

# Book Review: Deconstructing Brad Pitt

[blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2015/05/18/book-review-deconstructing-brad-pitt-by-schaberg-and-bennett/](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2015/05/18/book-review-deconstructing-brad-pitt-by-schaberg-and-bennett/)

18/05/2015

*The reactions evoked by images of and stories about Brad Pitt are many and wide-ranging: while one person might swoon or exclaim, another rolls his eyes or groans. How a single figure provokes such strong, often opposing emotions is a puzzle, one elegantly explored and perhaps even solved by Deconstructing Brad Pitt. This book allows the reader to enjoy the many analytical associations Pitt's image makes possible, writes **Helena Vieira**.*

**Deconstructing Brad Pitt. Christopher Schaberg and Robert Bennett (eds.). Bloomsbury. October 2014.**

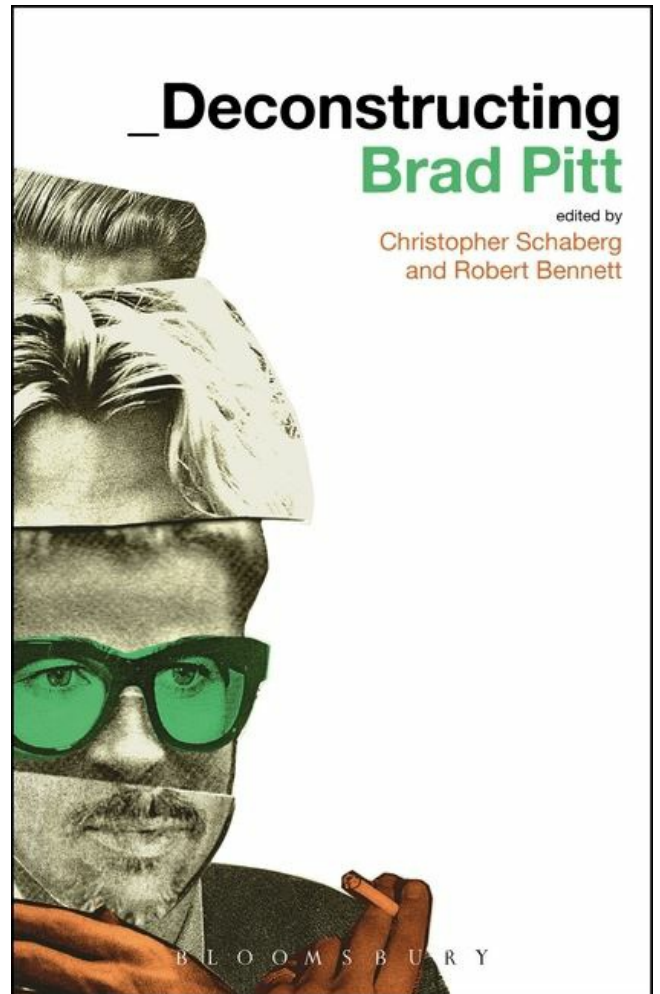
*Deconstructing Brad Pitt* will shock you the moment you find out it exists. The instinctive reaction to such a work is that academic analysis and Hollywood stardom do not make good bedfellows. This is exactly why you open the first page, and you find yourself hooked.

Christopher Schaberg and Robert Bennett, the editors, begin by describing the incredulous and often aggressive reaction the idea of the book received in academic circles. They even received hate e-mails from scholars. That the mere idea of a book can provoke such angry behaviour is a sign that it needs to be written, and makes it a must-read for anyone who cares about freedom of thought.

This anthology brings together academic authors who pore over different cross sections of the Brad Pitt phenomenon — actor; father; husband; sculpted abs, blond hair and chiselled jawline; celebrity; marketing savvy; marriage equality activist; philanthropist beloved for his work to save New Orleans post-Katrina (Brad Pitt for Mayor campaign); rags-to-riches; boy next door; laid-back personality.

It is a highly readable book, full of personal insights, first-person narratives and analyses based on the cultural studies literature. Something else makes reading this book a pleasant undertaking: you will likely want to intersperse the 14 chapters with a good number of hours watching Pitt's old movies so as to fully understand each author's point of view.

As you dig through the pages, you will find that much of the analysis centres on the characters Brad Pitt has played, which leads to the question: is this book really about Brad Pitt? If Pitt plays a character who can be described as an American romantic hero, who's the hero, he or the character?





**Brad Pitt at the premiere of *Burn After Reading*. Photo Credit: [Sam Javanrouh](#). CC-BY-NC.**

The romantic hero, as described by Elizabeth Abele, is a recurrent figure in Hollywood movies, an ideally beautiful man who “often attracts tragedy to himself or those with the misfortune to love him.”

Pitt played such a hero in at least two of his early movies: Paul, the main character in director Robert Redford’s *A River Runs through It* (1992,) and Tristan, in Edward Zwick’s *Legends of the Fall* (1994.) Abele analyses these characters under the prism of Leslie Fiedler’s *Love and Death and The American Novel*: “The typical male protagonist of our fiction has been a man on the run, harried into the forest and out to sea, down the river or into combat – anywhere to avoid ‘civilization’, which is to say the confrontation of a man and a woman which leads to the fall to sex, marriage and responsibility.”

***Legends of the Fall Trailer:***

About JW Player 6.12.4956...

00:00

00:00

00:00



How much responsibility does Brad Pitt have for the creation of these romantic heroes, or for their words and actions? Norman Maclean wrote the *A River Runs Through It* story based on his family history, while Richard Friedenberg wrote the script and Robert Redford directed the movie, distributed by Columbia Pictures. Isn’t the Paul character mostly their product?

Soon enough some authors attempt to address that question.

In dissecting the sub/urban dystopia *Fight Club*, Robert Bennett gives a thought-provoking analysis of Hollywood’s portrayal of countercultural movements and credits Brad Pitt’s playing Tyler Durden with the movie’s strength.

“... Pitt’s performance — and more specifically his performance of madness — provided a, if not *the*, key ingredient

or sine qua non, that transformed *Fight Club* into the voice of a new lost generation. Absent Pitt's signature style — his delivery, his wit, his body language, his intensity and his idiosyncratic devil-may-care nonchalance — *Fight Club* could have easily become *Rebel Without a Cause* without James Dean."

Bennett, part of the duo who edited the book, is clearly not impartial in his evaluation. He and co-editor Schaberg admit to their "obsessions with Pitt."

A counterpoint comes from Randy Laist, for whom "Pitt is more a celebrity than an actor." In his view, *Fight Club* is about the media-induced dream of becoming celebrities and "the crushing realities of an anonymous adulthood." That, Laist argues, contradicts with Brad Pitt being cast as one of the two main characters, since he epitomizes the yearning for stardom, having risen from middle class anonymity to become a millionaire and a celebrity.

### *Fight Club Trailer*

About JW Player 6.12.4956...

00:00

00:00

00:00



In Laist's analysis, the director's role in shaping the message stands out: "As if to explicitly communicate to the audience that the filmmakers are intentionally drawing on Pitt's celebrity status to make an ironic point, the background of one of the shots includes a marquee advertising *Seven Years in Tibet*, a Pitt vehicle from 1997."

Bob Batchelor turns the mirror back to Bennett and Schaberg when he implies that one's projections may play a big role in how they judge the actor (and, one could say, his characters): "It's not that Brad Pitt isn't talented. He's one of the most highly regarded film stars of his generation. But we're far less interested in any talent he possesses compared to our obsession with him as a person."

Regardless of whether Brad Pitt is responsible for how his characters behave, this book allows us to enjoy the many analytical associations his image makes possible. Pitt probably knew the ephemeral nature of beauty, and its tendency to cast a curse on credibility. Once having achieved fame, he steered away from heartthrob roles. Brian A. Sullivan writes about an interview in which the actor declared: "I wanted to [...] play someone with flaws."

This book may not convince us of Brad Pitt's transformative effect on the characters he plays, but it does show us that the one character Pitt has had the most control over is the actor named Brad Pitt.

---

**Helena Vieira** is the managing editor of the LSE's upcoming business blog. She has over 20 years of experience as a journalist in business media outlets such as Bloomberg and Dow Jones. She holds an M.S. in Strategic Communications from Columbia University (New York), and an M.A. in International Development from American University (Washington, D.C.). She tweets at [@helenavieira1](https://twitter.com/helenavieira1).

- Copyright 2013 LSE Review of Books