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Robert Schultz

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WGLT Interview with Robert Schultz, 2009

Willis Kern: Authorities in New York City have arrested a seventeen-year-old in connection with the Memorial Day weekend bombing of a Manhattan Starbucks. No one was injured in the blast but the alleged perpetrator, Kyle Shaw is drawing attention because of his fanaticism of the movie Fight Club, the 1999 cult classic starring Brad Pitt and Edward Norton. Shaw allegedly had started a fight club and was launching his own project mayhem, a reference to a plan designed by Pitt's character who advocated the sabotage of corporate America by destroying property. Robert Schultz is an Illinois Wesleyan University professor of history who has studied pop culture in America and is in the process of writing a book analyzing the depiction of male roles in American culture through books and film. Your book, that you're working on sites examples as far back as Herman Melville's Bartleby the Scrivener, right up to the film Fight Club itself and since that's the movie that's being pointed to in this New York incident, we're going to focus on that here in this interview. Is this what criminal justice types refer to as copycat incidents?

Robert Schultz: Copycat incidents, it's usually if there's a serial killer who, uh, they're looking for or some other person, perpetrator of a crime and then somebody duplicates it, uh, in this case it's somebody who is looking at the film as if the film's a model for reality that they're replicating in trying to make real in their own lives in some way.

Kern: And this film is also ten years' old.

Schultz: Right.

Kern: And as far as we know there have been no incidents of direct, copycatting of what happened in this film until now.

Schultz: There have been fight clubs that developed, there are websites created by fans of the film and of the book, of the Palahniuk book Fight Club, that the film is based on and they talked about these things on these websites but as far as I know I haven't read of anything like this where the Kyle Shaw had set off the homemade bomb under a bench at a Starbucks in New York.

Kern: In one scene in the film, the character played by Edward Norton wants to ask Brad Pitt's character if he can stay at his place but he's having a hard time doing that. Let's listen to that clip.

--start of clip from Fight Club--

Edward Norton: Would that be a problem?

Brad Pitt: Is it a problem for you to ask?

Norton: Can I stay at your place?

Pitt: Yeah.

Norton: Thanks

Pitt: Why don't you do me a favor.

Norton: Yeah sure

Pitt: I want you to hit me as hard as you can.

Norton: What?

Pitt: I want you to hit me as hard as you can.

--end of clip from Fight Club--

Kern: This helps introduce the concept of Fight Club. What is attractive about this sort of activity?

Schultz: It's not attractive to me but what's attractive to some of these young men, at least as it's depicted in the film, and that's why the article I got published in the Journal of Popular Culture on the novel and the film and in the book I'm writing, it's something about being able to be tough, be a real man, and experience something real in a society that they feel numbed both by the nature of the work and by the consumer culture that the film depicts as something that is a place their supposed to go to have fulfillment in their life because their jobs aren't fulfilling, uh, but no matter how much they buy, no matter how much they consume, they can never be fulfilled in that way.

Kern: So we have Kyle Shaw who allegedly brought fight club and its story line to life. In 1980 John Hinckley shot the President to impress the actress who played a character in the movie Taxi Driver, are these extreme examples of male cultural behavior. This is not reflective of what society is doing to the male gender.

Schultz: Yes, I'd say in part, anybody who acts this out like Kyle Shaw, I mean it's an anomaly we haven't seen a lot of this, if any of this in the last ten years since the book was, was, well since the movie came out in 1999 and the book was published in 1996. Um, but there are, have been websites created, Project Mayhem websites, and where young men have voiced and some women get on board here too and they talk about the themes of the movie, they talk about creating their own clubs, they talk about these kind of things. So there are themes in the film that resonate with, many of these young men, even whether they are college educated and going into, looking for professional job or if they're in a service sector job that does not require a college education.

Kern: Illinois Wesleyan History professor, Robert Schultz, has recent culture changed the position of the white male in society not only because of advances in the Civil Rights and Feminist movements, also because of guy's dissatisfaction with their mundane jobs and their inability to insatiably consume goods. Schultz's book based on his manuscript, "White Guys Who Prefer Not to: From Passive Resistance to Terrorist Acts" is expected to be published soon. I'm Willis Kern, WGLT news.