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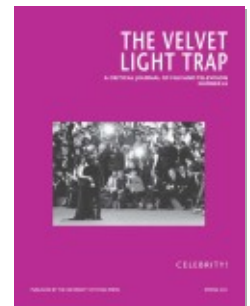
Populist Celebrity in the Election Campaigns of Jesse
Ventura and Arnold Schwarzenegger

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The Velvet Light Trap, Number 65, Spring 2010, pp. 44-57 (Article)

Published by University of Texas Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/vlt.0.0083>



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Populist Celebrity in the Election Campaigns of Jesse Ventura and Arnold Schwarzenegger

On the futuristic action flick *Demolition Man* (1993) supercop John Spartan (Sylvester Stallone) is thawed out of cryogenic stasis to hunt down superkiller Simon Phoenix (Wesley Snipes). Phoenix and his band of miscreant thugs (including the character actor Jesse Ventura) have been covertly and illegally thawed by the resident “benign” dictator/mayor to quash a nascent rebellion. The rebellion is led by a bedraggled band of underdwellers who don’t want to be vegetarians or abstain from sex—lifestyle choices demanded by the “San Angeles” authoritarian society of 2032. In San Angeles Lt. Lenina Huxley (Sandra Bullock) and the resurrected Spartan hunt Phoenix in a utopian/dystopian society ostensibly free of violence and anger. There is no “outside” of the unified San Angeles, only a stratified hierarchy of above and below; no hints of other governments, unengineered societies, or the flow of people across borders. Huxley, a nonviolent police officer and history buff, mentions her adoring fascination with Spartan’s twentieth-century escapades, referencing her research in the Schwarzenegger Library. Spartan, still acclimating to 2032, stops her, saying, “Hold it. The Schwarzenegger Library?” Huxley responds, “Yes! The Schwarzenegger Presidential Library.” With a bemused look she says, “Wasn’t he an actor when you were . . .” Spartan: “Stop. He was president?” Huxley: “Yes. Even though he was not born in this country, his popularity at the time caused the 61st Amendment, which states that . . .” Spartan interrupts: “I don’t want to know. President.” Huxley laughs, reminding us that anything can become natural and acceptable if given time and the right historical narrative of transformation. Political campaigns demand constant innovation in the use of media technology and attention to the most current mechanisms of publicity. One need only turn on the news to realize how intensely political campaigns rely on traditional mechanisms of

star building: carefully constructed childhood narratives, lifestyle interviews, glossy photo spreads, and visits to late-night television round out more traditional high-profile campaign stops and speeches, demonstrating the fascination with private life and personality over public achievements that has been argued to characterize the nature of true celebrity (Gamson; Turner).

The American ideal of politics as thoughtful, participatory deliberation makes it difficult to point this out without putting oneself in the position of criticizing contemporary politics and the role the media play in getting people elected. We would like to think that politics are (or could be) more than image promotion, and for most of us the first response to the celebrity politics of Arnold Schwarzenegger and Jesse Ventura is to condemn them as rather obvious symptoms of how democratic politics can devolve into two-dimensional rhetorical demagoguery. What else could be expected from entertainers rising out of popular cultural genres like action-adventure cinema and professional wrestling? We need only imagine the possibility of an earnest and successful dramatic actor running for office to suggest the importance of genre and class for analyzing political celebrity.

The goal of this essay is to take seriously the question of whether celebrity politics can tell us anything hopeful about democratic political ideals. The cases of Schwarzenegger and Ventura, because of their significant involvement in visual cultural production, can be most helpfully understood by taking a closer look at specific elements of Schwarzenegger’s and Ventura’s personas—or, in the terms of Richard Dyer’s classic method, we must read them like socially situated texts. Instead of adopting the simplistic assumption that their prior work in the entertainment industry amounted to “free publicity” for their political campaigns, we will instead assume that the specificity of their star personas made possible visions of

political collectivity that were deeply affecting because of the way they animated long-standing political tropes. There are two important dimensions of their star personas that stand out immediately in their campaign rhetoric and the press coverage of their candidacies: their ability to transform themselves and their muscular physical transparency. This essay's reading of these election campaigns will begin by laying out the stakes of televisual and cinematic genres for understanding political celebrity. After specifying the importance of accrued visual and narrative forms for Ventura's and Schwarzenegger's campaigns, we will then look more closely at the specific dimensions of their personas in terms of the populist tropes of class, action, transformation, opposition, collective identification, visibility, and oppositional transparency. What does the embodiment of political rhetoric in the form of celebrity politicians suggest about the stakes of popular politics and collective identity as we continue to hope that these things can be more than manipulative strategies?

Before turning to a reading of genre and Schwarzenegger's and Ventura's personas, it will be helpful to lay out the political philosophical concepts of representation and populism. In politics, personality and talent are described as "character," and one's private life demonstrates one's ethical qualifications to make difficult and prudent decisions in the name of the people (Braudy). For politicians, the value of personality, talent, and lifestyle choices are given an extra shell of allegorical meaning that alters how and what these individuals *represent*. In the case of political celebrity, the sovereign and republican dimensions of representation flesh out the semiotic sense of the term so that interpretive labor around the nature of the celebrity figure is not just about the individual but also about understanding and defining a figurative collective body (Rogin). Celebrities who express political opinions and support political causes do not necessarily claim to represent a public in the way that those who run for office do. A celebrity election campaign is more or less an effort to make a filmic, narrative, or entertaining body of work speak directly to the composition of imagined collective political identity. The gubernatorial election campaigns of Schwarzenegger (2003) and Ventura (1998), in their similarities and proximity, suggest a historical moment when the character paradigms of physical prowess, decisive action, personal progress, and transparent simplicity were effective signifiers of an ideal political process and the nature of "the people" as a unified historical actor. The moment

when these specific traits resonated may be fading, but the general structure of celebrity representation seems to only be growing in political significance, and these two cases can help us understand how famous individuals gain political traction by positioning their personas as allegories of the political totality.

Journalists covering the election campaigns and explaining the election results nearly always addressed the question of what role celebrity played in the elections. These analyses frequently described Schwarzenegger's and Ventura's entertainment careers simply as adding free publicity or providing practice in the art of media manipulation (Barone; Labash; Lane; Schier; Simon; Smolkin). While it is true that political campaigns benefit from publicity and that these two figures were experienced with managing media, this is only the beginning of the action hero-turned-populist rhetorician story. Existing political analyses don't account for the broader cultural narratives Ventura and Schwarzenegger evoked as they campaigned for gubernatorial office, cultural narratives that are generally the starting point for film and media scholarship on the ways that celebrities generate meaning (Dyer). Although certain political scholars are beginning to think about the ways in which "entertainment" and "politics" intersect, there is still a presumption of separation, a disciplinary distinction in the ways that these cultural texts are analyzed and an assumed difference in the ways they are approached by audiences. While we endorse the distinctions as being both factual and desirable, the instances of entertainment celebrities being elected to public office can help us shed light on the cultural overlap between these spheres, not the least of which are politicians like our current president who seem to rival film stars in their ability to generate interest in their personas. Our political culture clearly relies on the tropes and public relations strategies developed by the film industry's star-making apparatus, and so we are treated to detailed information about politicians' ethnic identity, physical regime, diet, family narratives, and general self-development techniques. This liberal borrowing should prompt us—out of both curiosity and concern—to examine the ways that political celebrity is continuous with Hollywood celebrity. In our two examples of entertainment celebrities turning into political celebrities, we can see the way that popular tropes of masculine self-development constitute not just entertainment culture but also populism, the representational form of mass politics.

If we are interested in the political dimensions of celebrity, we don't necessarily need to confine ourselves to celebrities who run for elected office (Street). Clearly, any number of celebrities have marked out territory for themselves on specific political issues. But we also might want to suggest overlapping differences between *charitable* activities, like Angelina Jolie's international adoption of children or the Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls in South Africa, and *political* activities, like George Clooney's criticisms of policy in Darfur or Bono's efforts to lobby for forgiveness of African debt. The difference seems to be the extent to which these activities are undertaken in critical or oppositional terms or with an eye toward effecting systematic or governmental change. Critical opposition is the realm of populist politics—and running for office in a competitive election with a winner and a loser is nearly always an activity that operates through critical opposition.

In his recent work *On Populist Reason* Ernesto Laclau draws on Antonio Gramsci, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, and theories of mass society to develop an understanding of democratic politics that takes populism as the fundamental political logic of democracy. According to Laclau, populist political organization is always rhetorical in the sense that groups of political actors are constituted through the representational capacities of polysemous figures that are often individual leaders. Unfulfilled popular demands are collected under the banner of a representational figure who is positioned against the existing political structure, and it is through this process of collecting various oppositional demands that “the people” are constituted. As P. David Marshall has argued, the celebrity short-circuits representational processes to directly represent the people as a mass, an aggregate that is embodied by the celebrity figure. But in directly representing the audience-mass, what does the celebrity figure do for the audience-mass? Laclau makes a basic distinction between material demands that are met by a governing political order and demands that remain unmet. Populist politics, he argues, is the process of equating unmet demands to form an ever-larger oppositional bloc. All the unmet demands have in common is that they are not addressed by the governing order. They are thus constituted by an *oppositional* identity and equate themselves as, in some sense, the authentic people and the legitimate source of democratic power.

Populist movements, therefore, fall along a continuum. On one end are movements that collect a series of strong

demands for material necessities like water, food, and housing. Laclau implies that these have a deep hegemony in the sense that the populist movement reflects meaningful or necessary elements of life that are lacking. At the other end of the spectrum are populist movements that are constituted merely by affection for a leader, and these are fleeting and lacking in tangible hegemony. Many would argue that the political efforts of Jesse Ventura and Arnold Schwarzenegger generally lack the type of legitimacy that comes with demands for material improvement in the conditions of life. In another sense, however, Ventura's and Schwarzenegger's election campaigns tapped into a deeply felt immaterial demand for representation in the terms of specifically popular aesthetics, much as Obama's campaign did. Not only did both politicians make their names in popular culture, they did so in genres of popular culture that are themselves often positioned against more elite or “cultured” popular forms. The question that needs to be addressed is this: Do the cases of Ventura and Schwarzenegger constitute examples of petty demagoguery, or is fulfilling the demand for popular politics something more than manipulative pandering?

Without a closer look at the textual history of stars' cultural production, analyses of celebrity politics run the risk of devolving into shrill condemnations of mass culture or seamless causal narratives in which fame determines success (Babcock; Smolkin). These types of expert political analyses cannot capture the richness of political discourse in its visibility, nor can they generate insight into how we imagine the accelerating intersections of governance, communication, and the political. In the words of former governor Ventura:

It always feels good to prove experts wrong. To prove that yes, something can be done. And then they kinda got irritated with me and probably still are because I started to question why they're experts. I question, if they're experts, why didn't they see this coming? To me, a true expert would have seen the writing on the wall begin to happen, and yet none of them did. There were none of them. And then after it's over, then some of them try to say, [in “expert” voice] “Well, yes, I saw it, da-da-dadada.” And try to analyze their way out of it. But in reality I try to question why they're experts, because they can't have that much expertise if they didn't see it coming. (*Citizen Jesse*)¹

What political analysts may not have wanted to admit was the conflation of politics with representation and escalating identification with popular culture through the traditional avenues of celebrity. These forms are far more

powerful arbiters of consciously articulated meaning in most people's lives than traditional political rhetoric. Another way to see the urgency of this question is to look at Barack Obama, an eloquent orator whose message of change, transformation, and new beginnings could only have acquired its successful force when accompanied by his history-making visual physical presence.

"Yeah, I saw that ad . . . the special effects sucked"

Film stars have historically performed within and through cinematic genres (Dyer). A genre, as a rich source of rhetorically textured expectations, provides the important set of associations that allow a celebrity to function almost wordlessly. Political rhetoric, of course, comes with its own generic conventions, a set of conventions that have been dry at best in recent history. In the cases of Schwarzenegger and Ventura, the genres of political advertising received a massive overhaul; just as a film star brings a transformative set of associations to a new film, they brought their own histories to their campaigns and in the process pulled political rhetoric into a whole range of hybrid narrative forms. Campaign advertisements tend to be relatively uncomplicated bits of media, produced on comparatively low budgets and in short periods of time. The two-dimensionality of many political campaigns doesn't allow for much depth or complexity of meaning; most television advertisements rely on tedious imagery and clichéd phrases. Much of this predictability is because political advertisements tag along after cinematic and televisual genre conventions, but political ads are also predictable because candidates are averse to appearing risky, irresponsible, or too far from an imagined mainstream. Ventura and Schwarzenegger, of course, were able to offer fresher material than most political candidates. Both action-adventure cinema and professional wrestling, as genres, occupy positions in an implicit cultural hierarchy. This implicit hierarchy guarantees that any of their unique tropes and associations immediately suggest a rebellious undertone when they are imported into a genre as staid and formal as political advertising.

Ventura's offbeat television ads explicitly engaged existing genres, as Glenn Richardson points out in this analysis of one Ventura ad:

An ad created for Reform Party candidate Jesse Ventura for the 1998 Minnesota gubernatorial contest is difficult to analyze, save in terms of genre. It featured two children playing with action figures (Jesse "The Body" and "Special Interest Man").



Figure 1. Still from one of Jesse Ventura's television spots (Ventura for governor campaign, 1998).

An awareness of cartoon action dramas allows one to favorably fill in the details the ad seeks to convey: that Mr. Ventura will be a strong independent voice for Minnesota. Absent such knowledge, two children playing with dolls would seemingly fail to convey a political message at all. (613)

Richardson, however, underestimates the fine-grained ironic discrimination of the viewers of this particular ad; the ad evokes not the genre of "cartoon action drama" so much as the genre of "action figure advertisement." The rampant proliferation of textual television patterns has quickly outpaced a literary-type taxonomy of genres such as Richardson's. But not only is the ad posing itself as an entertaining object of consumption by parodying advertising itself, it is also evoking a type of generic conflict that is specific to Ventura's celebrity persona. The conventions of genre can only get us so far, and then, ultimately, the connotative framework of Ventura's animated participation in professional wrestling's ongoing narratives of good and evil is what makes this ad pop.

It seems clear that, unlike the majority of political candidates, our heroes' advertisements, debating styles, speeches, and position papers did more than evoke the emotions and narrative structure of generic cultural texts. They also marshaled their own particular possessed, historical media personas. These prominent bodies of work generated the narrative conditions in which the campaigns were read as populist interventions against an elite political system. Ventura was running for office as an outsider candidate against two career politicians with deep and long-standing

ties to the Republican and Democratic parties.² The Reform Party in Minnesota had previously garnered over 5 percent of the vote in a statewide election for a Senate spot, automatically placing Ventura, the Reform Party candidate, on the ballot (Lentz). Because of this previous success, he was guaranteed access to a series of debates, an opportunity that ended up providing fertile ground for the play of his bombastic oppositional role. Commentary on the debates concluded that he was able to reinforce his outsider status in direct confrontation with the other candidates.

Public campaign financing laws set the terms for the unusual structure of the Minnesota gubernatorial election in 1998, creating the situation in which a true outsider could appear in the contest as a type of renegade outlaw figure. Progressive campaign financing laws in Minnesota cap spending for all candidates at \$2.1 million and guarantee equal portions (approximately \$310,000 each in 1998) to all candidates procuring at least 5 percent of the vote (Lentz). Ventura's campaign would have been doomed to obscurity without the mainstream media advertising this public money allowed him. Additionally, liberal same-day voter registration policies permitted the mass inclusion of "outsider voters." Ventura's overt and intentional outsider positions galvanized a variety of disaffected voters who may not otherwise have been able to participate in his narrative.

Similarly, Schwarzenegger's victory is likely a product of the specific context in which he ran as a Republican in a recall election without surviving the rigors of a Republican primary (Fineman and Breslau). Schwarzenegger's reliance on a heavily bipartisan platform (pro-gay, pro-gun control, pro-choice) allowed him to capture 23 percent of the Democratic vote while leaning heavily on the old guard of California Republican support (Fineman and Breslau). Additionally, Schwarzenegger was running a high-speed race (only sixty-two days of campaigning) against a governor who was isolated into bearing the brunt of the public's anger and frustration with a lagging economy, statewide budget deficit, and ongoing energy crisis. While the recall process and the necessary campaigning it entailed undoubtedly exacerbated these problems, perception of political insider Gray Davis's exceptional inadequacy and ineffectiveness was clearly instrumental in the ultimately overwhelming success of Schwarzenegger's bid for the governorship.³ The recall election itself was populated by an outrageous 135 candidates, including a variety of pseudo-celebrities (actor Gary Coleman, talking head

Ariana Huffington, *Hustler* magnate Larry Flynt, and porn star Mary Cook) who drew attention to the contest and made Schwarzenegger's candidacy seem both reasonable and historic (Shelley).

Ultimately, then, each of these elections was itself framed as an unusual intervention into politics as usual, a framing that put these actors into the role of making a drastic intervention against an entrenched elite political machine that was failing under its own weight. Each was supported by concrete populist election laws that were intended to promote a more inclusive or grassroots approach to the political process. Consequent media coverage of these nontraditional elections was scrambled to begin with and permitted these candidates a great deal of straightforward oppositional posturing without concrete policy proposals. In other words, they were cast in familiar roles but as part of a profoundly popular innovation in the genre of the "gubernatorial election." The following sections explore what these familiar roles were and how they resulted in a new hybrid genre of populist politics.

Transforming a Body into a Mind: Actors' Prerogatives and Transgressions

In the next two sections I examine some of the specific ways in which Ventura and Schwarzenegger drew on generic conventions and their own accrued personas to generate effective political rhetoric. The first of these was telling a compelling story about their abilities to metamorphose. During their election campaigns political commentators were deeply skeptical about both of our heroes' ability to complete the transition in the public eye from masters of muscular might to effective political leaders. The common response to the prospect of this transformation was to disdain the mere possibility or to disbelieve the legitimacy of such a transformation, and it is this disbelief that serves as the grounds for both accusations of demagoguery. The business of these two performers, however, has always been one of complex reversals that play on the themes of doubling and transgressions of appearance.

Ventura's performance as a professional wrestler thoroughly prepared his constituency to accept ongoing reconstitutions of his persona. Professional wrestling is uniquely situated as a simulacrum of the real; it uses the conventions of objective sports reporting to manifest the realness of an exhibition that nearly all spectators know objectively to be staged (Barthes; Mazer). In recent years

the heightened popularity of reality TV has expanded the ability of audiences to not just suspend disbelief but to actively participate in the production of belief and reality (Andrejevic). There is always a real outside to televised reality footage, hours or even days of filmed activity that the audience never sees. The strategic placement of specific scenes manufactures dramatic tension just as it does in overtly, completely scripted dramas. The audience, however, has to disavow the missing footage and replace it with certain assumptions about the nature of the spectacle—most importantly, that nothing significant happens off-camera. This wouldn't be all that interesting, except that in the case of reality TV audiences have a fulfilled expectation that they are witnessing something more real than an expressly fictional narrative.

It is this believing production that audiences must also utilize when they consume political campaigning, which is supposed to be more real than fictional narrative. Even though we know that political posturing is staged for very specific ends, those who attend to it choose to participate in the spectacle of the campaign as though it were unmediated by political machinations, all the while recognizing and accepting the presence of those machinations—or even taking the machinations themselves as the object of interest, as many celebrity watchers do (Gamson). The representational populist figure is not an *abstraction* of the demands it figures but is instead a *symbol* that constitutes people's allegiance without directly representing the reality of their material demands. In other words, in both “reality” programming and in politics audiences accept a unified, coherent figuration that references real events without claiming to correspond to the total truth of those events. Audiences were clearly prepared to absorb and reproduce Ventura's newly chosen role as a politician. Many of them, after all, were accustomed to accepting the reality of his chosen personas in staged environments as having real value as representations.

Schwarzenegger's identity transversals are more cinematic and spectacular. The larger scope of a California election comes into play; the vast majority of California's exposure to statewide politicians is through television advertisements, so voters' primary access to Schwarzenegger was through a visual medium that strongly echoed how they had experienced his presence in films. In addition to claiming a variety of progressively more impressive roles in his real life, his cinematic characters have frequently played on notions of multiple identities that encapsulate compet-

ing forces (Hayes). Albert Liu summarizes this tendency very well by arguing that “the total presentation of his persona seems to comprise a fractured intersection of effects of relating technology, recent history and representations of violence that underscore the instability of his gender configurations and his relentless engagement in new or hypothetical forms of identity” (58–59). Schwarzenegger's penchant for characters and films that play on ideas of hidden meanings, metamorphoses, and the shifting ground of identity have laid a groundwork for a voting audience to imagine new roles for him. As Schwarzenegger claimed directly, his candidacy was an extension of reveling in “*hypothetical* forms of identity” and his own ongoing potential to transform (Breslau). *Total Recall* (1990) is a blockbuster example of how Schwarzenegger's character can effectively undergo a variety of identity transformations, memory recoveries, and allegiance shifts that demonstrate the political amnesia that allowed for a new way of imagining his representational role (Grady; Liu). In *True Lies* (1994) Schwarzenegger lives a secret life as a government agent, a life so secret that his wife is unaware of it. Not only do these transformations generally involve radical identity reconfigurations, they are invariably more effective and successful configurations vis-à-vis the problems of the moment. The classically appealing Schwarzenegger biography (immigrant comes to America with no English and only the shirt on his back, ends up as a multibillionaire) lent the perfect political counterpoint to the cinematic narratives, setting up the citizens of California to wait with breathless anticipation when he decided to metamorphose into the “The Governor.”

“My Governor Can Beat Up Your Governor”

In addition to drawing on elements of their personas that encouraged voters to see them as capable of transforming themselves into politicians, these performers also clearly drew on their physical prowess. After the election of Jesse Ventura, the streets of Minneapolis were flooded with T-shirts carrying the above slogan. While this impulsive identification may seem juvenile, it clearly reveals the way Ventura's physical form produced allegiance among the citizens of Minnesota. In the last twenty years feminist scholars in all disciplines have theorized the body into submission. The problems and pleasures of its signification have been examined and expounded upon endlessly, and I have no intention of offering an end to that process here.

In an age when presidential work-out routines and doctor's visits are public knowledge, we need to affirm what studies of performance, corporeality, gender, queerness, and identity in general have been telling us for years: the body is a crucial site of laboring over the self to visually perform a socially constituted identity. The hulking muscularity of our heroes cannot go unremarked; they are unaccountably unwieldy specimens of rigorously constructed masculine physicality, and their careers and campaign rhetoric are virtually inseparable from the visibility of their bodily discipline.

Jesse "The Body" Ventura (a name that has been copy-righted by its owner) renounced his wrestling moniker early in his campaign, choosing instead to position himself on the historically more advantageous side of the Cartesian divide. He soon declared repeatedly to anyone who mistook him for his earlier incarnation that he was now Jesse "The Mind" Ventura because he was ostensibly in the process of making his living with his mind instead of his body. Nevertheless, the media clung to the original name. Ventura himself was fairly strategic about his deployment of the two variations. Repeated use of the phrase "The Body Politic" during Ventura's campaign (by his own advocates, as the title of his autobiography, and by a variety of media sources) immediately suggests the early modern vision of the sovereign as the representative of the collective mass of the citizenry, a description of celebrity power that emphasizes the natural unity of the collective under the sign of a representative figure (Kantorowicz; Ventura, *I Ain't Got Time*). The almost absurd literality of incarnating the body politic with a representative figure so well known for his visual physical presence suggests that this worn-out catchphrase might still contain an important grain of interpretive vibrancy in an era of celebrity politics. In other words, the natural unity assumed by the trope of the body politic is also the unity that makes possible the populist form of politics in which disparate interests and purposes are collected in the name of a singular figure that represents the people. Because "the body" is a trope that relies on notions of immediate intimate presence and essential human vigor, it is an unusually potent figure of democratic representation, one that also suggests an essential natural political unity without requiring *actual* essential unity in terms of land, blood, race, or religion. In other words, the bodily figure of a powerful or muscular leader stands in for and replaces a politics of belonging with a politics of physical self-development. But physical self-development is not

political simply because Schwarzenegger and Ventura were models of individual political subjectivity, although they may also be that. Instead, in their campaigns they figured a collective subject—the *people*, the collective body of those who were in opposition to opaque bureaucratic politics as usual. So how did this play out in specific terms?

Schwarzenegger began his complex career by successfully competing as a bodybuilder. His cinematic career was launched with the production of *Pumping Iron* (1977), a documentary film about the contest for his sixth Mr. Olympia title in 1975. The majority of his feature films rely heavily on notions of hypercompetitive zero-sum physical power. Throughout them he is an army of one, a force of nature that destroys everything in its path. The binaristic tropes of good and evil used in his films are often cliché (if frequently reversed and hidden), and his role in the proceedings is generally to mobilize the force necessary to produce narrative motion. While this may seem tautological, given that he is "the star of the picture," it seems significant that it is the massive force of his body itself that drives the characterizations and subsequent actions. Even in films that are not forceful action flicks it is his overwhelming muscular physical presence that manufactures the comedic pretense; it's just "so funny" that such a pumped-up guy is Danny DeVito's brother in *Twins* (1988), pregnant in *Junior* (1994), or surrounded by children in *Kindergarten Cop* (1990).

Arnold Schwarzenegger's body is the vector of his public persona, beginning with his first public appointment as head of George H. W. Bush's fitness council and his long-time claims about the political significance of rigorous physical discipline and its relationship to authoritative, hierarchical political structure (Rosellini). While his personal life narrative fits snugly into conventional ideas about what is possible in America through hard work and intelligence, it is his masculine body that provides the life narrative with the dimensions necessary for him to be read as truly decisive, dominant, dynamic, and commanding. Similarly, Ventura's personal narrative (although relative in scale, as California is to Minnesota) begins with a military story, and not just any military term of service but training as a navy SEAL. Such training is a personal hallmark of a high level of motivation, rigor, and exclusivity. Ventura's subsequent career trajectory encompassed varied and complex forays into hypermasculine physical activities, professional wrestling being the clearest manifestation of the integration of his body and his will to conquer (Cass).



Figure 2. Schwarzenegger borne on the shoulders of the people (*Pumping Iron*, 1977).

Without laboring too much over the minutiae of these men's physical assemblies, I want to point at the ways in which the forceful, rigorously constructed masculine body reveals its subject. Each muscle group, each gesture against material resistance, has a known and measured product: the visible bodies of these representatives. The *masculine body* is most often read as the *human body*, and in the case of a rigorously worked body that defines itself through muscular distinction it's the original body, the body whose regimen and force are measured and contained within those measurements. The solid, known, performing bodies of the heroes at hand may have been constituted through relations of competition, aggression, or dominance, but they reach the field of politics as those who are "human," those who exteriorize a neutral and representative subject position without the deceptions of imperfection and context.

Our heroes' public trajectories are confirmed by viewing their bodies. In these two, physical perfectibility becomes synonymous with transparency, honesty, and the denial that anything they said might be calculated or rhetorically manipulative. Ventura was frequently characterized as being nearly one-dimensional: "Ventura quickly revealed himself as unwilling to keep nearly anything floating through his head from leaving his mouth" (Lentz 2). Similarly, the clarity and predictability of Schwarzenegger's ambitions have often been conflated with the directness of his physical presence. A segment from *Pumping Iron* is particularly illustrative of how easily his burgeoning fame for physical superiority was made indistinct from the



Figure 3. The visibility of Schwarzenegger's ambition (*Pumping Iron*, 1977).

enduring perfection of humanist ideas about subjectivity. A portrait of Schwarzenegger is being carried through a pulsing crowd, face up. The camera shot is from a bird's-eye view, tracking the progress of the portrait as it moves through the crowd. The voice-over is Schwarzenegger's response to an unknown question: "I was always dreaming about very powerful people—dictators and things like that. I was always very impressed by people who could be remembered for hundreds of years or even like Jesus, you know, for thousands of years being remembered." As the portrait finds its destination on the other side of the crowd, the cut is to Schwarzenegger flexing and posing on top of a mountain. His blond hair is waving gently, he is smiling in profile, and he is backlit by the sun. There is no sign of human civilization; he is, of course, unclothed except for his briefs. The background musical lyrics repeat the phrase, "Everybody wants to live forever." The purity of his body in conjunction with notions of political power conflates perfect physical form and enduring humanness. Schwarzenegger's ambitions are transparent, and his presumed prowess and force of will just as obvious. Schwarzenegger's charisma and utilization of his body are compounded by his lack of guile; everything about him is knowable and visible.

Ventura's campaign for governor capitalized on his history as a known body even more explicitly. In one of his most popular television advertisements the camera closely traces the lines and muscles of his all-but-nude form (although a body double was used during filming),



Figures 4 and 5. Ventura in a television advertisement for the gubernatorial race (Ventura for governor campaign, 1998).



finally making its way to Ventura's face. His downcast eyes rise to meet the camera's gaze, and he winks impudently. The voice-over that follows his contours throughout the ad speaks of his personal background and his most prominent political opinions. The combination of nudity and the softness of the voice gives the impression of revealing him and of inscribing a politico-intellectual subjectivity onto the visual body witnessed by the spectator. But perhaps the most significant aspect of the advertisement is the pose of his body—the pose of Rodin's *The Thinker*. The background music is an Italian aria, evoking a sense of aesthetic refinement as well as the sculpted intentionality of classical democratic ideals. The simultaneity of bodily discipline and knowing thought pivots around Ventura's forceful persona to complete his human wholeness.

In a context where the functioning of government is increasingly opaque to an inattentive public, the impression of clarity and transparency is a more real indicator of truthfulness than any informed or genuinely explicative discussion of policy proposals. While deliberation might have a certain purity and simplicity as a democratic ideal, in practice it is messy and unsatisfying, and, most important, it is conducted behind closed doors. The familiarity of our heroes' bodies in the gaze of a continuously watching public was enough to provide the appearance of demystifying their perspectives, encounters, and motives. This familiarity and transparent essential human forcefulness enabled them to serve as the symbols of populism opposed to established insider bureaucracies.

Populism and the Political Machine: Audiences' Ways of Knowing

One need not be an actor with a visual record of populist imagery to position oneself against entrenched bureaucratic government. The United States has a history of successful political outsiders who have styled themselves as populists: Barack Obama, Andrew Jackson, Jimmy Carter, H. Ross Perot, and a host of others have built notable attempts at elected office on the premise that they are free of previous political entanglements and power structures and thus articulate promises of more pure representation of "the people's" interests. The American political landscape responds favorably to the idea of politics as a dirty business, and interlopers often surf the tide of antigovernment sentiments with assurances of fiscal reform and "letting the light shine in" on the obscure practices of government. For both



Figure 6. Ventura as *The Thinker* (Ventura for governor campaign, 1998).

of these candidates, being an entertainer instead of a career politician suggested outsider status to begin with, and this was enhanced by the particularities of their personas and performance genres (Cass; Gatehouse; Fineman).

Yvonne Tasker has argued that in the action-adventure genre the hero is often marginal to the established order yet dominant in his attempts to assert his belonging to that order and in the process transforming it, often through a strongly populist logic. This type of muscular cinema has often been described as "dumb movies for dumb people," a cultural classification that locates the action hero as a representative of a denigrated class that is excluded from more reasoned participation in the political order: "The popular audience emerges here as a powerful figure of the dispossessed, signaling those groups who have been effectively silenced and then designated too 'dumb' to speak" (107). Critical reception of the action-adventure genre has often been increasingly scathing in direct proportion to the level of popularity of a given film, suggesting that it is popularity itself that connotes a lack of legitimate cultural value. The action hero often condenses this set of associations within film narratives so that his forceful body is the symbol of popular opposition to a corrupt order that excludes a particular class of political subjects. In the case of professional wrestling, these class connotations are even more pronounced. Wrestling is considered the bottom of the cultural barrel, an ongoing circular spectacle of violence and sexuality with no redeeming moral or ethical value (Sammon). Not only is wrestling a paragon of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, it also foregrounds the status of

the wrestlers as workers who are perpetually subject to the vicissitudes of corporate configurations (Sammon). Both the action-adventure genre and professional wrestling occupy a cultural location that positions them in opposition to a more legitimate or refined class of culture.

In the case of Ventura, his status as a “bad boy” within the already marginal professional-wrestling circuit enhanced a rebellious image that suggested a capacity to represent “the people” within the halls of “the establishment.” Ventura’s campaign manager claimed this position in direct terms: “This is the closest thing you’re going to see to a revolution in this country” (*Citizen Jesse*), and Schwarzenegger’s campaign manager was particularly lucid in his explanation of their “revolutionary” strategy:

The first thing [Don Sipple] did was try to tap into voter anger by changing the Schwarzenegger campaign into a movement. Schwarzenegger campaign signs—and they sprang up everywhere—never asked citizens to “vote for” Schwarzenegger. They always asked them to “join” him. “This was about voter discontent,” Sipple says. “The public sees politics as a game, a game that benefits only the political ruling class. That is what their discontent is about. Our campaign was about creating a movement for change. ‘Join Arnold’ was our brand. We wanted people to join a movement, and it resonated.” (Simon)

This explanation of Arnold’s expressly populist rhetoric is a vivid representation of how populist sentiment need not have an agenda to summon allegiance to a symbolic representation. It also suggests that Schwarzenegger was effectively understood as a figure that represented a mass subject—if he were not already a collective mass, how else could he be “joined”? Arnold’s campaign did not attempt to address voters as people with material needs; instead, it appealed to their opposition to the existing order *in his name*. One of the key elements of current campaigning strategies reflecting this trend is an ongoing effort to produce emotional intimacy between candidates and citizens. The personal shortcomings of politicians are ceasing to be liabilities and are beginning to become points of identification for their voting audiences; voters are encouraged to develop forgiving interpersonal relationships with politicians in hopes that they will presume the politicians’ allegiance to them personally. When audiences supplement their understandings of politics with their understandings of personality, the features of individual identity become metaphors for describing the nature of political collectives, which in turn facilitates individual identification with the collective.

Audiences had extensive experience watching both of our populist leaders—they had been watching them act forcefully for years. And in the process of engaging their narratives and following their transformations, our heroes had been made more “real,” more immediate, knowable, and transparent than the political machine they were running against. We should remember that in both races they were up against uncharismatic career politicians who were weighed down and made invisible within the machinery they had devoted their lives to supporting (Barone; Breslau; Fineman; Gillespie; Simon). It was the opacity and mystery of political deliberation that our heroes confronted with the spectacular simplicity of their long-known, oppositional bodies and their simple, unvarnished ways of speaking (Power; Ventura, “Jesse Has Advice”). They gave the audience an opportunity to collectively insert itself into an emotional, high-profile narrative as part of a collective heroic action against the villain of an exclusive, elite political process, an opportunity that many people seized. In fact, it appears that the appeal of entering the narrative on either side of the election contest was far more appealing than the typical rewards of voting. Even those who voted against Ventura and Schwarzenegger seemed to be drawn in by the creation of a high-profile oppositional dialogue; voter turnout for all parties peaked sharply with these elections (Gray and Wattenberg; Lentz). The audience, it seems, chose to identify with the election as a dramatic pseudo-cinematic struggle, and it voted to become *part of the action narrative*.

Another way to put it might be to say that voting audiences voted to become part of the narrative of history. Voting audiences performed this role not in the mode of individuals but as a collective actor: the people. Schwarzenegger and Ventura each suggested an image of himself as an allegory of “the people” in the role that that collective body could play in the historical moment. That role may be most appropriately understood by attention to the significance of their bodily regimens and their engagement in the practice known as bodybuilding. Bodybuilding serves as a sort of metaphor for the operation of ascribing power to the laboring process: “Through its language and activity bodybuilding subculture makes a shrine of labor. Body ‘building,’ along with the related notion of ‘working’ out, connotes construction and blue-collar labor, as does the industrial imagery associated with ‘pumping iron.’ . . . Despite the absence of laboring class origins, bodybuilding nevertheless fetishizes labor by creating something that

appears as both a byproduct of labor and a precondition for labor: the muscled physique” (Klein 249). The connotations of the impressively built body clearly function not only to realize the fantasy of neutral political subjectivity but also to imply the laboring capacity of that body—an effective populist trope. The role of the transparent, laboring body is easily put in opposition to perceptively privileged and opaque governmental and corporate elites who are the targets of populist political rhetoric. I am indebted, once more, to Liu for his perceptive and clairvoyant consideration of Schwarzenegger’s oeuvre and its significance:

To the extent, then, that his strength does not act but only manifests itself, to the extent that he accomplishes his will through others, and to the extent that he resists the production of a work, Schwarzenegger replays the conventional themes of the theory of the sovereign. His films are productions in which he works simply by appearing: There he properly *acts*, not in order to simulate anything, but as the sheer display of potentialized force. Like no one else in election politics, he is a kind of *sovereign deposit* in the democratic state. (62)

If Schwarzenegger is a display of sovereign force, the populist spin on this is that he is a display of sovereign force and physical labor-power. This is the reenvisioning of “The Body Politic” that Ventura’s aides and commentators so blithely referred to. Thomas Hobbes’s original portrait of the body politic presumed that the sovereign represented the collective force of the people. Laclau accords a special place for the representational capacity of the sovereign because the most vivid expression of the unified singularity required by populism is an individual leader. But a populist leader is not a sovereign, because he or she is not in a position of institutional or juridical power. He or she is sovereign by virtue of his or her ability to collectively represent the people in the realm of pure rhetoric without the force of law behind him or her. Conditions of extreme plurality and institutional opacity require this kind of powerful, transcendently signifying figure to animate politics because conditions of participation in decision making are so rarely available or sought after. So then, for Laclau:

To some extent, we are in a situation comparable to that of Hobbes’s sovereign: in principle there is no reason why a corporate body could not fulfill the functions of the Leviathan; but its very plurality shows that it is at odds with the indivisible nature of sovereignty. So the only natural sovereign could be, for Hobbes, an individual. The difference between that situation and the one we are discussing is that Hobbes is talking

about actual ruling, while we are talking about constituting a signifying totality, and the latter does not lead automatically to the former. Nelson Mandela’s role as the symbol of the nation was compatible with a great deal of pluralism within his movement. However, the symbolic unification of the group around an individuality—and here I agree with Freud—is inherent to the formation of a “people.” (100)

In each case, the candidate was able to offer himself as a singular visual representation of “the people,” prompting allegiance as an aspect of political representation.⁴ By arguing that the power of Ventura’s and Schwarzenegger’s representational capacity is a product of their populist personas, we run the risk of collapsing the distinction between the political and aesthetic notions of representation, but it is precisely their convergence in this case that will help us complicate Laclau’s theory of populism and discover whether there was any hegemonic depth to the demands that may have been collected under the names of these potentially demagogic celebrities. When a representative leader is a symbol of the collective instead of a representative that corresponds to the practical will or interests of the people, the leader provides a powerful and persuasive image of the collective will acting into history, but there is no “will of the people” that exists prior to the moment of collective identification.

Deliberative democratic theory is the expression of a political hope that “the people” might be able to represent themselves directly in a decision-making process that is unmediated by an authoritative representational apparatus. Laclau’s vision of populist democratic logic, on the other hand, presupposes that figurative representation is the inescapable condition of participation in democratic politics. What Laclau does not do, however, is take the next step of asking what the contemporary conditions of our political way of life actually are. The fact that our process of political representation is constituted in the visual and narrative registers means that we must pay increasing attention to how exactly the tropes of political theory and democratic ideals can be translated into visual image and narrative. Because theories of collective identity and individual political subjectivity (like sovereign power) have been so central to democratic ideals, celebrities are increasingly in a position to narrativize and visually render those ideals as they represent collective identities. On the flip side, politicians without entertainment or sports backgrounds may also increasingly locate themselves in narratives of history with roles for collective subjects.

But this still leaves open our initial question about the hegemonic legitimacy of these celebrity campaigns. I would like to suggest that what both Ventura and Schwarzenegger offered democracy was a refiguration of the space of political representation, not in the sense of offering citizens an opportunity to express their wills and individual interests but rather in the sense that they created a politics that negotiated with representations that are truly popular—with all of the problematic connotations of the term. When we take the operative characteristics of Ventura and Schwarzenegger as traits that were voluntarily and retrospectively ascribed to the collective subject of the people, we can see these characteristics as a set of powerful political ideals about collective life and what we should be doing together: transforming, progressing, laboring, acting against entrenched bias and elitism, and making politics more transparent. We hardly need to add that subsequent administrations of Ventura and Schwarzenegger couldn't really be said to actualize these ideals, but perhaps there is something hopeful about the idea of a politics that takes popular ideals seriously in the process of envisioning collective action. When considering the role of celebrities in politics, we should keep open the question of whether the representative capacities of any individual also enable us to envision how popular ideals can be actualized. Meanwhile, it is quite clear that the significance of celebrity politics must be understood in the terms of the specific star persona and his or her body of work and life narrative. Film stars can't claim a monopoly on celebrity, but it is the work we've done to understand the ways they produce meaning through genres, new media forms, consistent character types, lifestyle tropes, and visual appearance that will also allow us to understand the important political and social meanings of other types of celebrity.

Notes

1. This quotation is taken from a formal interview recorded and released on video by Ventura's campaign. Ventura alleged that he prepared no notes of any kind before his interviews, speeches, or debates. During his campaign and in subsequent interviews he claimed that such preparation detracts from the legitimacy and honesty of politicians' portrayal of themselves and their opinions. His claim on "real" discourse is profoundly unmatched. Also see Ventura's letter to Schwarzenegger, published in *Time* magazine.

2. The Democratic candidate was Hubert H. "Skip" Humphrey III. The Republican candidate was Norm Coleman, an unfortunate Minnesota politician who was deflated by another celebrity opponent—Al Franken—in the protracted Senate race of 2008–09.

3. Schwarzenegger won the election with 48.6 percent of the vote. The official breakdown of the election results is available online from the California secretary of state at <http://vote2003.sos.ca.gov/Returns/summary.html>.

4. The potential circularity of this mode of representation is perhaps best captured by Schwarzenegger himself, who is quoted as having claimed, "I will be a governor for the people for a change because, because I want to represent the people because the only thing that counts for me is the people" (Stephen).

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