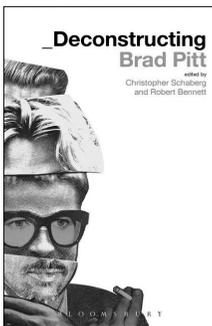


Review Essay

Spectacular Manhood and Girlhood: Celebrity Studies and Girlhood Studies Come of Age

Kathleen A. Feeley



DECONSTRUCTING BRAD PITT. Edited by Christopher Schaberg and Robert Bennett. New York: Bloomsbury. 2014.

SPECTACULAR GIRLS: Media Fascination and Celebrity Culture. By Sarah Projansky. New York: New York University Press. 2014.



Celebrity studies as interdisciplinary scholarship has come of age, as the books under review here indicate. Over the last half century, a vast study of celebrity, fame, stars, and entertainment industries has emerged to investigate how “the star intervenes and functions on every level of life, the imaginary level, the practical level, and especially on the level of the dialectic between the imaginary and the practical.”¹ Yet scholars of celebrity culture can still find themselves on the defensive, facing charges of “zany doings” and “trendy jargon,” as did the editors of *Deconstructing Brad Pitt* when they tried to organize a 2005 conference panel on the “cultural logic of Brad Pitt” to explore masculinity, sexuality, white-

ness, celebrity, philanthropy, the American West, and national identity.² As Su Holmes and Sean Redmond reported in the 2010 inaugural issue of *Celebrity Studies*, the first academic journal devoted exclusively and explicitly to this work, “in the media’s bludgeoning of the idea for the journal, we knew that the critical worth of *Celebrity Studies* was being proven. . . . s]tudying the impact of celebrity culture on everyday life was touching a raw nerve at the symbolic centre of celebrity production.”³ Yet the tide has turned as scholars, literature, organizations, and conferences devoted to this work proliferate: the two books under review here—*Deconstructing Brad Pitt* and *Spectacular Girls*—are part of this shift and exemplify the complex politics of gender, race, class, age, and sexuality laid bare by such work.

While the classical Hollywood studio system provided the original impetus for the study of celebrity culture, the subfield now encompasses a more nuanced and wide-ranging understanding of who is a celebrity, what it means to be celebrated, and the kinds of new and old media platforms and industries that create and sustain celebrity studies, including print culture, television, the music and recording industries, sports, and social media. As the technologies and platforms proliferate, the study of media and its celebrities grows, playing a decisive role in newer interdisciplinary areas of study—including media studies and cultural studies—as well as reshaping older disciplines like history and literature.

When literature scholars Christopher Schaberg and Robert Bennett issued a call for conference papers in 2005, using Brad Pitt as the lens through which to examine “race, class, gender, and regional or national identity” in postmodern American society, it provoked vitriolic reactions inside and outside academia (xvii). Bloggers took aim; so did the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Nearly a decade later, we have *Deconstructing Brad Pitt*, which underscores how dramatically the scholarly terrain has shifted. This volume uses Pitt’s work—primarily his acting as well as philanthropy—and his public persona to understand celebrity culture, modern U.S. popular and political culture, American selfhood and upward mobility, and shifting constructions of American masculinity. Here is a very interesting and provocative—if uneven—collection of fourteen essays, including Nancy Bernardo’s visual essay as well as engaging front and back matter. The collection’s front matter—including a prelude, foreword, preface, and introduction—details the collection’s origins and its intended audience and goals. In their introduction, editors Schaberg and Bennett reveal their goal to keep the collection “outside an academic series”: while the volume takes “an academic and critical approach,” it is also “free of . . . jargon” (2, 3). Their goal is an admirable one: to try to reach a popular, nonacademic audience without sacrificing intellectual rigor and theoretical significance. And in many ways, it works: the essays are not overly long; the endnotes are very much abbreviated; the cover, typefaces, images, and general layout are appealing and not the norm in an academic volume—nor is the visual essay. Some of the essays, however, might be too theoretical and engaged with academic concerns for a popular reader. Alternately, for an academic audience, the paucity of endnotes and relative brevity

of the essays sometimes leaves the scholarly reader wanting more. The result is a collection that is provocative and engaging, if uneven and sometimes vexing: arguably exactly the hybrid kind of publication the editors sought to produce.

Perhaps most vexing is the editors' decision to forgo the "standard academic strategy" of chapter summaries as well as—more importantly—an overview and analysis of the essays as a whole. While the desire to make reading the volume "an open-ended process" has merit, providing an interpretive frame—which readers can choose to ignore—is especially important to shed insight and provide coherence for an edited collection. Indeed, Brian Sullivan's brief Coda to the volume provides a partial and welcome interpretive overview of its persistent theme of failure, given the many flawed, marginalized characters in the Pitt filmography. From arrested adolescent stoner Floyd in *True Romance* (1993) to dim-witted personal trainer Chad in *Burn After Reading* (2008), Pitt has consistently sought roles inflected with pathos to undermine and complicate his "spectacular body." In a more traditional male leading role like *Seven*'s police detective David Mills, Pitt's protagonist solves the case and "gets" the serial killer villain. But, in doing so, Mills's family, career, and life are left in ruins—not a triumphant finish. In a similar vein, Christopher Schaberg's essay traces the motif of crashing in Pitt films, as in, for example, the "crash pads" and downward mobility of loner characters like Floyd in *True Romance* and the eponymous lead in *Johnny Suede* (1991).

The volume's first two essays foreground Pitt's reoccurring characterizations of flawed American manhood through heroes who demonstrate "a more complex masculinity that includes self-awareness, personal integrity, and non-conformity" as well as failure (33). Ben Luebner analyzes Pitt in his two Montana-based films—Paul in *A River Runs Through It* (1992) and Tristan in *Legends of the Fall* (1994)—where he plays "perfectly wild and perfectly debonair gentlemen" of the new American West (14). In these postmodern Westerns, Pitt's protagonists are outsiders who champion Native American life and culture, primarily via relationships with Native women. Yet, as Elizabeth Abele argues, these Native female love objects remain largely inscrutable, silent "noble savages" (like so many of Hollywood's Indians): characters that serve primarily as narrative tools to underscore the white protagonists' progressivism.

Abele also deftly interrogates Pitt's star persona, identifying the literary concept of the Romantic hero as inspiration for many early roles and his enduring appeal. After his breakout, a supporting role as a self-serving conman in *Thelma and Louise* (1991), Pitt's early starring performances—including in the aforementioned Montana films and as Louis in 1994's *Interview with a Vampire*—hew closely to the Romantic archetype. Such a character chooses individual passions, demons, and goals over duty, convention, and family, making him not "an ideal romantic partner" (23). Flawed and unconventional outsiders, like Rusty Ryan in *Ocean's Eleven* (2001), have persisted in Pitt's repertoire even as he began to play male protagonists who would not sacrifice their personal lives for their work, quest, or demons. In 2011's *Moneyball*, for example, Billy

Beane rejects conventional markers of public success in favor of his domestic life and personal values.

Robert Bennett uses a welcome wide-angle analytical lens and situates Pitt's films and characters within the broader context of American history and film: namely, in the post-World War II suburban revolution and the resulting cultural critique thereof. He uses 1967's germinal *The Graduate*, which turns on Benjamin Braddock's "acute sense of suburban alienation" and Michelangelo Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* (1970) to offer a scathing, radical rejection of suburbia (55). Both films have influenced decades of American movies, including *Fight Club* and *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*. In *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*, Pitt and his now-wife Angelina Jolie star as an estranged suburban couple. By the end of the film, as Bennett argues, they have rejected the "paranoid cold war nation-state" and military-industrial complex that employed them as assassins for hire and that also funded the post-World War II suburban revolution (68). Bennett does not address the unplanned but unmistakable ways in which the film's critique of the white, middle-class status quo was mirrored in its stars' personal lives. By the time the film was released in 2005, Pitt was famously in the midst of divorce proceedings with his first wife Jennifer Aniston and in an as-yet-unacknowledged relationship with Jolie. This romantic triangle has fueled tabloid headlines for over a decade and once represented a challenge to heterosexual matrimony as the cornerstone of a white, middle-class sensibility.⁴

Certainly, Pitt's personal life has always been a defining feature of the Pitt persona: from dating ingénues; to marrying Aniston, an American Sweetheart; to his partnership with Jolie and their formation of an unconventional family. Michele White examines Pitt's personal life in her fine essay "Brangelina Blend." White emphasizes how the celebrity portmanteau in general, and for this couple and their sometimes-unconventional choices in particular, can undermine the male partner's masculinity. The uber-coupledness represented by Brangelina has been used to feminize Pitt: his partnership with Jolie, an independent, unorthodox female figure, sometimes compromises his personification of "ideal white masculinity" (95). White misses an opportunity to deepen her compelling analysis by placing Brangelina within a long Hollywood tradition of superstar couples and portmanteaus: Pickfair became home to one of Hollywood's first celebrity couples—Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks—in 1920. So there is a long history of celebrated duos using their partnership to fuel mass appeal, professional opportunities, and acclaim—and to avoid or circumvent negative publicity.

Several essays offer close sociocultural and political analyses of a single Pitt film and/or role to explore these films' cultural work in shaping, reflecting, confirming, and/or challenging cultural norms and ideals. Film and media studies scholar Andrew Horton is also a screenwriter who rewrote the screenplay for *The Dark Side of the Sun*, Pitt's first leading role, and he reflects upon a pre-fame Pitt. Fran Pheasant-Kelly argues that the significance of *Seven* (1995) lies in its nihilistic vision of American masculinity via the "failed oedipal trajectory of Pitt's character" David Mills (139). Throughout the film, Mills is being

groomed to replace Morgan Freeman's retiring Detective William Somerset. Yet just as Mills seems poised to assume Somerset's role as patriarch at film's end, his family is killed and he loses control over his life, exemplifying "an ongoing crisis in masculinity, initiated after Vietnam, inflamed by feminism and gay rights, and perpetuated in more recent times by 9/11" (149). This so-called crisis of masculinity, however, needs more development here and elsewhere: is it real, imagined, fueled by the media? Lacking an extended analysis, readers are left to presume that the social, economic, and political gains of women and nonwhite men have, in fact, come at the expense of white men. In *Troy* (2004), Rick Hudson argues that Pitt's arrogant, selfish, and brutal Achilles made this film a "successful critique of conventional heroic narratives" (153). The heroes in *Troy* do not win: they perish and "heroism is not rewarded but it is valued" (161). Thus, Achilles represents an uneasy blend of ancient and modern heroic attributes for a modern audience.

Robert Bennett argues that Pitt's casting and his acting ability make *Fight Club* and its pointed critique of modern consumer culture and its suburban aesthetic successful. Pitt's skilled "performance of madness" and his considerable popular appeal brought in a mass audience, which might otherwise have rejected this disturbing and resolutely downbeat project. Understanding the enduring appeal and cult status of the film *Fight Club* is at the heart of Randy Laist's essay. Laist contends that Pitt is first and foremost a celebrity and tabloid fixture, which is precisely why director David Fincher cast him. Fincher's "subversive casting choice" transformed the novel's critique of mass culture, deepened it, and turned it nihilistic by having "the voice denouncing mass media culture . . . coming out of the very idealized face of that culture" (84). Laist places the focus on Fincher choosing Pitt while Bennett emphasizes Pitt's choosing and performing of the role. A central question in celebrity studies is always some version of: "how much credit does Brad Pitt deserve for developing Brand Pitt?" (172). Bob Batchelor most directly takes on this thorny and important issue. Pitt's "spectacular body" and a sometimes-turbulent personal life have periodically threatened to destabilize his star persona and undermine his work life. Batchelor argues that Pitt's membership in "Hollywood's power elite" is a result of his own hard work, the entertainment publicity machine, and "timing, looks, affect, and luck" (165, 168).

Other essays look beyond Hollywood and Pitt's films to examine: how visual artists interpret his persona and cultural influence, his philanthropic work in post-Katrina New Orleans, and how Pitt's persona operates in contemporary digital culture. In "Art Muse," Sarah Juliet Lauro explores how contemporary visual, media, and fine artists have been inspired by Pitt and the machinery of stardom—not just as muse but as collaborator with artists like Chuck Close and Robert Wilson. These projects—like others in which Pitt played no part—meditate on the real versus reel, and "the celebrity's nightmare . . . the ever searching, insatiable gaze of the viewer" (123). This essay also reproduces images of the artwork under discussion, which complements and deepens the analysis and serves as a reminder that the visual is absolutely central to understanding Pitt as

artist and symbol. Indeed, Nancy Bernardo's cover image and her visual essay provide welcome, important visual components and analyses to the collection, despite its puzzling exclusion from the volume's table of contents. Those who work in media studies often struggle with being bound to the written word when our subjects operate so much in the visual (and aural) realms. Thus Bernardo's juxtaposition of the many faces and characters of Brad Pitt in conjunction with words of Jacques Derrida's theory offers another kind of meditation upon Pitt's cultural significance. Thomas Bayer takes on Pitt's philanthropy in post-Katrina New Orleans, which resulted in a 2009 unofficial "campaign" for Pitt as mayor. The campaign highlighted discontent in post-Katrina New Orleans, the power of celebrity in politicking, as well as the enormous goodwill generated by Pitt's ongoing philanthropic efforts in New Orleans. Edmond Chang takes on the gender and sexual politics of the digital Pitt persona. The "Brad Pitt Theory"—Google it—suggests that whatever their sexual orientation and identity, all men can safely desire Pitt. Chang identifies "an attainable masculinity and a contained femininity" embodied by Pitt that makes it possible for straight men to challenge gender and sexual binaries, "disavow homophobia and heterosexism," and "imagine the potential for queerness" (205, 211).

Deconstructing Brad Pitt examines Pitt's function as a symbol of American masculinity, the new American West, modern parenting and partnership, green architecture and sustainability, philanthropy, and same-sex desire. While most of the essayists are careful to distinguish between Pitt as symbol and persona versus Pitt as an active agent in the world, an opportunity to reflect upon Pitt as both symbol *and* agent is missed. As his celebrity grew, Pitt's economic, institutional, promotional, and cultural power increased. But actors—even iconic ones—are not the most powerful personnel on a film set: directors and especially producers have the real power. Since 2006, Pitt has served as a producer on over thirty film and television projects through his production company Plan B Entertainment. Indeed, he won his first Academy Award as a producer of Best Picture winner *12 Years a Slave* (2013) and most his recent films roles have been in Plan B productions, so an essay on Plan B would be most desirable. Overall *Deconstructing Brad Pitt* is a compelling read, most suitable for a scholarly audience though accessible to well-read mass audience that seeks thoughtful commentary on American popular culture. Pitt as actor, celebrity, philanthropist, father, partner, environmentalist, liberal activist, man, tabloid fodder, artist sheds light on many aspects of American popular culture and society.

The "spectacular body" of Brad Pitt and the many questions it raises about modern, white, middle-class, American masculinity shares a mediascape with spectacularized representations of girls—"can-do," "at-risk," and "crash and burn" alike. In *Spectacular Girls: Media Fascination and Celebrity Culture*, feminist media scholar Sarah Projansky explores a century of mediated American girlhoods and then focuses upon turn-of-the-twenty-first-century representations of girlhood and reception of normative and non-normative girls who are celebrated variously as performers, victims, and cautionary tales. A now con-

siderable literature on the history, culture, and meaning of girlhood, including newer work like Projansky's fine work, exists on the intersection of childhood and star studies. This interdisciplinary scholarship has produced, by her count, at least ten major literature review essays, a new journal (*Journal of Girlhood Studies* [2008]), and special conferences and symposia. Projansky uses public and social policy research and ethnographic studies about girlhood that are seldom incorporated in the current girlhood literature to uncover both a normative girl "as an idealized citizen for the neoliberal global economy . . . [and] postfeminist discourse" and alternative girls who challenge the gender, racial and sexual status quo in late-twentieth and early twenty-first-century American popular and political culture and society (11–12).

While white, middle-class, athletic, heterosexual, well-behaved, and successful girls predominate in U.S. media culture, Projansky seeks to destabilize this "narrow definition of conventional girlhood" and broaden the literature by focusing on alternative, nonwhite, nonnormative girls and their bodies and stories, including Selena Gomez, Sasha and Malia Obama, Serena and Venus Williams, Tamara Brooks, Jacqueline Marris, Jessica Dubroff, and Sakia Gunn (1). Projansky's sample is not limited to media celebrities like performers, athletes, and "First Daughters"; she also incorporates girls who have entered the public eye as kidnapes, hate crime victims, and murder victims. Objectified and commodified, public American girlhood is generally presented in two seemingly dichotomous modes: as outstanding and upstanding or as (potentially) scandalous. Projansky makes a compelling case that the key archetypes—the "can-do," "at-risk," and "crash-and-burn" girls—are, in fact, part of a simplistic, false continuum in which a declension narrative predominates. The path to success is tied to hewing to a white, heteronormative status quo and "through consumer choices" (5). Young, female celebrity girls are powerful and compelling vehicles to market all manner of goods, but the fallen girl narrative bumps ratings, guarantees Internet traffic, and is thus particularly lucrative and desirable in the marketplace. Indeed, both public and private girlhood are the targets of countless moral panics (for example: eating disorders, teen pregnancy, hyper-sexualization, and bullying) used to justify "surveillance and discipline" of *all* girls (4).

Celebrated girls in the media are not a new phenomenon. Projansky devotes her first chapter to the history of celebrated girlhood in twentieth-century American film and culture. She argues that the "girl star played a central role in establishing, perpetuating, and protecting the structure of the star system and Hollywood as a whole" (30). Indeed *Spectacular Girls* is a key contribution to a small but growing literature on the importance of the early Hollywood "girl" and "girliness" in shaping the film industry, celebrity culture, and the performance (and invisibility and pervasiveness) of whiteness.⁵ Both young girls like Shirley Temple and adult women "playing young" like Mary Pickford inspired wildly ambivalent responses that could both challenge and/or uphold the status quo: erotic longing, sentimental protectionism, and gender and sexual ambiguity. Projansky traces changes and continuities in representations and personas

of female child stars across the twentieth century and then focuses upon the under-studied 1970s child star Tatum O'Neal. O'Neal serves as an excellent example of girl celebrity as a "hyper-white, highly sexualized, and highly scandalous individual in conflict" (56). Prior to the 1980s, Projansky identifies only five nonwhite girl performers in lead film roles—as opposed to their typical casting as the sidekick. O'Neal's stardom, like those before her, was built upon African-American supporting characters, demonstrating how "girl star as a cinematic category produces, maintains, and requires, whiteness" (43). And O'Neal's early career illustrates the "anxiety and ambivalence" long embedded in the concept of the child star: the problem of child labor, the problem of young female performer as *both* sexual object and ambiguously gendered figure, and the problem of looming adulthood (43).

Projansky then examines the late 1990s and early 2000s media proliferation of girl culture. She defines girls as those who entered the public spotlight "under the age of eighteen" and whose girlishness remains central to their public persona even as they mature (19). Her prodigious research tracks public fascination with and media exposure of celebrated girls via *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *People* cover stories from 1990 to 2012, finding 242 relevant covers. Her goal is twofold: establishing the dominant narrative about white, heterosexual girlhood and "identifying alternative girls" who defy racial, national, and sexual norms (60). About 80 percent of these cover girls are plotted along the "can-do/at risk" continuum and pass as white. They are celebrated for some combination of: 1. their precocious, professional accomplishments; 2. their vulnerability in a dangerous, difficult world; and 3. who/what they symbolize in their success/failure. But what of the other 20 percent "who are spectacular in part because of their difference" (65)?

These atypical cover girls include presidential daughters, performers, athletes, and victims of violent crime. Some of these feature stories racialize the can-do girl, offering a nonwhite, mixed race vision of success as embodied by Malia and Sasha Obama, Vanessa Hudgens, or Selena Gomez, but do not otherwise challenge the can-do/at-risk paradigm. Tennis champions Venus and Serena Williams not only offer a nonwhite version of girlhood, they also sometimes challenge the typical success narrative. For example, they acknowledge that they are treated like outsiders and denounce racism on the tennis tour. Even as they faced charges of being too confrontational, "arrogant," and "aloof," they remained wildly successful and stymied the usual can-do/at-risk narrative, creating spaces for a different kind of girlhood (81). Of the young female victims of violent crime or accidents who gained media notoriety during this period, a majority were white, blonde, and blue-eyed—those for whom it was easiest to make a case that they were deserving of protection and justice. Notably, a few such girls did not fall into these categories and thus offer alternative readings on what it means to be a "girl in peril": structural, racial, gender, and economic inequities were invoked as contributing factors in these cases, and such girls were presented as resourceful and resilient, thereby destabilizing the can-do/at

risk paradigm. For example, media coverage of Jessica Dubroff as “a miniature and queer Amelia Earhart” bestowed upon her an unusual degree of “agency and complexity” and offers a more complex and dynamic vision of American girlhood (90, 92).

Projansky then focuses upon four feature films drawn from her extensive database of 450 girl culture films produced between 2000 and 2009. The films Projansky highlights inspired the most significant feminist debate over the lead actors, their roles, and star personas as well as the films’ content in both mainstream and alternative media: *Mean Girls* (2004), *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006), *Juno* (2007), *Precious* (2009). All of these films provide alternative girlhoods of agency, choice, and/or fortitude, though rooting for these “special” female protagonists often requires “a disciplining and derogatory denigration of girls in general” (106). These films’ young, female leads provoked ambivalent, fluctuating commentary that sometimes upheld and sometimes challenged gender, sexual, and/or racial conventions. In particular, Projansky seeks to understand how, when, and why these films also create space for and provide a voice for alternative girlhoods. *Mean Girls* critiques heteronormativity and whiteness, particularly through its supporting characters. In *Little Miss Sunshine*, Olive’s desire to participate in a child beauty pageant drives the film’s narrative and makes her a particularly active girl character by choosing her path and claiming a performative, public space on her own terms. *Precious* centers on a poor, black girl and details the protagonist’s problems and possibilities on a specific and individual level and thus “challenge[s] the denial of black girlhood” (124). *Juno* makes many important feminist choices: most importantly to have sex and then make her own reproductive decisions and to choose a single adoptive mother for her baby. All of these films inspired media conversations around feminist topics like domestic and sexual violence, reproductive politics, female empowerment and sexual pleasure.

Next Projansky expands upon an earlier analysis of media coverage of Venus Williams. As she emerged as a superstar athlete in the late 1990s, Projansky skillfully argues, commentators mostly avoided explicit discussion of race except when offering an inspirational, upwardly mobile narrative of Williams as “an exceptional black girl” (137). Williams’s “difference” was most commonly depicted without reference to race, racism, or the enduring whiteness of the professional tennis tour. Instead her outsider status was framed as her choice and/or her fault and was reinforced through racially coded fetishizing of her hair, clothing, stature, and musculature. Yet periodically the problematic behavior and responses of sportscasters, other players, and tennis officials erupted into explicit debates about race and racism in sports and in American society. Three broadcasting incidents are the focus here: an ongoing debate over the Williams family’s career management strategies; an opponent’s aggressive, unapologetic shoulder bump; and an umpire’s controversial ruling of a match penalty because of Williams’s loose hair beads. Projansky makes a compelling case that Williams’s extraordinary success has commanded respect, sometimes inspired

forthright racial commentary, and has helped to forge a new narrative around black girlhood as dynamic, specific, and powerful.

The author then turns to the life, death, and varied memorializations of the poor, queer, African-American teenager Sakia Gunn, the victim of a 2003 hate crime in Newark, New Jersey. Here Projansky moves beyond mainstream media to find diverse representations of girlhood. Gunn's life and death garnered little attention in the national, mainstream media, but was consistently featured in New York and New Jersey local mainstream media outlets as well as national alternative press. Across all of the coverage, however, is little discussion about Gunn's age and her girlhood: indeed, Projansky seeks to "reclaim her girlhood" (166). National coverage of the case was very limited and generally focused upon Gunn as the innocent victim of violent crime. However, the media's usage of class and racial signifiers like "Newark" and "public transportation" imply that Gunn was poor and black. Local and alternative news outlets generally covered Gunn as a much more well-rounded and complex individual—as opposed to "a generic symbol of pathos" (158)—who was attacked and killed because of her race, class, sexuality, gender, and age. Here she emerged as a queer and/or black victim whose death became symbolic of violence directed at LGBTQ and/or black citizens, the problems of the urban underclass, and the need for advocacy work. Yet some alternative media outlets also championed Gunn as a "heroic queer girl" (169). Here Projansky recovers and restores an active, multifaceted girlhood to this poor, gay, African American, gender-nonconforming teenager whose life and death defied the status quo and who demonstrates that alternative kinds of girlhood operate in the real world and in the media.

In the final chapter Projansky applies the book's theory and analysis of spectacular and alternative girlhoods to actual girls (and boys) through an analysis and assessment of elementary school students' media literacy. Projansky spent several weeks in her daughter's third grade Midwestern public school classroom. Her purpose was twofold: 1. to challenge the so-called Ophelia Thesis that young "girls are cultural dupes" who must be protected from dangerous and damaging media content; and 2. to understand the varied ways in which they understand and use media (182). Their work together revealed that these twenty-one students (nine girls and twelve boys) "are media critics who use their specific analytical abilities to articulate persuasive insights about both media structure and gender representation" (215). Perhaps most illuminating in this chapter was how the students resisted, challenged, and transformed the project and exposed its limitations, as Projansky carefully details, thereby proving that they were "already media critics who can set the terms of the conversation" (215). Her project plan, created with the classroom teacher, had to evolve particularly when students rejected writing a final media analysis essay in favor of watching and commenting upon television ads and shows in large and small groups. Projansky found that the students engaged in sophisticated, close textual analysis; questioned media industry structure; and challenged commonplace, simplistic, and negative assumptions about media, including notions that it "rots our brains" (197). Students

also identified, often questioned, and sometimes rejected the gender binaries inscribed in media production and promotion. Simultaneously, they were aware of the dangers of transgressing gender norms and sometimes policed themselves accordingly. Projansky addresses some of the study's limitations, including insufficient engagement with the intersectional complications of race and class with the students. A more complete sense of the students' own socioeconomic profiles would have helped further contextualize her findings. Projansky used data from both the male and female students, arguing that this prepubescent group was "not gender specific" and responded very similarly—though she did rely more heavily on her nine female subjects, further shrinking the already small sample size of twenty-one subjects (194). Ultimately Projansky builds a convincing case that most of these students—in their complex responses to and understandings of media—exemplify an active, not passive, "'girl as media critic'" and, as such, serve as an important example of an alternative kind of girlhood in which their "thinking belongs to them" (182, 213).

Spectacular Girl sets out to redefine media girlhood by establishing the normative girl and her history, but then also seeks alternative girlhoods in the national mainstream media and beyond—such as in the alternative press and finally in a third-grade classroom. The author very successfully uses "an antiracist, queer, feminist perspective" to illuminate alternative girlhoods (221). Economic status is also central here, but receives less attention. A more sustained discussion of the media representations of poor and working-class girls—their invisibility, inscrutability, passivity, pathos—would have been welcome. Also worth addressing is whether the norm is truly a middle-class girl or an upper-class girl? So many of the spectacular girls under discussion here are already affluent and/or are greatly enriched by their spectacular girlhood: from Mary Pickford to Tatum O'Neal to Vanessa Hutchens to Venus and Serena Williams. Selena Gomez rose to fame portraying middle-class Alex Russo on *Wizards of Waverly Place*; as a result, Gomez became wealthy: so is the ideal the middle-class Russo or the upper-class Gomez? An American ethos of upward mobility and the politics of star personas obscures the contradiction at the heart of "an everyday girl . . . dealing with mega stardom" (77). A more explicit analysis of the perils of economic privilege (or the lack thereof) would further enrich Projansky's already germinal dismantling of the can-do/at-risk dichotomy. The book's first three chapters are organized thematically and chronologically and cover much ground: most of the last century in mainstream media representations of American girlhood. The final three chapters are case studies of alternative visions of girlhood from 1997 to 1999, 2003, and 2009. Organizing the book into two parts would have more clearly signaled to the reader the distinctiveness of the two halves of the book and more closely integrated the case study chapters into the fabric of the book. For example, the outstanding standalone chapter on Venus Williams lacks explicit reference to Projansky's earlier analysis of Venus and Serena Williams as mass-market magazine cover girls.

Spectacular Girls is an ambitious, deeply researched, and compellingly argued work of feminist girls' media studies that both provides an important contextual and historical overview of the last century of girlhood in the media and advances important new arguments about and insight into the media reproduction of American girlhood. In correcting a myopic scholarly focus on a white, heteronormative girlhood and exposing and challenging the can-do/at-risk binary, Projansky opens up important new areas of research in a book that works to help readers imagine "more expansive and liberatory futures for all girls" (226). She exposes the "neoliberal protectionist stance that writes out of existence . . . girls who are not white, not heterosexual, not vulnerable, and/or not passive" (223). And, most importantly, Projansky demonstrates that alternative visions, performances, and examples of nonwhite, queer, active girlhoods are widespread, if only we are willing to look for and know how to spot them, and are willing to acknowledge them. Like the contributors to *Deconstructing Brad Pitt*, Projansky helps readers to understand the power and politics of American popular culture and sheds important new light on the myriad ways that audiences consume and understand media and celebrity culture.

Notes

1. Edgar Morin, *The Stars*, trans. Richard Howard (1957; repr. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 147. The literature on celebrity studies is vast: some important early examples are Richard deCordova, *Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990); Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986) and *Stars*, 2nd ed. (London: BFI, 1998); Richard Schickel, *Intimate Strangers: The Culture of Celebrity* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1985).

2. Charlotte Allen, "Yes, But Will Angelina Jolie Be Delivering a Paper?" *Independent Women's Forum*, June 9, 2005. Accessed on August 21, 2015 at: <http://www.iwf.org/blog/2427255/Yes-But-Will-Angelina-Jolie-Be-Delivering-a-Paper>

3. Su Holmes and Sean Redmond, "A journal in Celebrity Studies," *Celebrity Studies* 1:1 (March 2010): 1.

4. In 2014, Pitt and Jolie married; Aniston married Justin Theroux in 2015, thus reasserting the supremacy of heterosexual marriage.

5. On the early Hollywood girl, see, for example, Hilary A. Hallett, *Go West, Young Women! The Rise of Early Hollywood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Kristen Hatch, *Shirley Temple and the Performance of Girlhood* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015); Christel Schmidt, ed. *Mary Pickford: Queen of the Movies* (Library of Congress/University Press of Kentucky, 2012); Gaylyn Studlar, *Precocious Charms: Stars Performing Girlhood in Classical Hollywood Cinema* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2013).