

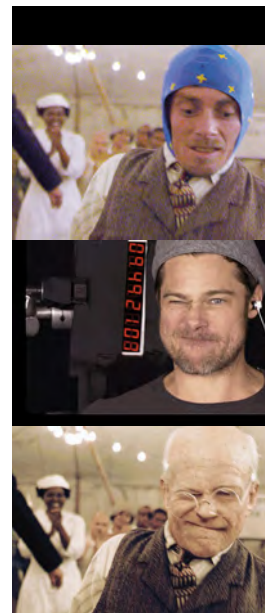
A NEW GEOMETRY OF THE EYE. THE CURIOUS CASE OF BRAD PITT

JÖRG STERNAGEL

What is the curious case of Brad Pitt? Does the curiosity come from watching and having watched the motion picture *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, directed by David Fincher, and starring Brad Pitt in the leading male role, back in 2008? What is the curious case of both the character Button and its actor Pitt? Might it be about face, or, to be more precise, about *vicissitudes* of the face, changes, processes, developments that are in the face, that are rendered visible on the face?

To begin, let us consider a review of the film, a review by Al Hoff, critic for the Pittsburgh City paper, who elaborates on his experience with the film, with the faces, with the vicissitudes of the face, with the curious case of Brad Pitt: “At the screening I attended, I could hear the audience snuffling, but I found David Fincher’s overly long, glossy account of one man’s odd life to be more emotionally distancing than engaging. Liberally adapted from F. Scott Fitzgerald’s short story by Eric Roth (whose *Forrest Gump* this film reminds me of), the film tells the instructive tale of a baby named Benjamin Button, born old but who, as he grows up, becomes younger. Button is mostly played by Brad Pitt through the magic of make-up and digitally appending his head to tiny wrinkled bodies. In a series of episodes—intercut with an awkward dying-woman-recollects framing device—we follow Button from his childhood in a New Orleans old-folks home (how convenient), through World War II adventures and his mid-life romance with a ballet dancer (Cate Blanchett). While entertaining as a large-scale fable, *Button*’s story left many quirky details (a backward-running clock, a pygmy) unexplained, while blithely adding contrivances (Hurricane Katrina; a useful inheritance). Pitt is game (though you could feel the audience relax when he achieved his mid-life perfect Brad Pitt-ness, sunburnished and lounging in vintage khakis), but Blanchett seemed an awkward fit throughout. *Button* presents a mildly interesting idea juiced with a lot of greeting-card sentiment and golden light. Its point doesn’t seem especially illuminating: We all age (or unage), and that process is rife with regrets and loss. But living life in reverse doesn’t change the basic mechanics of the human condition, just as a clock that runs backward doesn’t change the fact the time still moves forward.” (Hoff 2009)

In the light of Fincher’s film, what follows, let us consider three issues of Hoff’s review, beginning at its end and ending up at its beginning: those will be discussions of, first, the Brad Pitt-ness he claims,



second, the magic of make-up and digital appendage he addresses, and, third, his own experience with the film that he describes as emotionally distanced. These three issues will subsequently be contextualized by brief paragraphs from F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1922 short story of the same name on which the film is loosely based and will be discussed within three paradigms of visibility, a model partly suggested by the sociologist Andrea Mubi Brighenti in his essay "Artveillance: At the Crossroads of Art and Surveillance" (2010). The first paradigm, dealing with the Brad Pitt-ness, will shortly be presented as the *visibility of the spectacle*, the second, on the make-up and the digital effects, also quite shortly as the *visibility of recognition*, and the third, starting with the reviewer's experience, more at length, as the *visibility of being*.

I. THE VISIBILITY OF THE SPECTACLE

Benjamin, once he left the hospital, took life as he found it. Several small boys were brought to see him, and he spent a stiff-jointed afternoon trying to work up an interest in tops and marbles—he even managed, quite accidentally, to break a kitchen window with a stone from a sling shot, a feat which secretly delighted his father. Thereafter Benjamin contrived to break something every day, but he did these things only because they were expected of him, and because he was by nature obliging. (Fitzgerald 2003: 67)

Before the film, Brad Pitt, the actor, as we continue with the help of Fitzgerald, works up interests in the work, in his fellow-actors, in props and set designs, in the camera, to bring, at least in part, Benjamin Button to life. In sum, his interest, at least on an artistic level, would be to create a role. Before the film, we, in turn, work up an interest for Brad Pitt, as we have experienced him in numerous films before, as in *Seven* (David Fincher, 1995), *Seven Years in Tibet* (Jean-Jacques Annaud, 1997), and *Meet Joe Black* (Martin Brest, 1998) and therefore decide to be at the movies with him, to watch him in another film. In sum, our interest, on an experiential level, would be to meet again. During the film, Brad Pitt offers variations of his art, variations we are partly familiar with like the tone of his voice, his pronunciation of words, his gestures, his posture, his obliging 'perfect Brad Pitt-ness'. Let us remember Al Hoff writing: "Pitt is game (though you could feel the audience relax when he achieved his mid-life perfect Brad Pitt-ness, sunburnished and lounging in vintage khakis)." Here, the focus is on the situation of perception during the film, a situation that is also influenced by experiences before or after the film. This is where a visibility of the spectacle develops, pointing successively lesser and lesser to Brad Pitt's familiar performing choices and my experience of them, but more and more to his star or celebrity functions.



Such a paradigm could be further scrutinized with Richard Dyer, for example, and his thoughts about the *Heavenly Bodies*, where the economic importance comes into play, and the star is also presented as being fashioned "out of the raw material of the person", where "make-up, coiffure, clothing, dieting and body-building can all make more or less of the body features they start with." (1986, 5) Or, as Brighenti points out, it could be interpreted with Guy Debord and his approach in the *Society of the Spectacle*, where we are separated from the celebrity or star in everyday life as the images we see with him, from him, are detached from life and only propose an illusionary form of life's unity, where Brad Pitt is "the spectacular representation of a living human being", embodying this banality

by embodying the image of a possible role.” (1962: § 60) At this point, to move to the next paradigm, let us further reflect upon why the audience of Hoff’s screening relaxed as soon as Brad Pitt achieved mid-life in his role in the film.

II. THE VISIBILITY OF RECOGNITION

But one day a few weeks after his twelfth birthday, while looking in the mirror, Benjamin made, or thought he made, an astonishing discovery. Did his eyes deceive him, or had his hair turned in the dozen years of his life from white to iron-gray under its concealing dye? Was the network of wrinkles on his face becoming less pronounced? Was his skin healthier and firmer, with even a touch of ruddy winter color? He could not tell. He knew that he no longer stooped, and that his physical condition had improved since the early days of his life. ‘Can it be?’ he thought to himself, or, rather, scarcely dared to think. (Fitzgerald 2003: 68)

Can it be, to continue with the film’s very loose adaptation of Fitzgerald’s prose, that the focus on Pitt and especially his face relies on patterns of recognition? Certainly, also this film in his making, to follow James Naremore in his study *Acting in the Cinema*, is dependent on “a form of communication whereby meanings are *acted out*” where, once it is released in cinema, my “experience of watching them involves not only a pleasure in storytelling but also a delight in bodies and expressive movement, an enjoyment of familiar performing skills, and an interest in players as ‘real persons’.” (1988, 2) Here, the paradigm of the spectacle shifts to the paradigm of recognition as “the interest in players as ‘real persons’” remains influential, while the “delight in bodies and expressive movement” become central. Here, the film’s decision is to offer a basis for orientation from which a “delight in bodies and expressive movement” can develop. This basis, this center is the face of Brad Pitt, with all its features, its eyes, ears, nose, mouth, hair, even its “network of wrinkles”. Throughout the film, Pitt occasionally appears as himself with his own acting body and enters with his own face and his well-known expressions, but, more often than not, his body in general and his face in particular solely function as sources of inspiration and contact: Pitt’s face is partly attached to other actors’ bodies, acting out either familiar or different meanings, while being always ready for the close-up, while being successively experienced as aging backwards. “Button is mostly played by Brad Pitt through the magic of make-up and digitally appending his head to tiny wrinkled bodies”. (Hoff 2009) Pitt’s moving, constantly altered face frequently appears at the center of attention and offers both an orientation and a dis-orientation, along with an ever-changing body that does not always belong to Pitt himself. Here too, “something sharper than a mask is looming”, “something sharper” that Roland Barthes sees in the face of actress Greta Garbo, »a kind of voluntary and therefore human relation between the curve of the nostrils and the arch of the eyebrows; a rare, individual function relating two regions of the face.” (2004: 721) However, in Pitt’s face, this “human relation” is re-considered and re-structured in digital codes, inviting us to reflect upon a very slippery realm of film experience, where unresolved affects might prevail, partly created by, and this is where the first part of the essay’s title comes from, “a new geometry” of the face, its rendering, especially in detail of the eye, of its “eye socket structure”, as one of the visual artists of the motion picture, Edson Williams, points out, for “the effect of age re-juvenation”. The techniques in question are correspondingly named in a meaningful way: “Emotion” and “Facts”, facial coding systems, enabling animators to use micro-expressions to manipulate individual movements such as a dimple or eyebrow twitch, taken from Pitt’s own face, aiming to keep Pitt’s/Button’s expressions true to the performances through the ages and on to the bodies, in order to keep the possibility of recognition for the spectators.

III. THE VISIBILITY OF BEING

Up in his room he saw his reflection in the familiar mirror—he went closer and examined his own face with anxiety, comparing it after a moment with a photograph of himself in uniform taken just before the war. ‘Good Lord!’ he said aloud. The process was continuing. There was no doubt of it—he looked now like a man of thirty. Instead of being delighted, he was uneasy—he was growing younger. He had hitherto hoped that once he reached a bodily age equivalent to his age in years, the grotesque phenomenon which had marked his birth would cease to function. He shuddered. His destiny seemed to him awful, incredible. (Fitzgerald 2003: 76)

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Indeed, there is a process of continuing, of establishing the phenomenon of *aging* backwards, prominently through and with the face of Pitt, with an attention to detail carrying affects that initiate experiences of belonging and non-belonging in human and non-human interrelation: But, here, too, “instead of being delighted”, as Fitzgerald proposes considering his protagonist looking in the mirror, seeing himself getting younger, for me, too, there is an uneasiness, as is for Hoff: “I found David Fincher’s overly long, glossy account of one man’s odd life to be more emotionally distancing than engaging.” (2009) The grotesque phenomenon of aging backwards that Fitzgerald writes about in his short story is sought to bring to the screen and there, too, it shows, even if at least in part in an unforeseen way: the bodily uneasiness with and the emotional distance from what is rendered visible on screen are centered on and around Brad Pitt’s fragmentized body, following his remaining bodily traces in a very slippery realm of film experience, where unresolved affects might prevail, as especially the partly animated face of Pitt develops to be ungripping, causing uncertainties of how to act within the visual, auditory, and tactile field between the screen, Brad Pitt, his digital fragments, Al Hoff, and me, for example. Here, the coexistence with the film actor is challenged, and the bodily link to the actor is loosened. The form which is common to both the actor’s and the spectator’s visual and tactile perceptions occasionally dissolves, the form that both actor and spectator possess, where, according to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “all happens as if the intuitions and motor performances of the other are founded in a kind of internal encroachment, as if my body and the other’s form a system.” (2010: 452) The form is my body, and what I learn to consider as the other’s body is a possibility of movements for me; thus, Merleau-Ponty: “We can say that the actor’s art is only a deepening of an art that we all possess.” (Ibid.: 453) This possibility is partly vanishing in the face of Pitt and his others, on the various bodies, despite the attention to detail and the use of his own voice. The visibility of *being* turns to *non-being*, and provokes concluding remarks on a phenomenology of the face: Details of the face are preceded by physiognomies in which moments of facial expressions, gazes, and liveliness abruptly emerge. These moments are not registered as empirical data to assemble, or to compose a face, moreover, these moments are seen as primarily forces and affects, and we see less a geometrical form than a pure and moving expression. While the making of Benjamin Button with the help of the Brad Pitt-ness certainly adds to this human experience of the face, it also certainly lacks an important ingredient in its rendering: a *somehow* pure and moving expression, leading to a slippery realm of film experience.

“Through the noons and nights he breathed and over him there were soft mumblings and murmurings that he scarcely heard, and faintly differentiated smells, and light and darkness. Then it was all dark, and his white crib and the dim faces that moved above him, and the warm sweet aroma of the milk, faded out altogether from his mind.” (Fitzgerald 2003: 83)

At the end of the film, the dim, indistinct, unclear faces of Brad Pitt fade out altogether from my mind and body, and, unfortunately, not even “the warm sweet aroma of milk” remains and I am still kept at a safe distance.