

# Episode 3: Taking Brad Pitt Very Seriously

If you've listened to any of this podcast before, you know that sometimes I like to spend an episode just working out what's going on with some guy. Sometimes, episodes about some guy are triggered because fame makes certain types of people go absolutely batshit crazy and I just want to look at their Wikipedia page and mutter "what the fuck" to myself over and over. But usually, it's because I've gone on a movie watching binge and have become unreasonably fixated on what one guy is doing from film to film.

In this case, it's because I went and saw *The Lost City*, which is a delightful rom com with an insane cast, including Sandra Bullock, Channing Tatum, Daniel Radcliffe and Brad Pitt. So many guys to choose from, so many rabbit holes to go down. And look, frankly given how much I love *Magic Mike XXL* (the greatest film ever made), it wouldn't be surprising if you assumed I was doing an episode on whatever Channing Tatum has going on. But I'm not. It's actually physically impossible for me to not be into a man with really long hair, and Brad Pitt has a beautiful wig on in this film.

Obviously, I watched like 15 Brad Pitt films immediately after and I have some things I want to unpack.

I'm Alex, this is Pop Culture Boner, the podcast edition, and today I'm thinking

about Brad Pitt.

Brad Pitt is quite private by the standards of contemporary fame. He doesn't have social media; the interviews he does are minimal and lean very heavily toward the classical long-form profile pieces that are afforded to stars of a certain level; even in a new media landscape, he rarely even pops up on the YouTube shows run by formerly print-only mastheads that have become mainstays of the publicity circuit now (think like GQ's 'Iconic characters' show, where actors review high points of their career). In spite of this, the content mill still loves a little bit of Brad Pitt and thousands of words are dedicated annually picking at his life, career and talent. I'm doing it right now!

But I want you to think about how famous Brad Pitt is and then compare it with how much you actually know about him. When I was telling my mum – a long-time Brad fan (or Bradley, as she calls him) – about this episode, and we spoke about his rise to fame, I was like "Was he an underwear model? I feel like he was an underwear model?" Turns out I was just confusing his washboard abs in *Thelma and Louise* with Calvin Klein ads from around the same era. He was not an underwear model. And look, I'm assuming someone listening to this podcast is a bigger Brad fan than me and is shouting to themselves "Alex, he did bit parts on *Dallas* before

hitting it big!" And that's ok, but I think the more important point here is to think about how you know that. How much of the information you know about Brad Pitt feels like it was imparted directly to you? From god's lips to your ears or whatever. In an era of celebrity where fame and influence can either mean you're in blockbuster films, or that 200,000 people watch you put on make-up regularly, it's kind of interesting to think about how those different types of fame are actually embodied. Micro-celebrities and influencers often achieve their fame through the intense documentation and detailing of their life, and the things you know about them are often spoken directly to you... or like... to a front-facing camera that you're watching.

Anyway, that train of thought lead me to the two things I want to consider about Brad Pitt – the first is the nature of his fame. Why is Brad Pitt so enduringly popular? What is it about this man that has elevated him to perpetually discussed and mythologised icon? And then the second is perhaps the more obvious thing – Brad Pitt's beautiful face. Because I think it has been at least partially responsible for his longevity and I want to give that square jaw some credit. But I also want to think about how his looks might have impacted the types of roles he was offered as his career was starting out, and how that might have changed now he's almost 60 years old. Yes, I'm on my "thinking about crumbling beauty and the decrepit male body" bullshit again, but it's my podcast and you cannot stop me. Let's get into it shall we?

So, one of the things you'll notice if you read any recent writing on Brad Pitt is that

people tend to view him as emblematic of a particular type of old-school fame that doesn't really exist anymore. When he appeared in Tarantino's *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* back in 2019, Doreen St. Felix, a writer for the *New Yorker* tweeted "Brad Pitt is the last good-looking white man". While this might feel a little hyperbolic, given our cultural obsession with beauty, I think it taps into something in the nostalgia-fest that is *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*. There's something old-Hollywood-esque about the way that Brad Pitt conducts himself. Even as he ages (beautifully, I might add) he's still almost universally recognisable in a way that's almost impossible to achieve now.

In recent years (and with the advent of social media) our burning desire for some perceived relationship to celebrity has forced a wave of increasingly accessible famous people, meaning that even established actors are often chattering away unfiltered on Instagram or Twitter. Pitt doesn't have that level of accessibility. Whatever perceptions of him we might have – as charming or laid back or down-to-earth – are filtered through really carefully curated interviews and speculative pieces of tabloid fiction. He said himself in his first *Rolling Stone* cover story: "The truth is, I don't want people to know me. I don't know a thing about my favourite actors. I don't think you should. Then they become personalities." The rest of the cover story is suitably mythologising, less interview, more recount of being dragged through the Glaswegian bar scene by a handsome and charming drifter.

I think there's probably something of a



bleeding of Brad Pitt personal mythology and Brad Pitt screen presence. The role that everyone considers to have made Brad Pitt's career is as J.D. in *Thelma and Louise* – an impossibly beautiful, slightly dangerous and endlessly charming drifter who delivers the delightful line, "I've always believed that done properly, armed robbery doesn't have to be a totally unpleasant experience." He does, of course, rob Louise of her life savings while the two women sleep. Obviously, *Thelma and Louise* is a modern classic – beyond simply being a good movie, it's also a notable example of a film where the female characters have a significant inner life and whose interactions are driven by friendship rather than competition (something which has tragically not become much more common since the film's release in 1991). In that context, a beautiful man who isn't the main plot feature could really have been played by anyone in Hollywood hitting the conventional 1990s beauty standards. But it's significant that Brad is it.

His overall physique is leaner than the rigours of the 80s cinematic male body typically demanded, and more importantly, it's kind of vulnerable – he stands shirtless in his jeans and cowboy hat, posing with a hairdryer as a gun, but also, he listens to what Thelma has to say and he appears to care about their time together. Manuela Lanzic, writing for *The Ringer*, sees Pitt's role in this film as important specifically because he's designed purely to be looked at. She argues that action bodies are not emotional – they're geared for physical danger – whereas Brad Pitt's J.D. is offering a body that is available for visual pleasure and emotional intelligence. She

says, "J.D.'s embracing of his superficial appeal and of people's emotions makes him sexually liberated—and liberating." While this changing understanding of cinematic masculinity marks a significant shift in popular and marketable attraction, that obviously doesn't exist in a vacuum and you can map the changes Lanzic outlines through other action genre movies that came out in the same year – my beloved and incredibly homoerotic *Point Break*, for one. But I think his role in *Thelma and Louise* really cemented something fundamental about how we understand Brad Pitt's presence on screen, which would serve as a foundation stone for future roles and shape how we've come to understand his career.

While Pitt is undeniably handsome, there's also something oddly malleable in the way we view his masculinity. In *Thelma and Louise* his character is a sort of flipped version of a femme fatale – his softened presentation of masculinity represents a tempting new sexual ideal, promising pleasure that is both sensual and emotional even if it's a little dangerous. The square jaw and the washboard abs are coupled with a pouted lower lip and furrowed brow as he listens intently to stories of feminine woe. That same spirit carries over into his other movies – the sculpted body never quite means what it's supposed to. In the years immediately following his turn as J.D., Pitt's two biggest roles (the ones which continued to cement his place as a bankable star) were in *Legends of the Fall* and *Interview with the Vampire*, in which he plays two characters who outlive everyone they've ever loved, often due to circumstances they have inadvertently

played a hand in. They're odd choices for someone so... golden. Like Pitt is a glowing, tanned farm boy from Missouri. And yet there he is, surrounded by the carnage of everyone else's miserable end in *Legends of the Fall*, or reclining in melancholic, homoerotic agony in *Interview with the Vampire*. It's almost in direct opposition to how we feel Pitt should be appearing based on his physical being.

Elizabeth Abele argues that these roles set Pitt up as a "Romantic hero in the literary sense". As a quick and dirty Wikipedia definition for the unfamiliar – a Romantic hero is a character that rejects the established norms of a civilised society, and is in turn, rejected. They're often lightly tortured and tragic, full of regret and introspection, even as their powerful presence often draws people toward them. Abele suggests that throughout his career, many of Pitt's roles are imbued with the type of values that classify them as Romantic in this classical sense, and that they use his physical beauty to contrast with traditional expectations of masculinity on screen. In my recent Brad Pitt binge, I re-watched *Mr & Mrs Smith* aka the film with that sparked all the "Brad is cheating on his wife with Angelina Jolie" rumours. The pair play married assassins who don't realise that they're working for rival companies, having told each other elaborate lies and married each other ostensibly for a sense of normalcy. Aside from the spicy chemistry, the thing that stuck out for me on this re-watch was how submissive Pitt's character is. When he finds out his wife might be trying to kill him, he tests her, believing she won't blow up the elevator she thinks he's in

because she cares about him. When she does it anyway, he becomes melancholic and vows to take her out, but ultimately can't do it. With guns to each other's heads he surrenders, saying "Go on, I can't do it. You want it more; you pull the trigger."

He's consistently bested by his wife, but the thing that ultimately overcomes her is the fact that he's vulnerable with her (though she initially finds it repulsive and hangs up on him when he confesses that it was love at first sight). The whole set-up is antithetical to the masculine conventions of the assassin genre that movie-goers are usually presented with, but he does have that Romantic hero essence in that his personal code here is so strong that he's willing to die for it. Pitt's handsome physical presence is underpinned by a softness that makes the character feel more nuanced. (If you had told me when that film came out in 2005 that I would be thinking about it in the same sentence as the words "Byronic hero", I would've... been like "I don't fully understand what a Byronic hero is, I'm 15"... anyway, life and English degrees come at you fast.)

I think the combination of Bradley's beautiful face and carefully curated, lightly mysterious offscreen persona have led a lot of people (myself included, probably) to read complexity into even the blandest of his roles. It's kind of easy to forget, given his longevity as a successful and continuously employable star, that many of Pitt's roles were critical failures, even if they weren't commercial ones. Which brings me to maybe my favourite thing that's ever been written about Brad Pitt – Allison Willmore's piece for BuzzFeed



in 2019 titled Brad Pitt is a Character Actor Trapped in a Movie Star's Body. The piece notes Brad is an extremely talented actor, but that all of his best roles have been supporting character parts, and that often, when he's pushed in to the kinds of conventional leading roles that one might expect of a man with his face that he suddenly becomes a blank canvas where a person should be. Her argument is not that Brad Pitt is at war with his looks, but rather revelling in them in specific cinematic contexts. The interesting thing about his career in her mind, is that the context in which he's seemed most comfortable shifting focus to his looks is as an object of envy or resentment for other men, pulling focus on their desire to embody their own masculinity through his own. He is, she says "a character actor in a movie star's body."

Willmore uses *Fight Club* and *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* as examples, specifically because they both deploy Pitt's looks as something violent and toxic, poorly papered over with the aspirational ideal of masculinity. I would also argue that they're two of Pitt's most mis-read roles – but that's a separate episode on like... the concept of red flag films and the wilful misinterpretation of complex literary and cinematic concepts by incels. I think the best summary of Brad Pitt's skill as a bit player is his role as personal trainer Chad Feldheimer in the Coen Brothers' *Burn After Reading* – a film about misunderstandings, the CIA and a man trying to write his memoirs in peace. Aside from the fact that this movie is hilarious and wildly underrated, it's also one of the best things I've ever seen Brad Pitt do. He plays a frosted-tipped, gum chewing himbo, constantly

in search of hydration (specifically from Gatorade... none of that swamp water) – he's more animated than he's ever been and most importantly he's funny. I think because of his face, people assume Brad Pitt couldn't possibly nail comedic timing (probably because it seems like you'd have to have made some sort of crossroads-based devil pact to both look like that and be an actor versatile enough to nail comedy and drama, but I digress). Pitt was 45 by the time this film came out, and by this stage I would argue he'd spent the better part of his career trying to avoid being type-cast based on his face. In this role, he embraces being of ripped physique and golden skin specifically so that he can play up the buffoonery of this character. And it works. He steals every scene he's in and critics and audiences loved him. Compare that to his role in *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, which came out the same year. It did garner Pitt an Oscar nomination, but despite being in the title role, he's arguably the least memorable thing about the film after the art direction and Cate Blanchett's yearning looks.

Obviously, there's a certain security that Brad Pitt is now afforded – having reached solid ground in a notoriously fickle industry, he can be pickier or more whimsical in his role choices if he wants to be. Which I think is how we've ended up with a scene-stealing turn in *The Lost City*. I think as a younger actor he likely had to prove that he was able to be the key player, while also reassuring everyone around him that he could be something more than just beautiful. Ironically, I think he's actually done this by playing on his looks. But I think in allowing himself to comfortably take smaller (and often





**funnier) roles where he's allowed to go a bit ham, we're actually being treated to the best bits of Brad's career.**

**Well, those are my sweet baby Bradley thoughts. You should actually go and see *The Lost City*. I don't want to give the game away but he has the best line in the whole film. Also Channing Tatum's ass is right there and he's really put the work into those sculpted cheeks, so it would be a shame not to go see that on a large screen. If you've got thoughts on Brad's best role, or Channing Tatum's meaty ass cheeks, talk to me about it next time you see me at the pub! Peace!**

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**Episode written by Alex Johnson and produced by Wes Fahey.**

**Theme tune by Wes Fahey. ([Soundcloud: lee snipes](#))**

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