. It has created a previously unknown level of scrutiny (and off-the-charts levels of insecurity) in regards to our own looks.

Visual culture is currency now in ways that would have been unimaginable to me as a kid clumsily applying mascara and wonky eyeliner in the nineties. This was make-up applied to be seen in the physical world by people I was face to face rather than face to screen with. Today, I am more familiar with many friends’

and acquaintances' photos than I am with their actual faces.

The images we showcase and exchange via apps offer condensed versions of reality, conditioning us even further to expect a flattened one-dimensionality that expresses itself through surfaces, rather than depths. Dating online further reduces people to the visual alone. Desirability is transmuted into the transactional. We are trained to never be satisfied, in a landscape where everybody is not only replaceable, but upgradeable. It's a medium whose very nature reinforces shallow ideals and disconnection.

Why is one of our dominant beauty standards today perceived to be found in immobility, in faces that are too full of botox and filler to move freely or express the full range of human emotion? Why are the types of beauty upheld as paragons so often empty, like edifices to blandness and passivity?

This has all happened so quickly that it often feels like we have inadequate tools to make sense of the increasingly confused world

we have inadvertently constructed around ourselves.

Leaps in science, research and innovation have bequeathed us a range of beauty processes, products and potions so vast as to be unmanageable. Unparalleled skincare products, a dizzying array of cosmetics, Botox, buccal fat removal, fillers, facelifts, rhinoplasty, liposuction, all types of cosmetic nips and 'tweakments'. Nonsurgical procedures have extended our range of choices; injectables and fillers are subtler than ever before, achievable in the space of a lunch break. According to one report, 'the global cosmetic surgery market size was valued at \$55.68 billion in 2022 and is projected to grow from \$57.67 billion in 2023 to \$75.20 billion by 2030'.

And never before has there been such sophisticated intrusion into our lives. We don't need to buy a magazine or turn on the TV anymore. Our phones are always 'on' with work, imperceptible advertising and intimate conversations interwoven seamlessly into one flow of communication. And throughout it all, we are

bombarded with products that promise transformation, in a culture where there is constant pressure to maximise not just our productivity but our *potential* for productivity through relentless ‘self-improvement’.

Of course, these aren’t issues that only affect women: the pressure on men to conform to certain physical ideals is increasing.\* However, women underwent 93 per cent of all cosmetic procedures recorded in 2022 – a rise of 101 per cent from 2021 – and there remains a specificity in women’s experience of patriarchy and of embodiment.

To add to the fun, we can trace a blurring of the lines between feminism and female-centred neoliberal capitalism or ‘girlboss feminism’, which has come to be increasingly misrepresented as ‘a woman’s freedom to make choices’. According to the logic of ‘consumer choice’,

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\* Research suggests that the risk of body-image concerns among sexual minority men is high, with sexual minority men generally reported to have more negative body image compared to heterosexual men.

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