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## Robert Schultz

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Robert Schultz, Illinois Wesleyan University, interviewed by Willis Kern, WGLT  
WGLT Interview Transcript  
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A terrorist act in Manhattan two months ago has caught the attention of culture observers nationwide. WGLT's Willis Kern has more with a central Illinois educator who is among those trying to make sense of the recent bombing's apparent connection to a cult film classic...

Willis Kern: Authorities in New York City have arrested a seventeen-year-old in connection with the Memorial Day 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 cites examples as far back as Herman Melville's *Barnaby 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 in this interview. Is this what criminal justice types refer to as "copycat" incidents?

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

Willis Kern: And this film is also ten years old—

Robert Schultz: Right.

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

Robert Schultz: There have been fight clubs that developed. There have been websites created by fans of the film and of the book, of the **polanic (1:40)??** book *Fight Club* that the film's based on and they talked about these things and these websites but as far as I know I haven't read anything like this where the—Kyle Shaw had set off the homemade bomb under a bench at a Starbuck's in New York.

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

[Clip plays]

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

Robert 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 my—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 they're supposed to go to have fulfillment in life because their jobs aren't fulfilling but no matter how much they buy, no matter how much they consume, they can never be fulfilled in that way.

Willis Kern: So we have Kyle Shaw who allegedly brought *Fight Club* and its storyline to life. In 1980 John Hinckley shot the president to impress the actress who played a character in the movie *Taxi Driver*. Aren't these extreme examples of male cultural behavior? This is not reflective of what society is doing to the male gender.

Robert 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—well since the movie came out in 1999 or the book was published in 1996 but there are—I mean there have been websites created where—Project Mayhem websites and—where young men have voiced—and some women get onboard here too—and they talk about the themes of the movie. They talk about creating their own clubs. They talk about these kinds of things so there are themes in the film that resonate with, I think, many of these young men even whether they're college-educated and going into looking for a professional job or if they're in a service sector job that does not require a college education.

Willis Kern: Illinois Wesleyan History Professor Robert Schultz says recent culture has changed the position of the white male in society not only because of advances in the civil rights and feminist movements but also because of guys' 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.