

**Arnold Schwarzenegger and Media Spectacle**  
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Arnold Schwarzenegger's gubernatorial victory demonstrates the increasing collapse of the boundaries between entertainment and politics in an era of media spectacle.

Over the past decades, major struggles around politics, race, gender and sexuality have played out in the media. In the 1990s, the O.J. Simpson trial, the Clinton sex scandals and the proliferation of tabloid journalism made serious political issues the stuff of popular entertainment and culture.

Moreover, presidential politics -- on the level of campaigns and governing -- have also exhibited a growing politics of image and spectacle. In our media-saturated society, politicians become celebrities who fine-tune their image through daily photo ops, spin out their message of the day and, like celebrities, employ image management firms to make sure their performance is playing well with the public.

In an era of media politics, celebrities can take on increasingly political roles. Hollywood film and television stars were prominent opponents of the Bush administration's 2003 Iraq war, and teams of celebrities were employed by both sides in the California recall election.

Schwarzenegger had a familiar role to play in the recall scenario. The people -- angry with higher taxes, energy costs and what appeared to be a deteriorating economy -- were looking for a savior. Schwarzenegger presented himself as the hero on the white horse. His "rescue California" pitch played into a standard action/adventure genre where the outside lone hero arrives in a chaotic situation and, through his agency and magical powers, defeats the evil forces, solves the problem and returns the situation to stability and normalcy.

Right-wing talk radio and an omnipresent media whipped up voters' passions to a frenzy, and the Schwarzenegger campaign was able to channel voter anger against Gov. Gray Davis. Davis was immensely unpopular, so it was relatively easy to blame him, if albeit unfairly, for California's problems.

In this political morality tale, Schwarzenegger did not have to present specific political positions, although it was no doubt useful that he held his own and was indeed highly entertaining in the one heavily watched political debate. Schwarzenegger campaigned daily, drew large audiences and provided engaging sound bites in the daily media. Hence, exposés of predatory sexual behavior published in the Los Angeles Times seemed to have little effect, perhaps because in the world of Hollywood, such sexual behavior is expected or accepted as part of the scene.

In any case, Schwarzenegger is now governor. It remains to be seen how Hollywood fantasy scenarios will play out in day-to-day politics. Engaging complex problems of the budget do not lend themselves to magical solutions, and media politics can only go so far in dealing with the problems of the California economy and political system.

Once again, California is undergoing an experiment in which the implosion of entertainment, media spectacle and politics has produced a celebrity actor governor. It is likely that the resulting story will provide a cautionary political morality tale about the dangers of celebrity politics, just as Schwarzenegger's victory confirms its power in an age of big media and celebrity. But unlike Hollywood films, real politics are complex, open-ended and difficult to predict.

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