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**Title:** Spinning, Spooning and the Seductions of Flirtatious Masculinity in Contemporary Politics

**Year of publication:** 2010

**Citation:** Yates, C. (2010) 'Spinning, Spooning and the Seductions of Flirtatious Masculinity in Contemporary Politics' *Subjectivity* 3 (3) pp.282-302.

**Link to published version:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1057/sub.2010.16>

**DOI:** 10.1057/sub.2010.16

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Published in: 2010 Macmillan Publishers Ltd. 1755-6341 Subjectivity Vol. 3, 3, 282–302

[www.palgrave-journals.com/sub/](http://www.palgrave-journals.com/sub/)

## **Spinning, Spooning and the Seductions of Flirtatious Masculinity In Contemporary Politics**

### **Abstract**

*This paper explores the relationships between masculinity, flirtation and fantasy within the promotional arena of politics and PR. Flirtation is associated with coquetry and play, connoting a lack of seriousness, and in political flirtation, the desire to move between different opinions and ideas. Flirtation is often linked with femininity. Yet against a backdrop of masculinity in crisis, the study of flirtation, with its connotations of ambiguity and frustrated desire, is useful to explore the uncertainties of masculinities today. Dilemmas about flirtation as a tantalising performance resonate with misgivings about the seductive nature of political spin and the desire of politicians to woo audiences by flirting to the camera. Taking examples of politicians such as Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and Barack Obama, this paper discusses the possibilities of flirtatious masculinity as a counter-hegemonic strategy within the symbolic battleground of Western politics, a struggle largely played out in print and digital media.*

### **Key Words**

Flirtation, masculinity, politics, play, psychoanalysis

### **Introduction**

This paper examines the relationship between masculinity and flirtation, and the emergence of flirtation as a hegemonic strategy within the cultural arena of political

communication. These themes are explored by drawing on recent cultural studies perspectives, which focus on the mediatisation of politics, and its relationship to processes of celebrity and popular culture (Corner and Pels, 2003; Evans, 2009; Marshall, 1997). I develop that work by applying an eclectic psychoanalytic framework to explore the unconscious fantasies, anxieties and desires that shape affective identification within the fluid and transitory context of Western political culture. Following the work of Minsky (1998), Yates (2007) and Bainbridge (2008), the psychoanalytic approach applied here, draws on the tradition of Object Relations and theories of sexual difference to acknowledge the significance of both oedipal and pre-oedipal fantasy in the shaping of images and processes of identification within popular culture and the public face of political life. The study of flirtation as a mode of communication, which operates as a cycle of seduction and desire, is highly suggestive in the contemporary context of ‘post-ideological’ party politics (Corner and Pels, 2003), where as in the UK ‘New Labour Project’, political communication has played a key role in ‘wooing’ voters at every turn (Chadwick and Heffernan, 2003; Rawnsley, 2003).

Flirtation is associated with coquetry, dalliance and play; it connotes a lack of seriousness or intention, as in the refusal to commit romantically, or, as in intellectual or political flirtation, the desire to move between different opinions and ideas (Phillips, 1994; Simmel, 1909). Flirting connotes a kind of fickleness and an inability to sustain mature relationships and as such, constitutes ‘a libidinal form of loitering without intent’ (Kaye, 2002, p. 2). Given the current preoccupation with political ‘spin’ and public relations in the UK and elsewhere, images of flirtatious politicians alongside flirtatious mechanisms of communication, have become commonplace as a means to communicate

with the public in different mediatised contexts, including print and digital media. This article explores these ideas, focusing in particular on male leaders on the contemporary political scene, and examines how such representations of flirtatious masculinity contribute to new formations of masculinity in the contemporary context of mediatised political culture.

The study of flirtation as a mode of communication with its connotations of ambiguity and frustrated desire also provides an interesting focus through which to explore the symbolism of hegemonic masculinities within contemporary political life. The notion that the West is witnessing a 'crisis' of masculinity has received widespread attention by writers in the field of gender studies (Bainbridge and Yates, 2005). Some suggest that the undermining of hegemonic masculinity has created the potential for modes of masculinity that are less narcissistic and sit more easily with the complexities of change and relations of difference (Yates, 2007). Yet others argue that the crisis of masculinity has invoked a more defensive response, characterised by a paranoid backlash against feminism and its ideals and the desire to reclaim a reactionary vision of masculinity (Faludi, 1999). The idea of flirtation works well as a descriptive metaphor for the insecurities of contemporary masculinities, and in a feminist move, can be put to work to explore its potential as a signifier of plurality and a refusal to accept the hegemonic certainties of patriarchal masculinity and the impulse for mastery. Rosa Braidotti's (2002) continental feminist approach to questions of sexual difference is pertinent here, as she evokes the language of flirtation when she argues for the importance of living with complexity and uncertainty in order to challenge the marginalisation of 'the feminine' within the rigid symbolic systems of Western

patriarchal culture. Developing Braidotti's ideas, one can argue that flirtation opens up the possibility for something new, challenging the idea of sameness implied by the fidelity to the father and the hierarchical patriarchal order. On the one hand, flirtation, with all its connotations of playfulness, evokes perhaps in its fluidity, the feminist potential of contemporary masculinities in its refusal of jealous patriarchal authority. Yet on the other, flirtation may also work in a defensive, retrograde way as a metaphor for the emptiness of masculinity as a defensive formation, mediated by narcissistic insecurities and an inability to cope with loss.

Interrogating the image of the male flirt is pertinent when applied to representations of male politicians in the popular media, where the lightweight, feminized connotations of the term 'flirt' may sit uneasily with the electorate's desire for 'authentic' masculinity in the guise of paternal authority (Samuels, 2001). The different fantasies of flirtatious masculinity, which coalesce around images of male politicians such as Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, Nicolas Sarkozy or Barack Obama, represent a tension between a potential desire for what might be called defensive, 'retro-sexual' fantasies of flirtatious masculinity on the one hand, and the wish for more progressive, playful and creative modes of masculinity on the other. The latter, which for the purposes of this essay can be defined as 'metrosexual', signifies in a positive vein, the potential for a 'feminized' mode of counter-hegemonic masculinity, which in its fluid and flirtatious ambiguity refuses the certainties of mastery and fidelity to the idealised symbolic father.<sup>i</sup>

The paper begins with a discussion of the social and cultural context of flirtation and its links to the growth of 'spin' and public relations within political culture. It then turns to psychoanalytic understandings of flirtation and their relationship to theories of

masculinity and sexual difference. Using examples taken from the popular media, the paper then discusses the flirtatious culture of spin and political communication and applies these ideas to examples of male politicians over the past ten years, to explore their identities as flirtatious operators on the political scene.

### **Cultures of flirtation and political spin.**

The notion that we live in a flirtatious culture is highly evocative in a postmodern age and works well as a metaphor for the fluid, transitory nature of experience in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries (Bauman, 2000; Elliott, 1996). At a time of cultural flux and transition, a culture of contingency and the flirtatious attitude of ‘what if?’ is developed, perhaps, as a defence against the losses and insecurities of contemporary life (Kaye, 2002, p.8). Lasch (1979) argues that in the US, late capitalist society has given rise to a narcissistic personality type that is unable to experience emotions in a way that feels authentic. The implication appears to be that flirting has become a way of life, as we dart from sensation to sensation, addicted to the image and the narcissistic pleasures of short-lived encounters. This notion of the contemporary flirtatious sensibility is echoed by those who emphasize, if in less pessimistic tones, the mercurial quality of contemporary interaction and postmodern experience, and the practices of social networking exemplify this development (Braidotti, 2002; Castells, 2000; Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2006). As I discuss below, the flirtatious pleasures of social networking tap into developments in

political communication and the promotion of politicians via different media platforms on the internet.

It is interesting that Simmel applies the theme of flirtation as a mode of communication to politics and the practice of identifying with different 'political positions' (1909, p. 151). It is often the case that within the contemporary context of party politics and Public Relations, both politicians and voters flirt with different political positions. Political candidates use their campaigns to flirt with 'floating voters', who in their apparent flirtatious lack of commitment, resemble the Benjaminian figure of the *flâneur*, window shopping for political promises and consuming the spectacle of the political market place (Benjamin, 1992). Paradoxically, the flirtatious game between politicians and voters may have helped to create a loss of respect for politicians whose political pragmatism connotes a lack of seriousness and intention, producing an even greater sense of mistrust and uncertainty in relation to party political narratives (Classen, 2007). Floating voters provide the main target for such campaigns (Prior, 2007). Increasingly, PR teams direct their efforts towards wooing these groups of undecided voters who, given the loss of distinct ideological differences between parties in countries such as the UK, now have the power to decide who win elections (Corner and Pels, 2003).

The ways in which the public responds to the flirtation of politicians are linked to processes of 'spin' and Public Relations, which have now become intrinsic to the promotion of party politics. The latter refers to the techniques of persuasion used by political parties and their press officers to lead the news agenda and present their policies and politicians in the best possible light (Barnett and Garber, 2001). This process of

communication includes both the medium and the message. Whereas the 'message' may be overtly flirtatious in its attempts to 'woo' voters, the 'medium' also works flirtatiously as a process in the mediatised application of persuasive codes of communication.

Depending on where the form of political communication falls on the 'defensive' versus 'creative' spectrum of flirtation, the medium in this context has the potential to open up or close down spaces for meaningful engagement.

Andrew Wernick's (1991) ideas on the processes of 'promotional culture' can help us to understand spin and public relations in the postmodern context. Wernick equates 'promotion' with 'advertising and its practices taken in the widest and most generic sense' and like flirtation, he says that promotion is now a 'verb' and a 'rhetorical form diffused throughout our culture'. In this way, 'promotion has come to shape not only culture's symbolic and ideological contents, but also its ethos, texture and constitution as a whole' (Wernick, 1991: vii). For Wernick then, the 'ethos' of promotion now mediates all forms of personal and public communication and politics should also be seen in this context (p. 132). In the US and in the UK, politicians use public relations teams - including 'special advisors' who communicate messages to the media and also directly to the public through various media platforms including the internet. Examples of the latter range in scale and context - from Obama's presidential campaign to UK Conservative party leader David Cameron's 'Web Cameron', where he can be found throwing snowballs and joking with TV presenter Carol Vorderman (his new advisor on teaching mathematics), or talking to voters while washing up at his kitchen sink. <sup>ii</sup>

The close relationship between public relations and politics can be traced back to Sigmund Freud's nephew Edward Bernays, whose analysis of the relationship between



propaganda and desire played a key role in cementing the links between consumerism, media and citizenship in Western democracies (Miller, 2005; Sanders, 2009). Bernays' distrust of mass society was clearly articulated in his desire to shape public opinion and 'regiment the mind' of the masses (Bernays, 1928). Following the success of marketing the merits of Western democracy and Allied propaganda drives of the First World War, Bernays developed those methods of propaganda in commercial advertising campaigns for companies such as General Motors and is credited with selling the pleasures of smoking cigarettes to American women through his campaigns for Chesterfield cigarettes (Sanders, 2009). As Ewen (1988, p.266) argues, 'by the end of the Second World War, the systematic stylization of politicians, policies and political ideas had become commonplace'. In his 1947 essay 'The Engineering of Consent', Bernays argued for the significance of radio and television in shaping hearts and minds and providing 'open doors to the public mind' (Ewen, 1988, p. 267). The role of the media and public relations in shaping US political campaigns have been well documented (Cohen 2001; Hart, 1999; Van Zoonen, Wahl-Jorgensen, 2000) and Van Zoonen argues that whilst the language 'associated with masculinity' has tended to dominate politics, stylised images and performance of male politicians flirting to camera have played a key role in selling messages to voters. For instance, here one can cite the rugged masculinity of US president Theodore Roosevelt (1901-1909), the 'every-man' appeal Richard Nixon (1969-4), the 'folksy charm' of Ronald Reagan (1981-1989) or the warmth and openness of Bill Clinton (1993-2001) and more recently, the cool, containing authority of Barack Obama, who can all be seen as examples of effective male political performers in action.<sup>iii</sup>

The influence of US presidential campaigning practices (Foley, 2000) and the different elements associated with performative politics have contributed to the flirtatious turn in political life in the UK and elsewhere (Foley, 2000). These elements include a preoccupation with celebrity, personality and images of authenticity. As Richard Sennett (1976) anticipated in the 1970s, the growth of personality-orientated politics provides the context for what he called ‘secular charisma’, where the residual envy or *resentiment* of voters in relation to powerful politicians in social democratic societies, is warded off by focussing on the personality and image of politicians rather than substantial political issues and policies.<sup>iv</sup> As numerous cultural commentators have documented, when Tony Blair came to power in 1997 as Prime Minister, he was particularly skilled at courting voters and warding off their latent aggression (Foley, 2000; Rentoul, 2001). Potential envy aroused by the power of his presidential style was offset by his capacity to exude a likable authentic persona, where, in flirting to camera, he became the face and personality of the New Labour ‘brand’ (Foley, 2000). The themes of consumerism, charisma and personality all converge around the history of the ‘New Labour Project’, where news management played a key role in acquiring and exercising power (Chadwick and Heffernan, 2003). Communications Director Peter Mandelson and Press Officer Alastair Campbell were important players in managing the image of New Labour, and Campbell was initially liked by journalists who were somewhat seduced by his ‘brutal charm’ (Rentoul, 2001: 262). Indeed, it is reported that Campbell’s relationship with the press was extremely flirtatious in the manner he would tantalise journalists by having ‘favourites’ and only giving stories to those newspapers who played ‘the game’ and reported what they wanted (Rentoul, 2001). Thus flirtation operated at a number of levels

in the promotion of New Labour, including the performance, the message and the flirtatious mechanisms of mediatised political culture.

### **Flirtation and the play of the unconscious**

Psychoanalysis provides a useful language to explore the seduction of flirtation and the fantasies, which accompany the ‘real not real’ quality of its interactions, especially within the political arena. Yet in the past, classical psychoanalytic discourse has often viewed flirtation in a negative light. For instance Freud (1915) links flirtation to regressive love and an inability to cope with mourning and separation. As Adam Phillips (1994) argues, flirtation has a childish, playful quality to it, which has its roots in early Oedipal flirtations, where the imaginary possibilities for love are not yet closed down by the strictures of Oedipal law and the customs of monogamy. There is no place for flirtation in the classical Oedipal narrative of ‘healthy development’, where mature love is linked to mourning and accepting the loss of the mother and the femininity she represents.<sup>v</sup> The cultural distrust of flirtation as a mode of relating is reflected in psychoanalytic discourse where flirtation becomes a signifier of lightweight, superficial human relations and aligned with the image of the coquette as the seductive, if shallow, *feminine* other. In 1915, such misgivings are also inflected with national prejudice as Freud uses this negative image of flirtation as regressive, to signify his distrust of America and its difference to Europe and the seriousness of ‘continental’ romantic relations:

It becomes as shallow and empty as, let us say, an American flirtation, in which it is understood from the first that nothing is to happen, as contrasted with a continental love affair in which both partners must constantly bear its serious consequences in mind (Freud, 1915, p. 79).

Since Freud, psychoanalytic thinkers such as Adam Phillips (1994) have debated the creative potential of flirtation and its malignant flip side. In his 1994 study *On Flirtation*, Phillips provides a positive reading of flirtation and its ontological and creative potential as a form of playful object relations. Phillips applies the ideas of D. W. Winnicott (1971) to flirtation, likening it to the interactive processes associated with ‘transitional phenomena’ and the ‘transitional spaces’ that shape subjectivity and which first emerge between mother and infant for play. Whilst acknowledging the sadistic pleasures which may underpin the flirtatious deferral and denial of commitment, Phillips defends flirtation on the grounds that

From a pragmatic point of view one could say that a space is being created in which aims or ends can be worked out; the assumed wish for the more or less obvious sexual combinations, or commitments, may be a way of pre-empting the elaboration of, making time for, less familiar possibilities. Flirtation, if it can be sustained, is a way of cultivating wishes, of playing for time. Deferral can make room (1994, p. xix).

For Phillips then, the flirtatious refusal of commitment connotes a radical sensibility, evoking (albeit drawing from a different philosophical tradition) poststructural conceptions of ‘becoming’, where certainty is refused and spaces are continually re-created in order to disrupt the old hierarchies and relations of difference, between self and other (Bainbridge, 2008; Braidotti, 2002). This disruptive process has important implications for masculinity and its construction in the field of popular political communication. However, before turning to the gendered implications of play and flirtation, it is necessary to take into account those views, which see flirtation in a more negative light.

Messler Davies (1998) argues that the ambiguous, circular nature of flirtation may be used as a defence mechanism against the losses and disappointments that come with intimacy and the complexity of object relations and ‘mature’ object love. This view of flirtation as a regressive, defensive strategy used to ward off loss, can also be linked to Andre Green’s (2005) critique of Winnicott’s (1971) theory of play, which as we have seen, is key to Phillips’ reading of flirtation. Green takes issue with what he sees as Winnicott’s ‘idealised’ reading of play as being rooted solely in a ‘benign’ vision of the first mother/baby relationship. Instead he argues that play includes a sexual aspect to it that that can be ‘cruel’ and ‘narcissistic’ and may be linked to destructive, sexual drives:

I think the activity of play can sometimes become distorted, corrupted and perverted in society as well in individuals (P. 11).

In particular, Green cites the ‘distorted’ forms of play that may take place in the clinical setting between the analyst and analysand: <sup>vi</sup>

Here, play requires the partner’s submission and omnipotence based on the interplay of colluding narcissisms on the real desire to harm, debase and destroy the other (p. 12).

As Green goes on to say, destructive forms of play are ‘not based on interchange, but on the will to dominate’. Green’s discussion of ‘perverted’ play paints a very different picture to Winnicott, who links play to psychic health, a capacity for transformation and the development of ‘trust’ in the context of early object and then later group relations. By contrast, Green develops the work of Winnicott and uses the ideas of Freud to explore the role of fantasy in play and its potential for the transformation of internal and external worlds. In particular, Green cites Freud’s 1920 discussion of the ‘Fort/Da’ game in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* to describe how play may be used in fantasy to obtain a sense of mastery in order to ward off loss. In that paper, Freud describes how his Grandson Ernst used a cotton reel, which he repeatedly threw out of his cot as a means of managing his mother’s absence. This description of play is highly suggestive when applied to flirtation in both its benign and more manipulative guises as a form of mastery over the object. For example, as regards the latter, flirtation often involves the play of emotion, creating a powerful emotional response in the other, which may include desire, compliance or frustration. Green argues that to be caught up in someone else’s play may mean that as an object of fantasy, the subject is used in a game where s/he is positioned

as a substitute for the lost object (p. 16). Green says that loss and substitution are always 'coupled' in the process of play; yet when the experience of loss is too great, the quality of play alters and becomes linked to the compulsion to repeat. Instead of using objects in a creative and transformative way, they merely become substitutes of 'reality' (a reality which is never objectively perceived), where wounded narcissism and loss are constantly denied.

Following on from Green then, we can begin to think about two forms of play, which can be applied to different models of flirtatious masculinity on the political scene - the 'creative' and the 'defensive'. On the one hand, the 'metrosexual' flirtatious blurring of boundaries can be perceived positively as 'creative' in its refusal of patriarchal certainty and mastery, yet on the other, more defensive forms of flirtation correspond to what can be defined as 'retrosexual' modes of masculinity. Defensive modes of flirtation invoke Luce Irigaray's (1993) feminist reading of the Fort/Da game as a way of using play to mask the potential losses of masculinity and also anxieties about femininity and sexual difference. In her discussion of Freud's 1920 paper, Irigaray discusses the relationship between play and the desire for mastery, relating it to Ernst's desire for unity with his mother, which she argues is a universal desire. Irigaray suggests that this longing for unity can be traced back to the first separation at birth, and its poignancy continues to resonate where femininity is repudiated culturally and fails to find symbolisation in the public sphere, unless as the other of male desire. This reading, which links play to the pleasures of mastery and the refusal of femininity, negates the possibility of play and flirtation as a potentially radical intermediary space as offered in Phillips' account,

The distrust of male flirtation as a feminized activity is a recurring theme in psychoanalytic discourse. Freud (1914) reinforced the relationship between femininity and flirtation when he discussed women's narcissistic wish to 'attract' men and the same distrust can also be seen by those who see a close relationship between flirtation and hidden primary sadistic aggression. For example, Ernest Jones (1929) links male flirtation to the narrative of *Don Juan* and his image as the cruel seducer. Jones argues that flirtatious behaviour works as a charming 'masquerade' to mask a more aggressive and (jealous) desire to defend a fragile narcissistic ego underneath.

For Jones, flirtatious men are emotionally immature and unconsciously remain overly attached to their mothers. This same distrust of male flirtation can be found in contemporary discussions where those such as Shengold (1982) echo the concerns of Jones. Messler Davies (1998, p. 808) also likens flirtation to a 'malignant form of seductiveness' (especially in the clinical context) in which the flirtatious subject defends an undeveloped ego by projecting unwanted feelings into the other. Thus, in contrast to Adam Phillips, these negative readings of flirtation as a form of play imply that flirtation is used to shore up a sense of self in the flirtatious male subject and this defensive strategy has wider implications for an understanding of masculinity as a psycho-cultural formation at different historical moments.

### **Flirtation, masculinity and sexual difference in political culture**



The alleged 'crisis' of masculinity in the West is partly about coming to terms with the loss of mastery and a more flawed, less idealised vision of itself as a construction, and this cultural shift has implications for both men and masculinities as they are lived and imagined (Yates, 2007). The old fictions of masculinity are no longer convincing, yet they continue to be reworked as different models compete culturally for hegemonic dominance within the different spheres of public life and within the popular imagination (Bainbridge and Yates, 2005). In Europe and the US, men continue to occupy positions of power on the political scene, yet their authority has diminished and this contradiction is perhaps illustrative of the tensions that underpin the crisis of masculinity more generally. Recent shifts in masculinity have been linked to the so-called 'feminization' of society where the discourses, practices and values associated with cultural constructions of traditional 'femininity' such as nurturing, and a preoccupation with emotional expression and intimacy, have become more widespread (Yates, 2007). The performance and flirtatious play of emotion have become key to the construction of new masculinities and one such arena of hegemonic contestation can be found in the field of party politics, where as we have seen, the masculine image of political leaders play a central role in selling messages to voters (Yates, 2009).

Yet the extent to which the so-called feminization of culture constitutes a real shift in hegemonic masculinity and relations of difference are open to debate (Braidotti, 2002; Yates, 2007). From a sceptical feminist perspective one could also argue that the so-called feminization of society is merely an 'expansion' or 'hybridization' of hegemonic masculinity, a shoring up of patriarchy in a new guise (Korobov, 2008).

In a 'therapeutic culture' (Richards, 2007) where the boundaries between public and private spheres have become increasingly indistinct, politicians are now required to provide signs of their authenticity through the display of intimacy and emotional self-disclosure. Lacan's vision of masculinity as a 'masquerade' takes on a new meaning in this light (Lacan, 1977; Mitchell and Rose, 1987); emotions are now often paraded like trophies - especially in contexts such as party politics, where the performance of emotion is used to engage flirtatiously with the emotions of voters. This is well illustrated by UK politicians such as Tony Blair and David Cameron and also Barack Obama in the US, who constantly use their role as fathers and their affection for their children in particular, as signifiers of authentic masculinity and as a means to empathise with women and appeal to what is often defined in stereotypical terms as the 'soft vote' (Spears & Seydegart, 2000). David Cameron and Gordon Brown's recent attempts to woo the women on the mother's website *Mumsnet*<sup>vii</sup> provide a recent example of this, where, like the male protagonist in Nick Formby's novel *About a Boy* (1998), the fantasy of a paternal identity was used as a means to woo women and appeal to their so-called 'maternal instincts'.

As we have seen, in the past, flirtation has been associated with cultural constructions of femininity,<sup>viii</sup> and as a consequence, flirtatious men have often been pathologised and feminized as effeminate and hysterical (Kaye, 2002, p. 27). Yet interestingly, in the public sphere of political communication, it is often men, not women who have colonised the playful space of flirtation for themselves. It may be that women in public life simply dare not adopt this position for fear of not being taken seriously or of being reduced to a flirtatious sexual stereotype. Women have more to lose and ironically, cannot in the same way as men, afford to utilise the playful ambiguities of flirtatious

communication often associated with femininity. The contrast between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama in the recent US elections with his alleged legions of adoring female fans provides a case in point, as women make a different 'pact' with voters in this respect (Evans, 2009, p.73). On the one hand, if they flirt they are seen as exploiting their femininity, yet on the other, if they don't, they are seen as hard and unfeminine. The publicity surrounding Sarah Palin's winking to camera provides an example of this dilemma (Barkham, 2008). However, the risk of exhibiting flirtatious behaviour in the political arena was also illustrated by Barack Obama, whose success as a handsome politician nearly came to grief when he referred to a female journalist as 'Sweetie'. As a consequence of the 'sweetie' gaff, Oprah Winfrey, Whoopie Goldberg and other high-profile women rushed to his defence and were given air time to neutralise the alleged sexism of the remark (Katz, 2008). Other US female journalists such as Diane Sawyer took a less politically correct line in choosing to interpret it as a playful mode of flirtatious communication and reinforcing the objectifying fantasy of Obama as the handsome black politician and as the object of feminine desire (Traister, 2008). Obama's on-line status as a sex symbol was reinforced via the now infamous 'Obama Girl' *MTV*-style viral videos, which during the US election campaign claimed to tap into the pro-Obama youth vote.<sup>ix</sup> Today, following Obama's election success, 'Obama Girl' videos now present links to Obama's policy blog website, which implies that she has been sanctioned by the Obama team. The flirtatious strategy in this context affirms and shores up the certainties of patriarchal masculinity, as femininity in its playful postfeminist guise is commodified and exchanged between viewers on behalf of male politicians who are able to retain their dignity from a distance. Of course, the producers and viewers of

‘Obama Girl’ emphasise the playful, tongue-in-cheek nature of this emerging political genre and the subsequent release of the witty (and less sexualised) spoof video ‘I got a crush on Hillary’ would seem to reinforce this view.<sup>x</sup>

These videos can be identified as flirtatious, firstly because of their message or content, and secondly, because of the inherent playful flirtatiousness of the *form* as a mode of social communication, which invites the kind of flirtatious engagement discussed above. The development of social media is linked to the idea that in the West, flirtation has emerged as a metaphor for many aspects of life in postmodern culture. The technology of social networking and dating sites are also harnessed for their flirtatious mechanisms by UK politicians such as Foreign Secretary David Miliband and Liberal Democratic Leader Nick Clegg, who regularly use *Facebook* and *Twitter* and internet blogs to promote themselves and their ideas.<sup>xi</sup> The public response to the e-campaigning of politicians on social networking sites demonstrates the playful and interactive nature of contemporary political culture and its capacity to facilitate the public resistance to a top-down model of spin and political campaigning (Harris, 2010, p. 6).<sup>xii</sup>

Such engagement on the part of the public with the flirtatious mechanisms of mediatised political culture also signals perhaps, the cynicism of the electorate. The notion of ‘spin’ has become increasingly devalued in the minds of the public as manipulative, reinforcing the untrustworthiness of politicians generally (Barnett and Garber, 2001, p. 96; Corner and Pels, 2003, p. 11). Within newspaper reports, the language of flirtation, seduction and betrayal is a recurring theme in relation to the presentation of politicians, even from journalists themselves who, for example, in relation to Tony Blair, asked how they could have fallen for him and been so ‘taken in’ (Parris,

2007, p. 15). The language of betrayal was also present in the growing public disillusionment with the French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who began to look tarnished and 'less dignified' than previously, following his publicised love affair with Carla Bruni (Duval Smith, 2008, p. 45). More recently, journalist Andrew Rawnsley (2010, p. 39) has commented on the tiresome nature of being continually courted by Obama through an email campaign asking for money and support: 'all these emails from Barak Obama make me feel cheap'. For Rawnsley, then, the overly aggressive nature of Obama's campaigning in this instance, fails to work as a form of masculine flirtation. In contexts such as these, voters and journalists are positioned as dupes and are tarnished by association, or to invoke the fantasy of Freud's Fort/Da game, 'reeled in' as the feminized objects of political flirtation. One can detect a similar mode of public resistance in relation to the much publicised flirtatious 'poodle relationship' between Tony Blair and George Bush, where the British newspapers often watched in disbelief as Blair appeared desperate to maintain the illusion of a special relationship between the UK and US at all costs (Cannadine, 2006). Here, nationalist concerns were also aroused, as Blair's masculinity appeared threatened for supposedly operating from a feminized position of having to flirt with a more powerful ally.<sup>xiii</sup> There are analogies here between the reported charismatic charm of Blair and the depiction of Hugh Grant as the British Prime Minister in the Richard Curtis's so-called 'feel-good' film (2003) *Love Actually* (Macnab, 2009). However, an important aspect of the popular appeal of Grant's character is that he doesn't flirt with the US president in the same way as his real life counterpart, thus refusing the feminized connotations associated with the UK's perceived status as America's 'poodle' in the run-up to the Iraq war. Evoking Freud's anti-Americanism, it is

reported that some UK cinema audiences even cheered when Grant's PM told the US president, played by Billy Bob Thornton, where to 'get off' (Sylvester, 2006).

The un-pleasures for voters identifying with male politicians in flirtatious contexts are linked to anxieties about masculinity in crisis. Some politicians on the international scene have been careful to promote themselves in a traditional masculine guise, closing down spaces of ambiguity and warding off potential anxiety. For example, on a much-photographed fishing trip, Russian Prime minister Vladimir Putin, was pictured stripped to the waist, inviting flirtatious fantasies of male mastery by exuding a 'retrosexual' image of himself as the handsome strong warrior and father of the nation (Anon, 2007). Similarly, on the 2007 French election campaign trail – and in contrast to his female rival Segolene Royal, Nicolas Sarkozy attempted to demonstrate his virility by riding a horse and rounding up cattle (Duval Smith, 2008, p. 45). His public courtship of Carla Bruni reinforced his performance of flirtatious masculinity, albeit in a less rugged guise. However, against a backdrop of masculinity in crisis, such images begin to look increasingly parodic, and as recent negative coverage of Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's private and public flirtations indicates, often fail to convince.<sup>xiv</sup> Alternatively, seemingly less macho 'metrosexual' images of politicians such as Tony Blair, UK Conservative party leader David Cameron and Barack Obama, have at different moments projected a more 'feminized' relational mode of masculinity, exuding a different fantasy of authentic masculinity.<sup>xv</sup>

### **On not being able to flirt**

As discussed earlier, flirtation has played a key role in the promotion of New Labour. Yet when Gordon Brown replaced Blair as leader in 2007, his inability to ‘connect’ and communicate with the British public provides in its own way, a cautionary tale regarding the significance of flirtatious masculinity in the political arena. Brown’s relationship to flirtation is interesting, as despite his non-flirtatious persona, he does have a history of using the flirtatious mechanisms of political spin and PR to promote his ideas and advance his career as a politician (Gould, 1998, pp. 260-1). Moreover, Brown has not been shy of flirting with members of the opposition, as in his plan to invite them to join what he called ‘the government of all the talents’. In a bid to out-manoeuvre his political rival David Cameron, he also went on a charm offensive and managed to lure the old labour enemy Margaret Thatcher round for tea at Number Ten Downing Street (Tran, 2007). Yet when Gordon Brown took over from Tony Blair as the UK Prime Minister in 2007, his appeal lay in his apparent un-spun solid, authentic retrosexual style of masculinity. Whereas Blair was a skilled flirt, who in his early days in office seemed able to charm all in his wake, Brown was in a sense the ‘anti-flirt’, representing a fantasy of the trustworthy good father, an image that was in stark contrast to Blair’s playful guise as the frequent guest star on UK TV breakfast show sofas and as the politician who managed to woo middle England and the Murdoch press (Rentoul, 2001). However, following a series of PR blunders related to what the press often referred to as Brown’s ‘dithering’, his poll ratings began to fall (BBC News Channel, 2007). The perception of his indecision on a range of issues, including the 2007 election that never happened, not only undermined his image as the strong father, but also his capacity to promote and

manage his own performance. Brown attempted to use the flirtatious mechanisms of spin to convey a non-flirtatious serious image and when this strategy failed, the British public became increasingly disenchanted. As Wernick (1991, p.140) argues, the electorate are fairly sophisticated when interpreting the flirtatious messages of spin and often know when the message is merely empty and superficial. Yet the pleasures of flirtatious persuasion should not be underestimated and the politician's ability to present his policies and image in the best light may also signify a certain level of competency on the part of the politician and Brown's failure to do so, as in his awkward performance on *YouTube*, resulted in public ridicule (Anon, 2009).

Brown's failure to manage his impressions and engage with the public is linked to a perception that he is unable to work with women. The first large group of women to enter parliament reinforced Blair's metrosexual, feminized image in 1997. By contrast, there has been much publicity surrounding Brown's inability to work with women, and his treatment of them 'as window dressing' (Soodin, 2009). Thus in a post-Blair era, where the New Labour project has begun to fracture, Brown's fate was also damaged by those female colleagues who represented him as the man who in effect expects women to flirt with the public on his behalf. Brown's role in this narrative brings to mind the inventor/puppeteer in Hoffman's (1816) tale of 'Olympia' who is really a mechanical doll, where the pleasure in creating and playing with Olympia is analogous to that of the boy who uses the Fort/Da game as a means of shoring up his identity. When the women in Brown's cabinet refused to play the game and resigned *en masse*, it was not only Brown's alleged 'sexism' that let him down, but also his apparent lack of mastery over those women, which for some, appeared to undermine his masculinity even further. The



PR strategy of using Brown's wife to flirt with the public on his behalf by promoting him as 'her hero' at the annual conference and also through social networking sites, only served to reinforce his lack of potency as a politician.<sup>xvi</sup> As one commentator argued, it was not his wife but rather, his reputation as a bully that helped him gain popularity in the polls, shoring up perhaps, retrosexual fantasies of a man with 'rugged independent spirit' (Chancellor, 2010, p. 5).

### **Political flirtation, masculinity and the unconscious**

This paper has explored different formations of flirtatious masculinity in the mediatised context of politics and PR. As we have seen, flirtation works well as a metaphor for the fluid and transitory context of contemporary Western culture, where the old fidelities and attachments that previously structured the shaping of subjectivities are now often undermined and in flux. This process is linked to a loss of faith in the fictions of hegemonic masculinity, and new spaces have emerged within the mediatised spheres of politics and its promotion in mainstream culture, to challenge the old forms of patriarchal mastery and enable new forms of engagement, which allow us to imagine something new. Such spaces can be defined as 'flirtatious', as in the 'defensive' and 'creative models' of flirtation outlined earlier, which have the potential to either open up dialogue with the electorate or to close it down and the performance of masculinity is also used in that promotional context to engage with voters and shore up support. The political modes of flirtation that take place are related to the both the performance and content of the

message and the fluidity of the medium. These processes of political flirtation are fuelled by the mediatisation of political culture, where the illusion of intimacy is promoted by an increasing focus on the personality of politicians (Street, 2003).

Clearly, within the history of politics, the flirtatious charm of male politicians has always played a role in the promotion of political parties, and in the UK, one can cite figures from the past such as Benjamin Disraeli (Constantine, 1991; Kuhn, 2006). Yet the mechanical reproduction of technology which in its present form now operates on a twenty four hour basis, has ensured new modes of identification that are continual, mimicking the open-endedness of flirtatious encounters of the ‘American’ kind discussed by Freud. In the actual contemporary context of American political flirtation, Obama’s use of the technology to woo voters in the 2008 presidential campaign was highly effective as a creative model of political communication, which combined for the first time in the Western political sphere, the promotion of black masculinity with power, seductive oratory and the promise of real policy change. The old cultural symbol of black masculinity as the ‘other’ to the hegemonic ‘same’ of white masculinity was transformed, providing an example of counter hegemonic masculinity in that moment.

Yet against the backdrop of personality politics, the pleasures of identifying with particular political figures are also offset by more deep-rooted anxieties about trust and attachment, which, in a post-ideological age of party politics, creates a number of dilemmas for the undecided voter who may, as UK journalists reported in relation to Tony Blair, end up identifying with a man who just ‘led us on’ (Parris, 2007). The contradictions surrounding Blair are interesting in this context, as in the early years of New Labour he appeared to exemplify the metrosexual flirtatious politician whose

masculinity reflected a less patriarchal model of operating in the political scene. Even his affiliation with the New Labour project as the 'third way' reflected for some, a less split and rigid mode of political power (Richards, 2000). Yet his position regarding the Iraq war undermined that fluidity, suggesting a more defensive, retrosexual way of operating. Indeed, the way in which the decision to go to war was sold by him to parliament and the country based on questionable evidence illustrates his skill in political performance and playing the flirtatious game of mastery to his advantage. The willingness of many to suspend disbelief at that time may also be related to a desire for certainty in a post 9/11 context, and such scenarios are clearly linked to factors relating to the social and political specificities of the historical moment. At the level of unconscious fantasy, the wish to identify with narratives of mastery in this instance, suggests an unmourned, melancholic structure of masculinity at play. In contexts such as these, femininity continues to be repudiated, as the authoritarian impulse to close down the space for creative flirtatious engagement with the other becomes dominant. Thus despite the creative potential of political flirtation to challenge traditional forms of hegemonic masculinity, this seems increasingly unlikely in the current climate, where the desire to master the object through defensive modes of flirtation remains seductive.

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## Filmography

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## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> These terms, as used here, are very loosely based on Mansfield's (2006) discussion of metrosexual and retrosexual masculinities, which he discusses in terms of new and old masculinities respectively.

<sup>ii</sup> See: [http://playpolitical.typepad.com/uk\\_conservative/2008/08/the-five-best-w.html](http://playpolitical.typepad.com/uk_conservative/2008/08/the-five-best-w.html), accessed 9 June, 2009.

<sup>iii</sup> For discussion of Roosevelt, see Braudy (1986), for Nixon, see Hart (1999) and Sennett (1977); for Reagan, see Ewan (1988); for Clinton, see Van Zoonen (2005) and for Obama, see Sanders (2009).

<sup>iv</sup> *Resentment* is a contested term and its different uses are related to different philosophical traditions. From a psychoanalytic perspective, *resentment* can be used in a similar way to Melanie Klein's concepts of envy and projective identification. For further discussion see: Clarke, Hoggett and Thompson (eds.)(2006).

<sup>v</sup> In particular, see Melanie Klein, who discussed at length the link between the mature love in the 'depressive position' mourning and loss (1940).

<sup>vi</sup> See Green's (2006) critical essay 'Addendum to Lecture' on the flirtatious cruelty of the psychoanalyst Masud Khan in this volume.

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<sup>vii</sup> See [www.mumsnet.com](http://www.mumsnet.com)

<sup>viii</sup> The gendered connotations of the word ‘flirt’ can be traced back to the French term *coquette*, and from the eighteenth century, the nouns ‘coquette’ and ‘flirt’ tend to be associated in Britain with French aristocratic women (Kaye, 2002, p. 21).

<sup>ix</sup> This claim was made in a 2008 interview with ‘Obama girl’ on MSNBC news: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IoYeX1Ngf5Y&feature=related>, Accessed: 25 June 2009.

The first video ‘I’ve got a crush on Obama’ was posted in 2007 on You Tube, see: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKsoXHYICqU>, Accessed 20 June 2009.

<sup>x</sup> See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jLSWudoqtWE>, Accessed 20 June 2009.

<sup>xi</sup> For David Miliband see: [http://twitter.com/David\\_Miliband](http://twitter.com/David_Miliband), for Nick Clegg see: <http://twitter.com/nick> clegg

<sup>xii</sup> Recent examples of such online responses include websites and blogs by political activists such as the infamous Guido Fawkes: <http://order-order.com/>, or spoof political videos and electioneering posters using comical artwork and captions, as in the recent UK ‘Airbrushed for change’ e-campaign: <http://mydavidcameron.com/>.

<sup>xiii</sup> This power dynamic was illustrated in the ‘Yo Blair’ episode, when Bush unwittingly spoke to Blair at the 2006 G8 conference in Russia with the microphone still turned on (BBC News, 2006).

<sup>xiv</sup> As numerous comical you-tube videos of Berlusconi and Sarkozy demonstrate.

<sup>xv</sup> The feminized aspects of his public persona relate to his publicised identity as a father, his identification with ‘so-called ‘compassionate conservatism’ and ‘soft’ issues traditionally linked to female voters (Cockerell, 2007). See for example his victory

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speech, which was delivered in a manner that was similar style to Tony Blair (Cameron, 2005).

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2005/dec/06/toryleadership2005.conservatives3>

<sup>xvi</sup> Sarah Brown can be found on Twittter: <http://twitter.com/sarahbrown10> and she also has a section on the UK government web page: <http://www.number10.gov.uk/>