The Audio-Animatronic Candidate

Frank Rich, **New York Times.** Oct 12, 2003.

I DON'T care what anyone says. It's always depressing when the circus folds its tent and leaves town.

So forgive me for mourning the passing of the recall election in California. Maybe it wasn't the greatest show on earth, but in its lasting impact it may prove one of the more transformative cultural events of our young century. Eastern snobs who airily condescended to the spectacle as merely another example of left-coast madness just didn't get it. As goes California, so goes the nation. It's Disneyland, not Colonial Williamsburg, that prefigures our future, and the action-packed recall ride was nothing if not the apotheosis of the Magic Kingdom. It was fun, it was instructive, it was expensive, it was hawked relentlessly on television, it starred an Audio-Animatronic action figure. It even had product placement for its leading man's vehicle of choice, the Hummer. And it will set off a chain of unanticipated consequences whose full meaning will become apparent only with time.

To see the recall as Disneyland, you have to remember the platonic idea of Disneyland at its inception. From its opening day in Anaheim in July 1955 – 48 Julys before Darrell Issa's recall petitions hit paydirt – it was never meant to be just another tourist destination. It was virtual reality before virtual reality was cool – a visionary's idea of how American life might be conducted. Walt Disney had long despised the rowdiness that up until then had defined amusement parks, "dirty, phony places run by rough-looking people," as he characterized them. He wanted to build instead a beautiful, phony place run by nice-looking people: an alternative America that he could script and control down to the tiniest detail of its idyllic Main Street U.S.A. and whose sovereignty no citizen would or could challenge.

In 2003, as Pixar drives hand-crafted animation out of the movies, it's that vision of a hermetically sealed simulation of democracy that is proving to be Walt's most lasting legacy. The original notion of Disneyland lives today not only in the first park, its satellites and its many imitators; its influence can be found in planned and gated communities, in Rouse-developed downtowns, in the carefully scripted "reality" programs of network television, in the faux-urban ambiance of a shopping mall near you. It lives in Celebration, Fla., the model suburban town that Disney built in 1994 and has tried to manage with theme park-like control. But up until Arnold Schwarzenegger, no one had succeeded (though many have tried) in creating a powerful political movement according to the Disney park aesthetic: a content-free campaign, as hollow inside as a movie set's facade, that enjoyed an unimpeded romp to victory until scandal cast a shadow at the finish line.

Forget California. For America, the Arnold juggernaut is here to stay. Measured against the disappointing returns of "Terminator 3," his political career has far more box-office clout than his waning future as a Hollywood leading man. In a mere two months, he did far more than George W. Bush's touchy-feely "compassionate conservatism" to demolish his party's image as the nation's moral scold. (For starters, it's hard to imagine the White House talking up its crusade for abstinence-only sex education with Arnold on the team.) He fronted a campaign of such seamless make-believe that reality could barely intrude even when it came knocking at the door wearing a swastika. Though the fusion of entertainment with politics is an American perennial, Helen Gahagan Douglas, Jesse

Ventura and of course Ronald Reagan all had passionate ideological convictions to go with their showmanship. Unlike the Gipper, the Groper has none, except a belief in his own stardom. He only bothered to vote in two of the last eight state elections.

While it was Mr. Schwarzenegger's screen celebrity that got him on the political stage, it's the discipline of his campaign that made him fly. Its scrupulously bogus depiction of an actual political candidacy, as concocted by his staff of Imagineers, resembled a genuine democratic phenomenon in the same way that Disneyland's Main Street resembles an actual Main Street.

The candidate's "town meetings" were open to invited guests only. (Not even a game show retains such tight control of its extras.) Until the final days, "meeting the press" meant spurning the actual press entirely for TV entertainers like Oprah and Jay Leno. Political "dialogue" for Mr. Schwarzenegger meant dialogue akin to that of actors in costume playing Disney cartoon characters: he plucked well-worn tag lines from his films and shuffled them into crowd-pleasing medleys of his greatest hits. A debate? The only one he attended allowed him to deliver more scripted lines, written in response to questions provided in advance; he mouthed them with all the spontaneity mustered by "Abe Lincoln" at the Hall of Presidents in Orlando. The star's physical image was just as painstakingly manufactured, easily fulfilling the Disney dictums postulated by the cultural historian Thomas Hine in his classic study "Populuxe": "No natural aging is allowed in Disneyland. . . . Everything must be artificial so that this more intense feeling of reality can be achieved." (Or such was the case if you didn't look too closely at the Arnold neck.)

As for the young Arnold's ruminations about Hitler, sure there was fire to go with the smoke. Otherwise, why would the star have overpaid $1.2 million in 1991 for the exclusive rights to "Pumping Iron" and its outtakes? But whatever his sloppy words about the Fuhrer back in the 1970's, his statements about governance in general were more revealing and more to the point of his campaign. Mr. Schwarzenegger's credo was laid out quite specifically in his autobiography, "Arnold: The Education of a Bodybuilder": "A certain amount of people are meant to be in control. Ninety-five percent of the people have to be told what to do, have to be given orders."

This philosophy, which he has repeated elsewhere and never retracted, sums up his politics far more than conventional conservative-vs.-liberal, Republican-vs.-Democrat paradigms. The budget deficit? Failing public schools? Mr. Schwarzenegger will make things right by terminating the malefactors from on high; let the other 95 percent of "the people" get out of the way. What was the plan? "Hasta la vista, car tax!" Such know-nothingness is not Nazism; it's too idea-free even to qualify as fascism-lite. What the Arnold platform really amounted to was a steroid-inflated codification of the trust-me paternalism of Disney's Celebration.

A side effect of Mr. Schwarzenegger's campaign was that it so successfully wiped out distinctions between reality and its theme-park simulation that few, including the news media, could delineate one from the other by the end. Take the candidate's ardent surrogate, the actor Rob Lowe (please!). You'd think Mr. Lowe would have scant credibility in the political arena: his major previous brush with politics was being caught frolicking with "delegates" on an X-rated videotape shot during the 1988 Democratic convention. But now that the actor has been rehabilitated by fictional political service on "The West Wing" – a term in office that was also ended by a recall of sorts – he had the bonafides to testify on TV about the sanctity of the Schwarzenegger marriage in the campaign's

stormy final days. He did this not only on a pretend-news show, "The Daily Show With Jon Stewart," but on a real one, the "Today" show. Who could tell the difference? People should be worrying about California's bond rating rather than the candidate's personal behavior, he instructed Katie Couric. Amazingly, no one laughed.

The role played by the candidate's wife, Maria Shriver, was equally ambiguous. She was, we were told, "on leave from NBC News." Yet when she gave a speech to brand the accusations against her husband as false, the network that gave it the most airtime was MSNBC. Was this journalism or a clever replica of journalism? In Disneyland, such distinctions soon become meaningless. It's all "The Truman Show."

By the time The Los Angeles Times published its revelations of Mr. Schwarzenegger's alleged bullying of women, even the most moralistic media players had passed through the looking glass into Fantasyland. "I am willing to overlook frat boy behavior from 30 years ago," Bill O'Reilly told a radio caller, adding, "Most guys have done dopey things with women." So what if the incidents reported by The Times were as recent as three years ago, not 30, and were hardly the sort of activities most Americans associate with Dopey? As if on cue, the Schwarzenegger campaign produced a master of frat-boy movies as their man's character witness for his alleged misbehavior on the set of "Twins." Ivan Reitman, whose other credits include "Old School," "Road Trip" and "National Lampoon's Animal House," testified to The Times: "No raunchy stuff. People's families were there." End of story.

Last weekend, the candidate toyed with appearing on "60 Minutes," in emulation of the Clintons' Hail Mary pass after the Gennifer Flowers revelations, then thought better of the idea and went on his wife's network instead. "I never grabbed anyone," he told Tom Brokaw on "Dateline NBC," to which the newsman countered, "So you deny all those stories about grabbing?" Mr. Schwarzenegger's answer: "No, not all. I'm just saying this is not – this is not me." What was that again? The candidate was saying simultaneously that a) he never grabbed women; b) he grabbed some women; c) whoever grabbed those women was a mysterious interloper in his body. It's hard to imagine how any journalist, indeed any sentient listener, could parse the candidate's jabberwocky, an amalgam of denial, nondenial and nondenial denial all in the same thick mouthful.

The reason The Los Angeles Times's reports of Mr. Schwarzenegger's alleged misbehavior incited so little outrage is that they meshed perfectly with his campaign's alternative, theme-park incarnation of its candidate. "Yes, it is true I was on rowdy movie sets," Mr. Schwarzenegger said by way of explanation when first addressing the controversy – as if to say, so what do you expect? If your work place is a movie set, isn't everything that happens there, even actions that sound malevolent, a form of lighthearted play? If your most famous role is the Big Bad Wolf, then what's wrong with playing the Big Bad Wolf? Isn't it all as harmless in the end as a vicariously scary ride like "Pirates of the Caribbean"?

Fifteen women, all of them nobodies, had some nerve thinking they could shut the gates on Arnold's Tomorrowland just when the entire country was having such a blast.