

The Social Network: “Dot-com” myth-making

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The Social Network, directed by David Fincher (*Se7en*, *Fight Club*, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*), recounts in fictional fashion the rapid enrichment of Mark Zuckerberg, a young Internet businessman and disputed creator of Facebook. Since its release, the movie has been the subject of some controversy for its supposedly unflattering—and, according to Zuckerberg’s defenders, false—portrayal of its subject.

The *San Francisco Chronicle* went so far as to call the work “a hatchet job” of epic proportion, and Zuckerberg himself seems to have been concerned about the film’s impact on his public image—making an unprecedented donation of \$100 million to the Newark school system shortly before its release. (See “Facebook founder’s gift to Newark schools: The return of the aristocratic principle”)

In view of all this, it may be surprising to learn that the movie is actually quite admiring of Zuckerberg and his ilk. If anything, Fincher’s film portrays Zuckerberg as a misunderstood genius forced to suffer the presence of other mortals. The latter are incapable of comprehending such an advanced specimen—or simply jealous, or greedy.

Zuckerberg, as played by Jesse Eisenberg, is a whip-smart, “rebel” capitalist who has everyone and everything figured out—except his relations with women.

Of course, like many young men, his ego is injured by a girlfriend and he pulls a few pranks to demonstrate his power, but in the end, Fincher’s film gets its point across: Zuckerberg is smarter and more disciplined than the rest of us, and that is why he is the world’s youngest billionaire.

The reality is more commonplace. Mark Zuckerberg—a relatively privileged young man—came to Harvard University from one of the East Coast’s most prestigious prep schools with significant computer skills. At Harvard he gained notoriety by hacking into the university’s computer system, and then enlisted a number of friends in an effort to create a social networking site modeled on

several preexisting sites (Friendster, My Space, etc.), with a few improvements and the elite branding that comes with origins in an Ivy League school.

Through some ruthless business practices and a knack for irritating people, Zuckerberg managed to ensnare himself in a number of lawsuits—one launched by a former close friend and co-founder of Facebook, Eduardo Saverin. Saverin’s story was turned into Ben Mezrich’s *The Accidental Billionaires*, the basis for Aaron Sorkin’s screenplay.

The film’s opening sequences set the general tone. At a campus bar, Zuckerberg shows off to a girl (Rooney Mara) about to dump him. His plans to get into one of the elite fraternities do not seem to interest her, so he emphasizes their social influence by explaining how one of Harvard’s fraternities sends around a bus for girls who want to “party” with a former Federal Reserve chairman. Zuckerberg makes an assumption about the girl’s sexual availability, setting off an argument.

Upset and slightly intoxicated, he goes back to his dormitory and, along with his roommates, hacks into Harvard’s computer network, so he can create a site that allows people to vote on the “hottest” female students. The young men banter among themselves, using computer jargon, and discussing women and sex with as much machismo as one would find in a football locker-room.

The movie is peppered with this kind of thing, but the sexual obsessions never really ring true, and especially so in Zuckerberg’s case. His character seems chiefly interested in sexual relationships insofar as they enhance his status and reputation. Moreover, no woman in the movie exhibits much intelligence, except for an associate attorney on his eventual legal team, who plays a minor part as the voice of reason in the film.

For his defiant hacking, Zuckerberg is eventually disciplined at Harvard and subjected to an administrative hearing where he easily makes fools out of everyone in the room.

His campus notoriety gains him an audience with the Winklevoss brothers (both played by Armie Hammer),

athletes and members of an elite club, who are looking for a technician to bring their idea of a more exclusive social network to reality. Zuckerberg immediately agrees to work for them, but then organizes his own team and creates Facebook. The Winklevoss brothers—portrayed as strapping Anglo-Saxon blue-bloods—are only the first in a series of ethnic or social stereotypes.

Zuckerberg and his friends eventually move their operations to California where they meet Sean Parker (Justin Timberlake) of Napster fame, who incarnates the hucksterism and “irrational exuberance” that permeated the South San Francisco Bay Area elite in the mid- to late 1990s.

Parker manages to supplant Zuckerberg’s best friend Eduardo (Andrew Garfield) as the company’s financial officer by securing start-up money from a venture capitalist. With Zuckerberg’s help, those two collude to water down Eduardo’s share, leaving him with a small fraction of his original interest in the company. Eduardo is presented in a such a fashion that the betrayal seems almost justified; the portrayal reinforces the point that the brighter, successful elements naturally rise to the top.

The film is fast-paced, with some amusing moments, and is unusual in the sense that it treats a business model based on new technology founded by younger entrepreneurs. It attempts to paint an enticing picture of the Internet-based capitalist lifestyle, replete with “hot babes,” partying, drinking and a number of intoxicating speeches about the grandeur of online business and its insurgent youth storming the bastions of old money on Madison Avenue and Wall Street.

In the end, *The Social Network* resembles nothing so much as a slick television commercial for the latest computer product.

Indeed, David Fincher made a name for himself directing commercials for companies such as Revlon, Nike, Pepsi, Sony and Levi’s. He later joined a Hollywood production company where he continued to make commercials and music videos.

Fincher often seems determined—most notably in *Se7en* and *Fight Club*—to impress or shock his audience with contrived novelty and strong doses of violence and misanthropy. (Despite the extreme behavior he self-consciously brings to the screen, however, what the director actually thinks and feels about the world remains unknown.) Although *The Social Network* presents itself almost as a comedy, Fincher tries to give it a “edgy” quality throughout via foreboding music—a soundtrack composed by Trent Reznor of *Nine Inch Nails* and Atticus

Ross—and scenes lit and shot to suggest a horror film.

Fincher’s “dark” efforts are foiled by Sorkin’s screenplay and its source material, which most likely render Zuckerberg more intelligent, sensitive and loveable than he is in real life. Sorkin, a major campaign donor to the Democratic Party over the last decade, is perhaps best known for his effort to sanitize the political elite in *The West Wing*.

Essentially, *The Social Network* attempts to channel the enthusiasm of youth capitalism associated with the “dot-com” speculative bubble of the late 1990s. In that period, the revolutionary potential of the Internet was constantly identified by the media with the fortunes of web-based businessmen and the power of the free market.

The influx of billions in venture capital gave rise to various forms of “market populism” substituting a number of red herrings for the great social issues: e.g., the upstarts with computer skills vs. the wealthy stuffed-shirts, the young vs. the old, the hip vs. the boring, and so forth. This was not much more than journalistic impressionism.

Unfortunately, the film spends little time on the nature of social networking and worldwide Internet usage. This is perhaps the most fascinating aspect of the subject and yet the film blithely devotes itself to sex, status and the art of being cool. *The Social Network* leaves a good amount of important human activity buried under a heap of adolescent awkwardness and the pursuit of wealth. What the earth’s population will do with these revolutionary tools in the coming period remains the more interesting story.



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