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THE COMPLEX VISUAL GENDERING OF POLITICAL WOMEN IN THE PRESS

Åsa Kroon Lundell and Mats Ekström

In this article, we present an analysis of how gendering is “being done” in press visuals of women in politics. In short, we will argue that women professionals working within the area of politics are gendered and type-cast in more complex ways than previous research has yet shown. In a qualitative analysis of visuals from three different political scandals in Sweden involving prominent political women, we analyse the diversified ways of portraying women in visuals that do not simply reproduce the idea that the gendering of women uncritically correlates with concepts like sexualization, objectification, passivity and otherness. As on-lookers of a professional woman in politics caught in a pressing situation in a photograph, we will argue that at times we may be invited to see her both as an Other but also a person with whom we can identify. Or a woman may be positioned as an object with a focus on appearance, but not by emphasizing her femininity and sexuality but by doing exactly the reverse. We will also discuss the complexity that is related to the various contextual factors that come into play when press photographers and editors communicatively “work” at accomplishing specific gendered visual “preferred readings”.

KEYWORDS femininity; gender; media; politics; visuals; women

Introduction

Images . . . provide a complex field in which power relations are exercised and looks are exchanged. As both spectators and subjects of images, we engage in and are subject to complex practices of looking and being looked at. (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001, p. 106)

Taking Sturken and Cartwright’s statement about the complexity of looking and being looked at as a point of departure, this article will present an analysis of how gendering is “being done” in press visuals of women in politics. Gendering refers to when a person’s gender is emphasized without it being specifically context-relevant (Devere and Graham Davies, 2006, p. 65), and where appearance is given considerable attention. In short, we will argue that women professionals working within the area of politics are gendered and type-cast in more complex ways than previous research has yet shown.

We will analyse the complexity as diversified ways of portraying women in visuals that do not simply reproduce the idea that the gendering of women uncritically correlates with concepts like sexualization, objectification, passivity and otherness. For example, as on-lookers of a professional woman in politics caught in a pressing situation in a photograph, we will argue that at times we may be invited to see her both as an Other *and* a person with whom we ourselves can identify. Other times, a woman may be positioned as an object where her appearance is central but not by emphasizing her femininity and sexuality but by doing exactly the reverse. We will also discuss the complexity that is related to the various contextual factors that come into

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play when press photographers and editors communicatively “work” at accomplishing a specific gendered visual “preferred reading” (Hall, 1980 [1973]).

Research on women politicians in the media has resulted in a fairly homogenous pattern of gendered stereotyping and framing (see Whitaker, 2006). However, these conclusions are primarily if not exclusively drawn from various forms of textual content analysis, and in some cases from interviews with politicians. Taking this into consideration, it seems clear that a more qualitatively-oriented approach to the visual representation of women working within the political field is needed.

The main questions that will be asked is how gendered complexity is represented in visuals, what (preferred) reading positions are offered, and what the main reasons behind the various ways of visually gendering women may be. The data will be drawn from visuals from three different “political scandals” (Lull and Hinerman, 1997; Thompson, 2000) where three different prominent women in Swedish politics were condemned for their alleged immoral actions.

Research Overview

Much of the literature on gender and the media and mediated representations of women in particular has pinpointed the objectification and sexualization of women. Women tend to be displayed as fetishized objects of a male gaze, portrayed in subservient roles of an *other* in relation to men (e.g. Berger, 1972; Mulvey, 2003 [1975]; Sturken and Cartwright, 2001). The sexualization of women has not the least been an important ingredient in research on women and advertising (e.g. Carpenter and Edison, 2005; Goffman, 1979; Page, 2006; Soley and Reid, 1988; Winship, 1981). The results from many of these studies are based on texts and images in the press. Moving images in relation to the concept of sexualization has for instance been researched by Shugart (2003) and Holt and Bissell (2006) who study television coverage of women athletes. Nitz et al. (2007) examine the strategy of sexualization as a frame when it comes to the use of television news journalists in news programming from various American channels. The patriarchal and objectifying way of representing women is something that has also proven to permeate news coverage relating to women in various professional roles and settings (e.g. Byerly and Ross, 2006; McGregor, 2000; Ross and Sreberny, 2000; Tuchman, 1978; van Zoonen, 2000).

When it comes to women politicians in the media, the main research areas have focused on the question of (in)visibility and on the various ways of women’s representation that more often than not build on stereotyping and conventional gender frames.¹ Women are in general under-represented in comparison with their male counterparts (e.g. Kroon, 2006; Norris, 1997). They are more easily associated with domestic issues and the emphasis on physical traits, appearance and relationships is central (e.g. Heldman et al., 2005; Henderson, 1999). Scharrer (2002) has studied Hillary Clinton’s transition from first lady to Senate candidate in her content analysis of newspaper coverage, finding that Clinton was framed more negatively as her political candidacy drew closer. Ross and Sreberny (2000, p. 88) argue that women in general are always viewed as sex objects without regard to their profession, and women politicians are always described specifically as *women* politicians. In addition, from her interviews with women politicians, Ross (2002, p. 163) claims that “their hairstyles always seem more newsworthy than their policy positions”.

Tuchman (1978) has influenced many researchers working in the area of women, media and politics with her concept “symbolic annihilation”, i.e. the omission, trivialization and condemnation of women by the mass media. In later years, McGregor (2000) and Fountaine and McGregor (2002) have set out to test whether there are fewer instances of symbolic annihilation nowadays as more and more women start to inhabit corporate and political top positions. McGregor finds in her content analysis of press items that a New Zealand female chief executive officer tended to primarily be framed around her gender, age, marital relationship and child-rearing which work to devalue and trivialize the woman’s professional success.

In turn, Fountaine and McGregor ask whether women’s representations in the media have improved, in relation to Tuchman’s earlier work, as the number of women politicians have increased throughout the Western world. The authors conclude that indeed instances of omission, trivialization and condemnation continue despite greater political gains by women. The fault, according to these researchers, lies in the industry itself and the ways that journalists are trained. It is simply easier to fall back on old stereotypes to explain actions than to make individual choices that challenge current gender representations (cf. Gallagher, 2001). Other researchers point to the fact that the emphasis on gender with regards to women politicians is not only a result of media agenda-setting, but something that is also initiated either by the politicians themselves (Fountaine and McGregor, 2002) or by the party campaigns (Devere and Graham Davies, 2006).

The image of the competent politician is one that is decisive, rational, strong and charismatic. As Lee (2004, p. 209) correctly points out, this is hardly a gender-neutral image from the start. Women are conventionally framed as emotional beings with a closer connection to the private rather than the public realm (Lee, 2004). This historical and culturally rooted gender stereotypification makes women less likely to be cast as competent politicians in the media whilst men can, in some sense, take these competence criteria for granted. Certainly, men can also be discursively challenged if they are not seen as decisive, strong or charismatic *enough* in their political actions, but they do not need to prove that they inhabit these competences from the very beginning in the same way that women need to do.

No doubt, there are researchers who have highlighted the possibly ambiguous gender readings of men and women in our commercial visual culture (e.g. Kang, 1997; Sturken and Cartwright, 2001), but we believe that the range of possible gender readings that are constructed in today’s media, not least in relation to women in politics, have not been explored in greater detail. Thus, we want to criticize the many times taken-for-granted relationship between media, gender, women and sexualization by showing how three women in politics are gendered in ways that do not follow the expected path of feminized gendering.

Design of Study

We have chosen to collect visuals from three political scandals where professional women in politics get caught up in moments of extreme media exposure, and where visuals are used as a strategy to further incriminate and condemn their alleged immoral actions.² The women in question are Gudrun Schyman, then leader of the Left Wing Party, Laila Freivalds, then Foreign Minister (and earlier also Minister of Justice), and Ulrika Schenström, then Undersecretary of State and as such in close alliance with the Prime

Minister. Choosing visuals from scandals is a strategic choice guided by the assumption that the norms and conventions that influence the gender-specific representations of the women involved becomes particularly prominent in an intense press coverage where "casting blame" is at the heart of the matter for the media. Thus, the ways of gendering the women involved are then easier to detect and discuss. Scandals are also, at least in the Swedish context, driven forth by the tabloids in which visuals dominate both with regards to numbers and size. We have also found it advantageous to analyse visuals of women in politics that are represented in similar if not exactly the same kinds of stormy media contexts.

We should stress that we do not attempt to generalize our results in such a way that we can speak of the gendered visual framing of women in political scandals in general terms, or indeed how women in politics most often are depicted visually in the media. It is not how frequent a phenomenon is that is important in this qualitative textual analysis. The aim with the study, again, is to make use of the visuals in order to offer a more complex understanding of the media's gendering of women in politics, taking previous research as a critical point of departure. We firmly believe that a close reading of visuals influenced by the semiotic tradition and rooted in a "constructionist approach" (Hall, 1997, p. 25) can contribute to existing research. The discursively constructed characters of politicians in media discourse are more often than not the only platform from which to base one's opinion and attitudes towards these professionals, and we therefore stress the importance of examining how these constructions are visualized in a more qualitative way.

We have allowed ourselves to de-contextualize the visuals from the surrounding headings, captions and overall layout of the page, knowing full well that we then remove essential textual ingredients that an average reader uses when adopting a certain stance or perspective towards the narrative as a whole. We agree with Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, 1998) that it is essential to develop methods that catch the interplay between the verbal and the visual in an adequate way. However, bearing in mind our aim to expose the various ways of gendering women through visuals, we have stripped them of their context except from some reflections in relation to headlines.

The reason for concentrating on visuals is not only that they have been considerably less qualitatively investigated in this area, but also because of our general belief that "seeing comes before words" (Berger, 1972, p. 33). Messaris and Abraham (2001, p. 225) say that there is good reason to assume that media consumers are less conscious of the kind of influence that images have on the framing of a news story in comparison to what is said in the text: "...visual images may have the capacity of conveying messages that would meet with greater resistance if put in words, but which are received more readily in visual form".

The gendering will be operationalized by asking the following questions in our analysis of the visuals: Which kind of a social situation is the woman represented in or is the surrounding context cut off? The situated context of the woman in the photo may say something about how we are to perceive her status as a professional and competent woman. Is the woman seemingly captured in a backstage or a frontstage context and/or captured in what seems to be (un)posing ways? This question also relates to the portrayal of the woman's professionalism or lack thereof. How is her posture, facial expression and general physical appearance portrayed? This links into the former question and is relevant in relation to how her femininity and gender is constructed. More specifically, we will also pay attention to the gaze of the woman in the photo as well as the "preferred gaze" or

reading position encoded in the visual as it says something about the power relationships between object and on-looker (cf. Sturken and Cartwright, 2001, p. 100). What kind of camera shots are used? Camera shots imitate various interpersonal relationships which define the relationship between the visual's object and the reader (Kang and Heo, 2007, p. 14). Hence, they are important to examine as they help positioning the woman in various ways in relation to the on-looker.

Emphasized Femininity as a Visual Strategy for Condemnation

The first general tendency when it comes to visualizing women in politics involved in a media-driven scandal is to emphasize their femininity. In our case, this is the prevalent strategy³ used in relation to Gudrun Schyman who chose to retire from her 10-year leadership of the Left Wing Party, only a short while after the news about her alleged financial wrong-doings had hit the media. The emphasizing of her femininity is mainly achieved by:

1. Highlighting physical aspects of her femininity that go in line with the conventional gender stereotype.
2. Inviting the reader into her mental and emotional world.
3. Defining her "crime" as going against typical feminine behaviour and traits.
4. Relating her public persona to the feminine story-telling character of a princess.

The result of these various ways of visualizing her is an ambivalent reading-position which can work as a rather conventional condemning of an immoral woman politician. But, there are also strong implications that point to the possibility of a counter-reading, namely one that invites the reader to identify and sympathize with her fate.

In the independently Social Democratic tabloid *Aftonbladet*, a photo of Schyman in an elevator appears a few days into the scandal (Figure 1). One reason to use this photo as an illustration of her visualization is that it appeared in all of the newspapers in the study. Apparently, this photo is seen as particularly telling of the narrative that is collectively constructed.



FIGURE 1
Aftonbladet, 24 January 2003

Schyman is standing in what looks like an elevator with mirrored walls. To the right behind her back, two men are standing together, quietly watching her. When looking at the photo one could interpret the scene as if the men are talking about her behind her back and glancing at her. The caption says that they are her colleagues, but the photo suggests no relation or contact between them as she becomes the object of their gaze.

To the left behind her, you can see a man focusing her with a camera lens. As she has her back to him and is clearly not looking at him, the sense of her being invaded as the camera man "sneaks up behind her" in a place where she cannot escape is quite palpable. Also, the person taking the photograph must be rather close to her as the elevator is probably rather small, maybe too close for comfort. The mirrored walls give off reflections of the people in the background, making them look like a small group of people rather than just the three, making the scene feel crowded. In addition, an elevator is by many associated with a claustrophobic space where you would feel trapped, a sense that we think is exploited in this photograph.

Schyman appears much bigger than any of the other people in the photo. She evades the camera by looking up to her right, which to the reader is to the left. What is she thinking here, the photo seems to be beckoning us to ask. The headline says "It feels lonesome" within quotation marks. Feelings of sadness, regret and loneliness, as well as feelings of vulnerability are encoded into the photograph. The headline could suggest a certain sympathetic reading of her situation. The liberally-oriented tabloid *Expressen* also uses the elevator photograph of Schyman in much the same way as *Aftonbladet* although the headline differs. Instead of *Aftonbladet's* "It feels lonesome" which was presented as a quote directly from Schyman herself that could be interpreted as being sympathetic towards her pressing situation, *Expressen* formulates an accusation in their headline: "How could you Gudrun?" Thus, the same picture offers both an empathetic and an accusative reading depending on the context.

In *Svenska Dagbladet*, a liberally-oriented quality newspaper, the coverage of Schyman's downfall is not as extensive as in the tabloids which is not very surprising, nor do the headlines scream as loudly. Again, the same elevator picture as in both *Aftonbladet* and *Expressen* is used. The headline accompanying the photo is neither an accusation nor an alleged quote but reads: "Schyman is not going to retire despite threats of prosecution". However, even though the text does not portray her so much as a victim, the photo of her being invaded by cameras does not really make her look defiant either. Maybe the headline is parasitic on the image in such a way that the words lend a certain nonchalance to her countenance as she looks away, seemingly ignoring the photo lens in her face.

Sweden's largest and most prestigious daily newspaper, the liberal *Dagens Nyheter*, allows less space to the news about Schyman, but although the photos are not that many, the ones that exist are given generous space and highlight many of the sentiments and feelings that the photographs in the other papers embody. Along with the other papers, *Dagens Nyheter* uses the elevator photo on their front page, but this one is taken by their most well-known political press photographer. This shot shows Schyman from a different angle, her right-hand side. At first glance, she appears to be standing alone, looking down on the floor and not up as in the other elevator picture. Her shoulders are a bit hunched and her face looks sad and tired. Looking into the mirrors in the photo however, we see the reflections of several photographers trying to get a good shot, and we also see a young woman trying to hold them back by holding out her arm. Schyman's back and

silhouette are reflected in the mirrors but although seemingly threefold in the photo, she appears extremely vulnerable and lonely. Her mirrored image seems to symbolize the scrutiny of the media as she is probed from every angle. Everyone is looking at her, but she is not looking at anyone. The headline, "Tough criticism of Schyman's tax deductions" emphasizes feelings of guilt and regret.

The elevator picture(s), as they are used by all newspapers, are clearly judged as being representative of the narrative that the papers and journalists are trying to convey. The multiple mirror images of Schyman in these elevator visuals tell the story of a media celebrity and her downfall. In one of the papers, she is also named "the princess" who has fallen from grace. Where earlier she was often talked about in terms of her high heels, long legs and brightly coloured red lips, these photos of a sunken and greyish woman speak of loss, loneliness and defeat. Although, at the same time, perhaps particularly in *Dagens Nyheter*, a sympathetic reading of Schyman is also made possible. One can detect a certain self-criticism directed at the probing journalists with their large camera lenses who are captured in the mirrors by the photographer. At the same time as she is explicitly talked about as a former media "princess" fallen from grace, the fact that she has fallen because of the enormous media pressure does not go uncommented by the photographer.

On the same day as her elevator photograph, *Aftonbladet* also portrays her standing in her office (Figure 2). This visual together with the headline "Her days are numbered" also emphasizes her guilt and shame. As Ross (2002, p. 82) points out "...the media often appear to be operating double standards when considering women politicians, almost as if they expect 'better' standards of behaviour, higher moral values, more honesty, integrity, loyalty". We see this as an example of an instance where this assumed higher moral standard is explicitly conveyed in the picture as she is "forced" to bow in shame, her hands behind her back as if tied before an execution. If this is a conscious posing or not is



FIGURE 2

Aftonbladet, 24 January 2003

impossible to say, but the fact that the paper still chooses it says something about how they want to visualize her guilt.

On the day of Schyman's retirement, *Dagens Nyheter* chooses an extreme close-up of Schyman's face on the front page of the paper (Figure 3). Again, her gaze is evasive, looking downwards, her lips pressed tightly together.

It is a very intimate, almost painfully invading photograph especially when it is viewed in its actual size which covers almost a third of the front page. Like the elevator photographs and a number of other pictures published during the scandal, this extreme close-up on the front page frames the politician in a way that Goffman (1979) conceptualizes as "licensed withdrawal". Schyman appears disconnected and disoriented, her attention elsewhere.

Barthes (1993) reflects on the invisibility of a photograph, it is not that we see. In all, the photographs of Schyman have a very naked "being-there" quality to them. We see *her*, not the photograph of her. Being previously known for handling the media in such a brilliant manner, for instance her revelation that she was addicted to alcohol in a live news show on TV was described as "a stroke of genius" by journalists when looking back on her past career. These photos, however, seem to "demask" her of her dignity, typical sharp wit and cocky defiance.

Fiske (1987, pp. 6–7) defines extreme close-ups as a visual technique to frame a villainous person. Hall (1966, p. 10) suggests that such an extreme close-up defines "the distance of love-making and wrestling (lover or aggressor)". Kang and Heo (2007) who examine camera shots on magazine covers and who build on Hall's statement argue that public figures are unlikely to be perceived as intimate in these types of contexts. Hence, this means that they agree with Fiske's notion that extreme close-ups are used to frame a criminal.

However, we would argue that this is not the visual portraying of a villainess. She is certainly very intimately captured in a moment which almost looks as if she is caught off-guard. Her eyes are teary (which is easier to see in its actual size) and she looks as if she is fighting to keep her composure in front of the cameras. The fact that the surrounding context is cut off and the entire visual focuses on her face and expression is also an invitation to the reader to identify with the strain that she is under and the loss of her role as a prominent political leader, a position she has held for 10 years. The extreme close-up

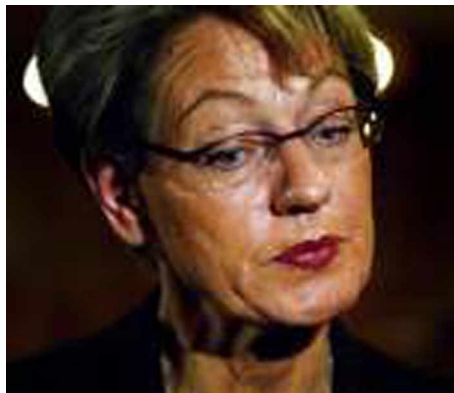


FIGURE 3
Dagens Nyheter's front page, 27 January 2003

connotes images of soap opera characters whose imagined emotions, thoughts and feeling are captured in close-ups and used as essential ingredients in the creation of dramatic narratives.

For us, this visual represents the ambiguous representation of Schyman as both, in some sense, a villain, but also someone who is to be sincerely pitied. In this case, the camera is both a lover and aggressor in relation to its object. The media's condemnations of her morally problematic actions are apparently not made without regret. Her previous good relations with the media, her openness and frankness regarding her personal life and her biting, sarcastic but sharp remarks directed at more stale male colleagues that were surely seen as constituting "excellent media stuff" can be seen as having paid off in this scandal. She is intimately probed, and yet, by and large, also empathetically handled. There is a certain sadness to the fact that she will be leaving the limelight, and also leaving the cameras with one less interesting and colourful person to capture.

So far, we have concluded that the fact that it is a woman politician and that her femininity definitely is exploited in the visuals (i.e. the focus on appearance, posture, facial expression, feelings and emotions of shame, sadness and guilt). However, the emphasis on her femininity may work in two ways, both for and against her.

We will now show some visual examples from two cases where women in politics are treated visually in very different ways. This time, the fact that they are *not* portrayed as conventionally beautiful or feminine either in appearance or in their overall manner becomes even more of a problem for them from a professional point of view.

De-emphasized Femininity as a Visual Strategy for Condemnation

The second strategy that works to marginalize and trivialize women in politics, and the one we feel is less researched, is to de-emphasize femininity. We suggest that this is accomplished in the visuals by:

1. Downplaying conventional overall feminine attractiveness.
2. Using visuals that show apparent backstage actions and expressions that enlarges the symbolic distance between photographed object and the on-looker.
3. Over-emphasizing "typical" masculine behaviours and traits.
4. Relating their public personas to negatively connoted story-telling characters like witch and mad hatter.

The politicians who we have focused on when analysing this particular strategy are Laila Freivalds and Ulrika Schenström. In 2003, Laila Freivalds was appointed Foreign Minister after the brutal murder of former Foreign Minister Anna Lindh; she resigned in March 2006. Basically, she was criticized for having practised governmental censorship of an Internet site belonging to the Swedish Democratic Party, known as an openly xenophobic party.

Roughly speaking, there are two categories of visuals of Freivalds. Either she is shown as active and on-the-go, gesticulating or taking a seat, much like a male politician would be represented (Kroon and Ekström, 2007). In the photos where the context is visible and not cut off, she is captured in professional settings such as a press conference or in some other kind of a meeting or walking with colleagues. In some sense, it could be argued that she is represented as a professional and active decision-maker. If interpreted

critically, it could also be argued that she is represented in a counter-gender way which makes her come off more like a man than a woman.

Following this more critical line of understanding of her alleged political actions in visuals, there is the other category which more concentrates on her appearance, and which also emphasizes a more mannish framing of her as a woman professional. Here, Freivalds' face is focused and the body is cut off around the chest area. Her facial expressions do not, in any way, express a feeling of shame, guilt and introversion as with Schyman.

Figure 4 is a rather representative picture of the way that Freivalds is portrayed in many visuals. She is shown in close-ups where her mouth is slightly open and her white hair (which looks considerably more golden in the personal publicity picture posed on the government site) is lit in such a way that it catches the on-looker's eye. Her gaze is not directed exactly at the on-looker but slightly beyond. She seemingly addresses someone but as the context is cut off, we do not know who and in what situation. The full frontal camera perspective has historical connotations dating back to the way that criminals were represented in visuals at the end of the 19th century (Sekula, 1989). Her hair becomes central in the construction of the "studium", in Barthes' (1993) words, the encounter with the photographer's (or editor, authors comment) intentions which harmonizes with your own. The hair becomes an essential element in the character construction of Freivalds as a mad woman, a mad hatter. It frames her odd-looking expression and may also connote someone who is (too) old for such a prominent job.

Freivalds is also shot from below as if to underline her alleged superiority (of which the media is critical), a common practice when picturing politicians (see Figure 5).

Freivalds is collectively visualized as a kind of a caricature of herself. In all of the papers but especially the tabloids, she is shown in close-ups with her eyes closed, drinking from a cup or just with her eyes shut or half-closed as if she was dozing off. Alternatively, she is portrayed with her eyes wide open as if staring wildly at someone (as on the front page of *Aftonbladet*, 21 March 2006). The "eye-pictures" convey a feeling of unattractiveness and unwomanliness. These visuals catch the politician in backstage moments but the fact that even a politician needs to blink once in a while is normally not something that is



FIGURE 4

Aftonbladet, 22 March 2006



FIGURE 5

Svenska Dagbladet, 21 March 2006

chosen to be a newsworthy frontstage visual. In her case, however, visuals of her blinking become a common way of making her look unattractive and unprofessional (Figure 6).

In all of the papers, Freivalds femininity is continually played down, and she is represented in unattractive poses making unflattering facial expressions that make her look plain, old and even ugly.

The second woman who is also portrayed in a less than flattering manner is the then Undersecretary of State, Ulrika Schenström, who worked closely with the present Prime Minister of Sweden, Fredrik Reinfeldt. She retired from her position in November 2007 after the revelation that she had been out to dinner (involving alcoholic beverages) with a news reporter from the channel TV4 while at the same time having been on call for the government's crisis management organization.⁴ A photographer from the tabloid *Aftonbladet* was tipped off and shot paparazzi pictures of the couple intermingling in the restaurant. On 24 October 2007, the so-called "kissing-picture" was published and the



FIGURE 6

Aftonbladet, 23 March 2006 (bubble reads "Darned reporters")



FIGURE 7

The paparazzi picture by Jimmy Wixström that ended Schenström's career as Undersecretary of State, *Aftonbladet*, 24 October 2007

media scandal was a fact. The picture in question (Figure 7) won the "Picture of the Year" award at a ceremony in March of 2008.

The various pictures were exploited in an on-going narrative during the days that followed although they, in fact, were taken at one specific instance portraying one single meeting (Figures 8 and 9).

The reasons for the newsworthiness of these particular pictures is, of course, not only that they catch a politician drinking with a reporter while possibly being responsible for the government's risk management. The fact that it got such an enormous exposure in every media was also that the visuals catch a woman engaged in typically counter-gender actions. Even though it was never established if Schenström was drunk or not, it is generally considered to be less acceptable for a woman to drink and to be drunk whether in charge of a risk management organization or not. In Figure 9, she certainly appears to be under the influence. Her eyes are closed and her bowed-down head makes her jaw look rather saggy. In reality, she might just have been looking down for some very reasonable explanation.

Schenström's general physical appearance may not be considered to fall into what is seen as conventionally attractive. She is not skinny and she has a long curly hairstyle that



FIGURE 8

Aftonbladet, 31 October 2007



FIGURE 9

Aftonbladet, 2 November 2007

can easily be connoted to a fiery red-headed witch. Schenström's preference for black clothing is also something that becomes an ingredient in the making of a witch character in the visuals. As in the case with Freivalds, Schenström's femininity is played down and she is shown in visuals that are clearly less flattering than they could be. Even when she is pictured looking very nice (Figure 10), the headline turns against her: "She lied twice".

Here she is shown nicely made-up, but the visual seems strange considering the context. She has just resigned after a massive media frenzy, yet *Aftonbladet* chooses this extreme close-up of her face. As opposed to the extreme close-up of Schyman when she had retired (see Figure 3), this picture does not convey any feelings of guilt or shame. In fact, it is probably taken in quite a different context and for a very different purpose than it is now used. It is as if her closed eyes and lack of regretful emotions get to symbolize an arrogant "I do not care" attitude towards everything that has happened. Unlike Freivalds who criticized the media, Schenström chose to retire without speaking to any reporters on the matter.

Besides the fact that even her attractiveness turns against her after she has retired, she is also made ugly in other ways. In Figure 11, she is shown looking red-faced, brooding and tired with her gaze seemingly directed at someone even if the context is cut off. This



FIGURE 10

Aftonbladet, 2 November 2007

**FIGURE 11**

Aftonbladet, 2 November 2007

medium-shot that distances the on-looker from her yet focuses on her face and gaze is contrasted with a colourful photo of the Prime Minister's conventionally attractive wife, Filippa Reinfeldt, in the same article (Figure 12). Reinfeldt is dressed in light colours, sits up straight, smiles and gazes directly at the viewer in a model-like manner much unlike the hunched and black-clad "villainous" Schenström.

The headline "Therefore did he trust her" refers to the Prime Minister's faith in his closest associate's capacity and honesty, and the article explicitly mentions that Schenström "ruled his professional life" while his wife "ruled his private life". Hence, Schenström's role as an expert in her field and as a close competent employee is questioned and even ridiculed as the two women allegedly closest to the Prime Minister are contrasted in this way.⁵

From our analysis of the de-emphasizing femininity strategy in visuals of women in politics, we can detect a much more closed and unambiguous reading of how we as on-lookers are supposed to judge these women. Freivalds and Schenström are simply guilty of their crimes and there is no visually constructed sympathy on offer for what they have done.

**FIGURE 12**

Filippa Reinfeldt, *Aftonbladet*, 2 November 2007

Discussion and Conclusions

In all of the scandals we have analysed we see examples of appearance being central in the visuals, but by “doing” their appearance in various ways, very different reading positions are made possible. In the case of Gudrun Schyman, her femininity is continually played on visually. She is shown in close-ups or extreme close-ups, or in situations where she appears very emotional, vulnerable, shameful and lonely. We would argue that she is not first and foremost portrayed as a sexualized object but a vulnerable woman with whom we as readers can sympathize. The parallel between the extreme close-ups of her emotional face and the camera shots of the characters in a daytime soap suggests that perhaps especially other women are invited to recognize her great loss and the extreme pressure that she is under. This interpretation would go against her being represented in a conventional objectified manner for a male gaze.

Thus, two reading positions are constructed. One is condemning and plays on conventional images of the supposedly moral woman who should have known better. Her apparent powerlessness and emotional state of mind are caught in extreme close-ups and mirrored elevator images and construct her as an object for our gaze. The other reading is made possible by framing her as a previously very successful politician who has paid a very high price for her mistakes. She is shown appearing sad, regretful and lonely, as a subject with whom we are offered to identify and sympathize with.

Laila Freivalds and Ulrika Schyman, on the other hand, appear mannish in their visuals. By playing down their femininity to the point where they appear very unattractive, and by exposing conventionally male behaviours in the visuals, they appear as villains rather than victims. Freivalds is visualized making facial expressions that are not normally chosen to portray professional politicians whether men or women. The visuals of her looking drugged or simply mad create a distance between her as an object for the camera and the on-looker in the sense that she, allegedly, looks anything but a professional politician and certainly no one that the reader wants to sympathize with.

Schenström is made the focal point in her visuals and she is shown appearing active, flirtatious and it is perhaps implied that she is even the one taking the initiative to the kiss. Both the drinking and alleged romantic initiative go against conventional gender codes where the man supposedly is the active one and the one whose drinking (and drunken state) is normally not questioned. In the one photo where she looks attractive, the headline backlashes and the visual is easily read as showing an arrogant and vain political advisor. The fact that Schenström does not appear as physically attractive as “could be expected” of a woman makes her seem even more guilty. The visuals of Freivalds and Schyman offer readings that are unambiguously condemning. There simply is no mercy—not only for what they have allegedly *done*—but for looking and acting in a manner similar to men.

Understanding the Complex Ways of Gendering Women in Politics

We now want to summarise our analysis by pointing to the complex contextual factors that most probably influence the ways in which the gendering of women in politics is achieved. Although there are many aspects to consider, we choose to discuss three factors that we believe are particularly relevant.

1. The male-dominated press (and visual) culture.

2. The women's alleged (in)abilities to conform to conventional standards of attractiveness.
3. Their respective previous relations with the media.

First, in the Swedish press, 80 per cent of the people in such leading positions as chief editors and editorial managers are men (Göransson, 2007). The overwhelming majority of editors and prominent press photographers who get to photograph top politicians are men. In our data, with a few exceptions, the visuals are all taken by men. It is safe to say that the visual culture of a newspaper, whether a quality one or a tabloid, is guided by male norms, values and conceptions. This ought to be a relevant factor when explaining how women in politics are gendered with a focus on appearance as they are framed from a male point of view and with a male gaze.

Second, our analysis has shown that the three women involved are all implicitly type-cast into various storytelling characters: princess, mad woman and witch. We have only been able to exemplify these constructions by showing 12 visuals but these discursive characters are continually constructed throughout each respective scandal. Schyman who is type-cast as a princess is done so when textual and visual referrals are made to her past where she was cast as young and vibrant, and the reader is reminded that the papers often used to comment on her long legs, lipstick and clothes that markedly differed from the men's grey suits in parliament. Although she looks tired and hunched in the elevator picture, it is as if her colourful past still works to her advantage and she is named the princess fallen from grace. The other negative type-castings (mad woman and witch) are largely accomplished by caricaturing the women's looks by exaggerating certain physical traits. For Freivalds it is primarily her hair, eyes and age that visually create her mad hatter character. For Schenström it is mainly her bouncy red curly hair, black clothing and body size. Freivalds and Schenström are not allowed to be seen as attractive women and their physical appearance is used to their disadvantage. Apparently, it is somewhat of a handicap for a woman in politics to not be seen as conventionally attractive and it is something which is used when constructing their scandal caricature.

Third, we would like to stress the importance of each woman's previous "media biography", especially with regards to Schyman and Freivalds. During her 10 years in politics, Schyman actively invited the media into her private life. In fact, she explicitly stated this as being an important aim for her as a politician, to allow herself to be personal and emotionally expressive in the public sphere. One example of this is her book from 1998 with the telling title: *Gudrun Schyman: Human Being, Woman, Mother, Lover, Party Leader*. In May of 2003, after the hugely publicized tax scandal analysed in this article, she was elected the second most popular woman in Sweden only surpassed by Queen Silvia. Freivalds, however, has quite a different media biography. Already in 2000, she chose to resign from her position as Minister of Justice which she held for six years. Then, the reason was her purchase of an apartment turned condominium which was considered to be in direct conflict with the politics of the Social Democratic Party. In the press release where her resignation was announced, she wrote that she had been the victim of "unacceptably demeaning attention from the media". The fact that she indignantly and forcefully shut her apartment door in the face of a group of probing journalists became the visual "defining moment" (Clayman, 1995) of that media scandal. At the press conference where she announced her resignation due to the scandal analysed here, she again criticized the media for not conveying a correct image of what had happened.

The fact that Freivalds and Schyman are treated so differently in the visuals, we argue, is directly related to their relations with the media. In Schenström's case, we believe that her alleged counter-gender actions and non-conventional attractiveness caught on camera played a big part in her downfall.

Suggestions for Further Research

Although it is argued that men are more likely than women to be described in gender-neutral terms (Jamieson, 1995), we would like to stress that we do not believe that women in politics are the only ones to be represented in complex ways for complex reasons. According to two male politicians whom we interviewed a few years ago, appearance was not considered an irrelevant factor when they were represented visually and verbally in the media:

I would like to emphasize that also a male politician is subject to an enormous amount of reviews about his appearance. It has been written about my eyebrows and my stubble, and you can find lots of statements about my looks, so, absolutely, male politicians are also subjected to it.

Apparently, the former Liberal's leader Lars Leijonborg who made this statement does not really find the focus on his appearance as something positive. As a contrast, the younger politician of the two, Thomas Bodström, then Minister of Justice, comments on both the pros and cons of being visualized as handsome:

I get some pretty flattering coverage. My wife claims that I'm more handsome in the news photos than in reality and I think she's right. But they can also rally over my appearance in a way that they would never dare do if I was a woman. They have made me into a paper doll picturing all parts of the body; they have commented on my thighs, my ankles, my eyes, everything. They would never do that if I was a woman.

According to these two politicians, they too feel sexualized and objectified at times. In addition to developing empirically the complexity of portraying women politicians in the media, it would be interesting to analyse the gendering of men in politics and how this is being done. Are male politicians ever made into women in order to undermine their professionalism? What in the gendering of both men and women in politics is culture-specific and what patterns are recognizable elsewhere? How do politicians' own perceptions of their representations vary in relation to scholarly results? Also, we know little about the complex interplay between deliberate political posing, visual techniques in order to create certain discursive characters, and the knowledge and assumptions of the on-lookers of these narratives. Indeed, these and other questions would be exciting points of departure for further research.

NOTES

1. Mervi Pantti, literary review on the gendered mediation of politicians for the project "Gender, Politics and the Media: challenging stereotypes, promoting diversity, strengthening equality" (available online at www.portrayingpolitics.net, accessed 2 April 2008).
2. For access reasons, we are only able to show visuals from three of the newspapers in this article. In total, we have analysed about 200 visuals from two Swedish quality papers

(*Dagens Nyheter* and *Svenska Dagbladet*) and two tabloids (*Aftonbladet* and *Expressen*), using both their paper and Internet versions. The patterns described in relation to the visuals in this article are not exclusive to these three papers but are found in all of the four papers analysed.

3. When we say “strategy” we do not mean that the ways that the women are visually framed are results of conscious actions by journalists with evil motives. In this context, we rather mean “discursive technique” which may or may not be consciously used.
4. It is worth noting that the media did not focus on the role and possible ethical and moral problem of a reporter kissing a politician whose political activities he usually covered. The blame was overwhelmingly directed at Schenström.
5. It might be added that Filippa Reinfeldt also holds a prominent political position in the Stockholm Council.

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