

**The Social Network**

Produced and distributed by Columbia Pictures ♦  
 Directed by David Fincher ♦  
 Screenplay by Aaron Sorkin ♦

*THE SOCIAL NETWORK* concerns Mark Zuckerberg and his cybercreation, Facebook, the website that now boasts 500 million active users and has made its “inventor” a multi-billionaire. On his site, you’re free to divulge your most praiseworthy, intimate, and perverse behaviors to thousands. Merely register, and you instantly become a star, inviting the scrutiny of your “friends,” as the site identifies your correspondents. Furthermore, your chosen circle can grow exponentially, since each of your friends has the option of suggesting you to their friends, who can likewise do the same. Should you be up to something sufficiently exceptional or weird or lurid, your circle could possibly rival that of the Almighty’s, having a center that’s everywhere and a circumference nowhere. Like certain celebrities, you’ll taste Lucifer’s temptation. Don’t you deserve to outshine the Bible’s out-of-date deity?

Not that Zuckerberg designed his site with such blasphemy in mind. No, his sinning was far less grand. His enterprise was driven by jealousy and anger. He wanted to strike back at the girl who had dumped him and, while he was at it, all those other girls whom he assumed would be only too glad to snub him in favor of more presentable swains. At least this is the way Aaron Sorkin and David Fincher have dramatized it in *The Social Network*. They’ve instructed Jesse Eisenberg to play Zuckerberg as a hopelessly gauche young man whose behavior suggests he may be suffering from Asperger syndrome, the form of autism characterized by high intelligence, obsessive focusing, and a striking lack of empathy.

We meet Zuckerberg first in a college bar with Erica (Rooney Mara), a pretty Boston University coed. He’s trying to impress her with his Harvard connections and how he intends to make it into one of

the school’s prestigious Final Clubs. It’s important to know the right people, he explains. As he patters on, she becomes increasingly restive and finally excuses herself, saying she has some studying to do. He expresses astonishment. After all, how much study time would anyone need to put in at BU? This is a step too far. Erica takes aim and fires. “You’re going to be successful, and rich,” she tells him with seeming sweetness. “But you’re going to go through life thinking that girls don’t like you because you’re a nerd. And I want you to know, from the bottom of my heart, that that won’t be true. It’ll be because you’re an asshole.”

The rest of the film will confirm her prediction implicitly, while its conclusion will do so explicitly when another young woman observes, “You’re not an asshole, Mark; you’re just trying too hard to be one.”

Stung by Erica’s dismissal, Zuckerberg runs to his dorm, where he works through the night hacking into the other dormitories’ websites, electronically snatching the profiles of their coeds complete with headshots. With this digital information, he constructs his own website, Facemash. Each page features pictures of two coeds and invites users to choose which is lovelier and make whatever other comments they wish. Facemash, indeed. It’s Zuckerberg’s kick in the face to the gals who think him unworthy. The girls are outraged, and the boys delighted. Soon Harvard’s server is so overloaded with male

responses to Zuckerberg’s invidious invitation that it crashes. It seems that, despite the *de rigueur* training in tolerance and gender awareness throughout prep school, the Harvard gentlemen are simply raring to demean the ladies.

For this stunt, Zuckerberg is put on probation, but it’s no big deal. He’s become an overnight campus celebrity. The Winklevoss twins, prominent members of the Porcellian Club, the most exclusive of the Final Clubs, invite him to work with them on their idea for a social website to be called HarvardConnection. It will be exclusive, of course, inviting only the best of the best to participate. Then, as if to signal their devotion to exclusivity, the Winklevi, as Zuckerberg comes to call them, meet him in the bicycle room of their club, a foyer to its inner sanctum to which Zuckerberg cannot be admitted. With gracious *noblesse oblige*, they offer him a sandwich. No wonder the Jewish wunderkind came to betray these handsome WASP scholar-athletes.

Zuckerberg has been described by many commentators as being an outsider’s outsider, a young man insulted by the privileged’s closed doors. Using the Winklevi’s idea, he devises the website that will become Facebook and takes it online without acknowledging their admittedly small role in its inception. From this moment, the war is on. Eventually, the Winklevi bring suit against him, as does Eduardo Saverin, Zuckerberg’s classmate and closest friend who put up the money with



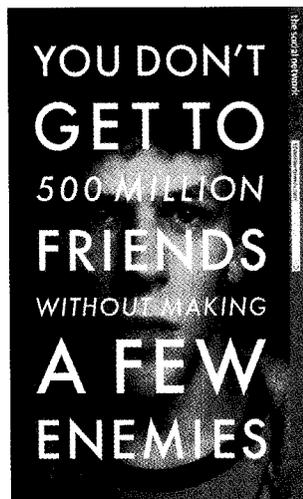
## Include Me Out

which the site was launched, only to be iced out once it became profitable. Their suits have been settled now, with the Winklevosses coming away with \$65 million added to their already bursting trust funds, while Saverin may be over \$100 million to the good. Although both suits' legal merits were questionable at best, there was no trial. Zuckerberg's lawyers realized he would never prevail before a jury. He was simply too unlikably arrogant. Besides, people who have neither the connections nor the wit to escape jury duty rarely sympathize with billionaires.

Also notably lacking sympathy for Facebook's mastermind are Sorkin and Fincher. While I thoroughly enjoyed watching their clever film, afterward I couldn't help feeling that it was exceptionally cruel. Zuckerberg may well be the shit they portray him to be, but he's 26 and was 20 when he initiated his site. In short, he's a kid with exceptional skills and luck who behaved badly toward some privileged frat boys. And if, as Sorkin's script strongly suggests, he suffers from Asperger's, should he be held fully accountable for his unpleasantness? When interviewers have brought up the issue, Sorkin has hidden behind the same kind of reasoning deployed by other Hollywood slanderers such as Ron Howard and Akiva Goldsman, who shamelessly fabricated the life of Princeton physicist John Nash in *A Beautiful Mind* and despicably besmirched Max Baer in *Cinderella Man*. Sorkin has said that he was making a movie entertainment, not a documentary, and therefore was not restricted to telling the factual truth. Really? I wonder how he would feel should someone make a film about his life and career in which his work on *The West Wing* television series was shown to be clandestine propaganda motivated by, let's say, a Marxist revolutionary agenda accompanied by an abiding desire to mock America's Christian heritage? Would that be OK, Aaron?

I hold no brief for Zuckerberg, about whom I know very little. From reading

about him, especially a fascinating *New Yorker* profile by Jose Antonio Vargas, I gather he's a snotty brat. So does this give Sorkin the right to vilify him in a film that hundreds of millions will see and largely take as the whole truth? The movie will forever shape the public perception of this 26-year-old, pursuing him to his grave. By comparison, Orson Welles treated William Randolph Hearst with gentlemanly decency, declaring the newspaper magnate provided no more than a suggestion on which to build his wholly fictional *Citizen Kane*.



Another annoyance: Sorkin gives only scant attention to what is most important about Facebook. That it's become the locus of reckless greed and litigious acrimony pales beside its value as a cautionary harbinger. As the Palo Alto sharpie and Napster scammer Sean Parker (Justin Timberlake) puts it to the beguiled Zuckerberg, "We lived on farms, then we lived in cities, and now we're gonna live on the internet!" Living on the internet? Yes, I'm afraid, and it's happening at the expense of privacy. One of the ways Facebook makes its enormous profits is by sharing with advertisers and researchers what its users so eagerly reveal about themselves. If you were retained to reach potential consumers of a new, exotic, and unusually expensive beer, wouldn't you like to know who is regularly shelling out \$19 for a six-pack of Dog-

fish Fort or \$9 for a four-pack of Brooklyn Chocolate Stout? You'd likely find your hops gourmands boasting their quaffing habits on Facebook. Should you want to locate scapegraces, you could do worse than putting yourself forth as a potential "friend" on the site, as has the FBI. Zuckerberg has said that we live in an age when privacy is an "evolving social norm." Undoubtedly true. And what a blessing for our public planners and government snoops. Spotting dissent obligingly self-revealed online will make their work so much easier. The potential for internet abuse is manifold: everything from stalking the young to spreading pornography to empowering those who think that what we need to flourish is a well-informed police state.

In *The Phenomenon of Man* (1955), the French Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin speculated that humanity was witnessing the development of what he called the noosphere. With this neologism derived from the Greek words *nous* (mind) and *sphere* (realm), Chardin was denoting what he thought of as a collective consciousness enabled by the various communication instruments devised in the modern period. He foresaw a day when the then-incipient computer technology would bind us together in an intellectual and spiritual embrace. We would gain an immensely deeper understanding of who we were and where we were going. The noosphere, in effect, would be evolution become conscious of itself. It would be our next phase, during which humanity would work in concert toward achieving its destiny, which he dubbed the Omega Point. I suppose this was Chardin's version of universal salvation.

I recall being impressed by his speculations when I first read him in the late 60's. Now I wonder. Did Chardin foresee Zuckerberg's confessional, collectivizing Facebook as one more step toward the Omega Point?

If this is the noosphere, I'm with the great Sam Goldwyn: Include me out. ♦

**THE ONLY TIME** I saw Bill Clinton in the flesh was four years ago in the London Ritz. I was having lunch with Leopold and Debbie Bismarck and the mother of my children, as I call Princess Alexandra Schoenburg-Hartenstein, my wife. There were Krauts galore plus some English friends, and we were celebrating Alexandra's birthday, which falls on September 26. Men were in dinner jackets, ladies in long dresses. Then in came Clinton, wearing a sleeveless sort of jumper over a T-shirt, with two black guys in jeans and outrageously gaudy windbreakers. The only ones properly dressed were the myriad of Secret Service personnel, all paid by yours truly, the American taxpayer.

Once they ensconced themselves at a table, I asked to speak to the maitre d', whom I know well, and demanded he throw the bums out. He refused because of Clinton's position as ex-president. I don't think I've ever felt as helpless as I did that day, especially after my wife told me that she would leave if I insulted Clinton, which I was ready to do. Manners, like courage on the battlefield, are not something Clinton is familiar with, and forelock-tugging maitre d's are not making it any easier for those of us who still believe in old-fashioned values.

Let's face it. Coarseness, violence, dishonesty, and lawlessness threaten to spread into every corner of life. To give one example: Spitting in public in all civilized societies has traditionally been an almost imprisonable offense. Nowadays, it is common. Black people and Hispanics, I have noticed, spit more than whites, New York City being the spit capital of the Western world. Another brutality is dress. Just as familiarity breeds contempt, informality generates disrespect. Can you imagine Calvin Coolidge or Herbert Hoover answering questions about what type of underwear they wore? The slob Clinton did, and some people even thought it cute. Can you imagine Churchill in a track suit, or even the criminal FDR in Bermuda shorts

saying, "Call me Frank"?

It's the eagerness to play slob by people who should know better that gets me. As if we didn't have enough sloppiness already. Airports nowadays resemble locker rooms, with grotesquely overweight people waddling in their track suits and disgusting sneakers. When I first flew across the Atlantic in 1948, we had beds in first class, and everyone was dressed to the nines. In fact, I don't think they would have allowed anyone dressed in a sweatsuit to board. This went on until well into the 70's. Then came the peanut farmer, the first American president to address the people wearing a sweater and jeans. Carter was a disaster sartorially, but he was a far better president than Clinton, Bush, and Obama could ever hope to be.

Bill Clinton was the first slob president, a terrible dresser who favored sneakers and sweat clothes when he played golf. He and his ghastly cronies view elegance as a villain, an antipopulist conspiracy of those born to privilege. Popular culture teaches us that fashion should be liberating. It is a clumsy argument made by philistines who possess the sensibilities of a Stalinist bureaucrat. High glamour once ruled Hollywood during its golden age. Now stars look like garage mechanics, which many of them probably were. Once upon a time actors spoke wonderful English with contrived upper-class accents. The old Central European Jews who controlled Hollywood insisted on it. The younger generation of Jews who control it now think that there's

more money to be made by dumbing down and dressing down. It is the age of the common man, after all.

Well, yes and no. The shabbiness of the modern male and female comes at the expense of a society unashamed of its vices. The arrogant disdain shown by the phony hippie movement of the 60's was matched only by the hippies' selfishness and greed. Sleaziness like Madonna's may be in vogue today, but look what her ilk has done to civility and common courtesy. I knew the game was up when about 15 years ago I arrived at the Athens tennis club and asked a young man working as a porter at the front desk the time of my scheduled match. (It was a veterans' tournament.) I addressed him in the formal plural. He answered in the informal singular—and rather rudely, too. So I put my racket down on his desk, reminded him of my name, past championships I had won, and my age, and demanded to be addressed in the same way I had addressed him or else. He was dumbfounded. "What's the big deal?" he asked, or something to that effect.

People are now taught that informality makes us equal. Well, some will always be more equal than others, but for the record, smart dress and good manners have nothing to do with class. They have to do with pride and a sense of achievement. The great Charles Lindbergh wore a bow tie on his first Atlantic crossing. The grotesque Bill Clinton did not wear a tie at the Ritz. ♦



## Common Slobbery