

Critique without a Critique

Aaron Sorkin and David Fincher's *The Social Network* asks you to participate in the meteoric rise of Facebook creator Mark Zuckerberg, who by all accounts ruthlessly cheated and lied his way into billionaire status. It is not terribly surprising that Sorkin (screenwriter) and Fincher (director) chose to avoid a direct critique of Facebook—by now it is virtually a truism that Facebook has contributed to the rapidly deteriorating state of our social relations—what is surprising is that Sorkin and Fincher have created a portrait of an internet tycoon who is in many respects a blank slate. The first thing we learn about Zuckerberg in the film's opening sequence is that he received a perfect score on his SATs and that he very badly wants to gain entrance into Harvard's exclusive final clubs. Not exactly *sui generis* for a Harvard computer nerd. Nevertheless, Sorkin's dialogue is sharp and he pulls you in as Zuckerberg proceeds to talk himself out of a relationship. Before his bewildered ex-girlfriend takes off she leaves Zuckerberg with the following diagnosis: "You're going to be successful and rich. But you're going to go through life thinking that girls don't like you because you're a tech geek. I want you to know, from the bottom of my heart, that won't be true: It'll be because you're an asshole." Commentators have suggested that this declaration functions as Zuckerberg's "Rosebud." Doomed to wander Silicon Valley as his bank account expands, Zuckerberg will nevertheless fail to win the affection and respect of anyone.

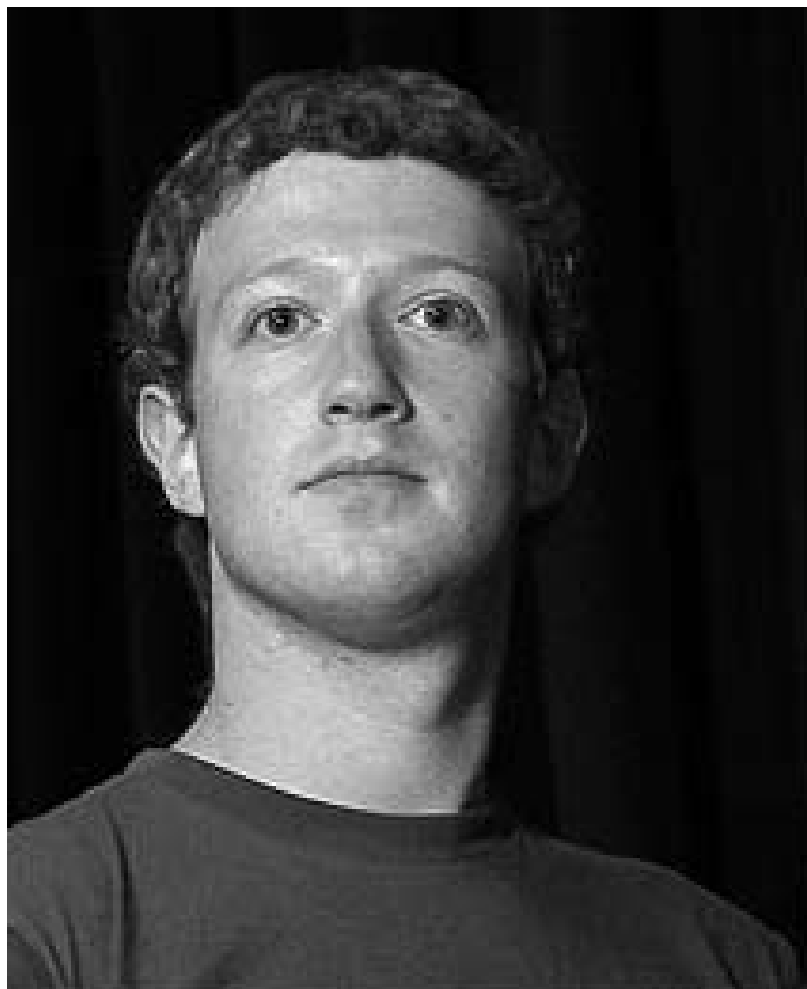
The meat of the film proceeds as a transmission of Zuckerberg's assorted lawsuits, particularly with "best friend" and CFO Eduardo Saverin, who Zuckerberg eventually froze out by reducing his ownership share to 0.03%. Additionally, Zuckerberg is sued by Cameron and Tyler Winklevoss for misleading them in the development of the "HarvardConnection," a precursor to Facebook. Whether or not the details of these trials are accurate is almost beside the point—Zuckerberg is clearly a self-serving entrepreneur who is willing to lie, cheat, and steal for the sake

of his company. The film is most successful in its portrayal of the speed and contingency of internet entrepreneurship—while the Winklevoss brothers wait for Zuckerberg to complete the HarvardConnection, Zuckerberg proceeds to develop and launch the Facebook without their knowledge. It is here that the logic of neo-liberalism presents itself—while the entitled Winklevoss brothers represent a "rule-bound" era of the American ruling class in their attempts to appeal to Harvard

President Larry Summers, Zuckerberg feels no such compulsion to adhere to the rules of the game. Saverin also falls prey to the illusion that finance is regulated and inherently principled. But the speed of internet entrepreneurship appears to eclipse all limits. While Saverin pursues more traditional avenues for promoting his company—e.g. interning for powerful financial firms in New York—Zuckerberg rapidly develops his own small empire with Napster founder Shaun Parker. With the assistance of Silicon Valley venture capitalists, Zuckerberg surreptitiously allows Saverin to sign away his own ownership share, thereby eliminating his future position within the company.

Much of the commentary regarding Zuckerberg's alleged behavior is interesting and it reflects significant assumptions regarding the nature and implicit legitimacy of capitalism. Lawrence Lessig, writing in *The New Republic*, insists that the sole "tragedy" of the film is that "policymakers are ferociously conspiring with old world powers to remove the conditions for this success." Lessig is speaking about the demise of "internet neutrality," and how we will inevitably return to a world where the Zuckerbergs of tomorrow will have to depend upon "permission" and "privilege." Leaving aside the fact that Facebook would have never amounted to anything without the wealth and privilege of its investors, Lessig's apologetics for Zuckerberg precisely misses what Sorkin and Fincher have been able to

protagonist. Yes, of course Zuckerberg is a narcissistic sociopath sprinkled with a touch of autism. But Sorkin and Fincher want you to acknowledge his fundamental character deficit and participate in it simultaneously. The film gets its biggest laughs when Zuckerberg heaps condescending insults on his opposing attorneys, and who wouldn't want to do that? Naturally it's at least a little fun to rise to billionaire status within the course of a few years and then be able to basically crap on anyone you happen to meet. But *The Social Network* functions only to the extent that it is able to get you to enjoy Zuckerberg's ride. Undoubtedly, there is plenty to criticize in Zuckerberg's character, but the form of the critique in fact conceals the structural illegitimacy of its subject. Sorkin himself has admitted that the film could just as easily been about "the making of toasters." It is clear that Sorkin and Fincher are not particularly interested in Facebook, the internet, or capitalism. Unfortunately, they also don't seem to be particularly interested in why it is that we live in a culture of deceit, or why it is that people like Zuckerberg are now seen as role models. Although Sorkin and Fincher are able to gesture towards a critique of Facebook through their portrait of the network's most paradigmatic user, the critique is never able to transcend the level of the portrait. The political failure at the root of *The Social Network* is that Sorkin and Fincher seem to be saying: "Forget about whether or not Facebook, MySpace,



demonstrate. Namely, that Facebook is not the invention of an individual, but rather the result of a set of social and technological conditions which allowed Zuckerberg and his immediate colleagues to launch a marketable platform. In the final analysis, no one is able to say who "invented" Facebook, for the internet is an infinitely connected, infinitely contextual thing.

Where the film fails is in its strange inability to distance itself from the anti-

Twitter, etc. are actually good or not—the bottom line is that Zuckerberg is essentially a bad guy." But the problem is not simply that Zuckerberg is a bad guy, the problem is that he's a bad guy and that he exists in a system which has enabled him to become so unimaginably powerful.

- Charles Prusic