INSTRUCTOR’S FOREWORD

Over the quarter, Kurt produced a trilogy of brilliant essays on *The Social Network*. His first—one like the X-ray image of two sunken man-of-wars—exposed the scars of a heated battle of generations concealed in the film’s visual rhetoric. His second deftly introduced us to the passionate spokesmen representing each side of this battle, writer Aaron Sorkin and director David Fincher, and charted their struggle over the meaning of the movie.

This final essay, “The Social Divide,” stands proudly on the shoulders of Kurt’s first two studies. With surgical sensitivity, the piece anatomizes protagonist Mark Zuckerberg, exposing his dual role as Sorkin’s tragic sociopath, and Fincher’s intractable young entrepreneur. Kurt paints the film’s complex hero as the offspring of these two clashing creators who—for the sake of a story they both felt was important—transformed their strife into a dynamic collaboration.

Kurt’s exquisitely researched treatment demonstrates how *The Social Network* labors, subtly and by means of its very structure, to make us believe in the imminent “demise” of a “social system based on privilege and aristocracy.” Waiting in the wings to replace this outmoded system is a model “centralized around innovation, entrepreneurship, and meritocracy,” and made possible only by the “brutality of cyberspace” and that great destroyer of decorum and privacy—the Internet. Kurt’s accomplishment is to make us feel the impact of Sorkin and Fincher’s debate as a tremor of the “seismic shift” that is bringing our society from an old, to a new, order.

—Davy Walter
The Social Divide: David Fincher and Aaron Sorkin As Counterpoints in the Dialogue over the Internet

Kurt Chirbas

Introduction

Halfway through director David Fincher’s 2010 drama The Social Network, we witness what might be called an act of seduction. The camera cranes over a San Francisco nightclub: an early-aughties techno track blasts below, scantily, leather-clad dancers, armed with pink feather boas, oscillate their hips atop a table, and flashing strobe lights lend the scene a sense of either ecstasy or nausea. After the establishing shot, we arrive at the heart of the action, two young men sitting at a table on the balcony, trying to have a conversation over pulsating music. One is Mark Zuckerberg (Jesse Eisenberg), a 19-year-old Harvard undergrad who has moved out to Palo Alto for the
summer in hopes of expanding the social networking site, Facebook, he co-founded with his then-best friend, Eduardo Saverin (Andrew Garfield), from his dorm room. The other is Sean Parker (Justin Timberlake), the 22-year-old founder of Napster, a now-bankrupt music-sharing program, who’s looking to get in on Zuckerberg’s business venture. On the DVD commentary, Timberlake describes his role the best: Parker is the “mistress” who “comes between two good friends.” And in this scene, Timberlake says his character is trying to build a “love affair”—to get Zuckerberg to dump Eduardo in favor of him. He means this in a metaphoric, business sense: this is not an affair that would be consummated by sex, but stock shares.

Reviewers of the film agree, many stating that the relationship between Zuckerberg and Parker mirrors that of Faust and Mephistopheles: Zuckerberg is selling his morality, which is represented by his relationship with Eduardo, to the devil, in this case Parker, in exchange for fame, fortune, and a life in the fast lane. This interpretation, however, doesn’t ring completely true. Not only does Zuckerberg reveal at one point in the film that he declined a million-dollar deal from Microsoft to buy a program he created in high school, suggesting that he cares little about money or financial wealth, but he also seems completely unaware of the debauchery that is taking place in the club: despite the nearly naked girls surrounding him, he’s more interested in admiring the architecture of the building. Therefore, it’s unlikely that any of this would have persuaded Zuckerberg to remove his best friend from the company on its own. Peter Travers, a film critic for *Rolling Stone*, makes a more nuanced, and I’d argue more accurate, comparison by saying that Parker is a “seductive Iago to Mark’s ego-bruised Othello.” This analogy can be justified: both Iago and Parker use an everyday object to exploit their respective protagonist’s tragic flaws—to plant a seed in their minds—and eventually, achieve their own goals and worldly ambitions. While Iago uses a handkerchief to take advantage of Othello’s jealousy, Parker uses a business card: right after Parker reveals that his dream is for Zuckerberg to one day hand out a business card that reads, “I’m CEO, bitch,” Zuckerberg immediately becomes much more animated, laughing and smiling, and deciding that he will make a space for Parker not only in his business, but also in his life. Literally. He offers Parker stay in his Palo Alto house rental. Parker captures Zuckerberg’s attention, in the way most characters in the film can’t, because he has managed to tap into one of Zuckerberg’s fundamental beliefs, one that he holds on to with an almost religious-like fervor. As screenwriter Aaron Sorkin comments in one of the DVD’s special features, “‘I’m CEO, bitch’ is the church they both go to.” But what exactly does this line mean? And if we extend the *Othello* comparison, how does it characterize Zuckerberg’s tragic flaw?
It turns out the filmmakers were wrestling with, and arguing over, these same exact questions. Timberlake says that this scene was by far the hardest to act in because he didn’t have a complete script until the day the scene was actually shot. Sorkin and Fincher “kept changing out dialogue, so much of it, the order of it, what (Parker) was actually saying, the verbiage, even just small words” up until they started filming that day. On a DVD featurette called, “How Did They Ever Make a Movie of Facebook?,” the audience is taken behind the scenes of the production, and one of the sections shows Sorkin and Fincher collaborating and trying to retool this scene. The two have a debate over who is the “bitch” that the card is referring to. Sorkin is much more literal about the profanity, stating that it refers to the girls in Zuckerberg’s and Parker’s life that broke up with them, causing them to create their websites in the first place. Fincher, however, takes a different approach, saying:

I’m CEO, bitch’ is anyone who looks at a 21-year-old who says, ‘I invented this thing,’ and they say, ‘Isn’t that great! Of course, we want you on board, and we want your ideas, and we want a relationship with you, but now, you can go the fuck home. Because we know what the fuck we are doing with this thing, and you’re finished. (The Social Network)

This distinction demonstrates a wide gap between Sorkin’s and Fincher’s understanding of the character of Zuckerberg, and alternatively, what his tragic flaw is that results in his decision to oust Eduardo from the company. For Sorkin, his flaw is the inability to communicate effectively with those around him, which prevents him from factoring in others’ emotions when making decisions and causes him great social alienation; but for Fincher, it stems from a frustration with the rest of the world for not taking his unique talents and innovations seriously, simply because he does not follow what he considers pointless social conventions like fashion, etiquette, and limitations placed on age.

In an interview with Deadline Hollywood, an online magazine about the entertainment industry, the film’s producer Scott Rudin says that these contrary interpretations extend beyond the two’s disagreement over who Zuckerberg is calling a bitch. He says both Fincher and Sorkin were attracted to the film for different reasons:

We all had different things about it that made us interested. David was much more interested in the ruthlessness of innovation. David believes that Zuckerberg did everything necessary to do right and protect Facebook. Aaron’s point of view on the material is more Ibsen-like. Zuckerberg is a tragic hero who suffers a substantial punishment. (Fleming)

By looking at interviews, newspaper articles, their tracks from
the DVD commentary, and film reviews, it can be determined that Sorkin and Fincher entered the project with diametrically opposed motivations and points of view. While it would be overly simplistic to ascribe one definitive interpretation of the film to Sorkin and Fincher, Sorkin is more likely to view the film as a morality tale, one that cautions the audience about the dangers of fame, power, and the isolating effect of cyberspace, while Fincher is more inclined to see it as an inspirational story about a young entrepreneur, about a man who stood by and defended his creation regardless of what others thought about him. Because the film was born out of collaboration between these two men, it is very rich as a result, with both threads of Zuckerberg’s characterization still intact. Curiously enough, viewers’ interpretation of the film seem to be falling roughly along generational lines: surveys show that older moviegoers are more likely to buy into Sorkin’s view about Zuckerberg being a tragic figure who falls into temptation while younger audience members see Zuckerberg as an aspirational figure, who remains true to his convictions and becomes a billionaire as a result.

The dialogue between Sorkin and Fincher in the making of this film is representative of a much greater conversation currently taking place in American culture: the role of the Internet in our society. Some see the film as validation of the Internet’s alienating effect, which they see as having resulted in the loss of privacy, the development of hyperactive characteristics in youth, and the growth of new forms of bullying. Others take the opposite stance, arguing that the film illustrates the role of Internet as an equalizing force: no longer does someone need the support of monolithic institutions or to schmooze through old-boy networks in order to be successful. All one needs is the drive and the talent. This essay will assert that the two seemingly contradictory themes found in the film are the result of the unique collaboration between Sorkin and Fincher, and as a result, reflect the deeper discourse currently taking place in American society.

Configuring a Network

_The Social Network_ is a film about a legal deposition. Well, technically, it’s a film about two legal depositions. Based on Ben Mezrich’s 2009 book, _The Accidental Billionaires: The Founding of Facebook, a Tale of Sex, Money, Genius, and Betrayal_, it tells the story of Zuckerberg, who launches Facebook from his Harvard dorm room and becomes the defendant in two separate lawsuits as a result: one with the Winklevoss twins (Armie Hammer), who claim the idea for the website was their own, and the other with Eduardo Saverin (Garfield), a Facebook co-founder and former best friend of Zuckerberg, who feels he was unfairly booted from the company when his shares
got diluted. It’s inspired by real events, but exactly how much portrayed in the film is true is up for debate.

The film’s history began in 2008 when an e-mail arrived in the inbox of the book’s author “completely out of the blue, at two in the morning” (Mezrich 257). The e-mail turned out to be written by a Harvard student, Will McMullen, and it said that his best friend, the real Eduardo Saverin, “had co-founded Facebook and no one had ever heard of him” (Harris). Mezrich was interested, and decided to build “a relationship with (Saverin) over the next couple of months” (Brown). He said he was so fascinated by Saverin’s story that instead of starting to write the book, he decided to rush a 28-page film treatment to Hollywood, pitching it to studios as “Superbad in the midst of a multibillion-dollar company” (Brown).

That’s when Sorkin entered the fold. He read Mezrich’s treatment, “got to page three” (Harris), and immediately signed on. The world got its first look the film on July 15, 2010, when Columbia Pictures premiered a two-and-a-half minute theatrical trailer on the film’s official website. Response to the trailer, which featured images from the film played over a choral rendition of Radiohead’s 1993 single “Creep,” immediately went viral. Josh Rottenberg, from Entertainment Weekly, said it was “brilliantly haunting.” Amy Kaufman blogged for the Los Angeles Times, “Who knew Facebook could be so deep?,” calling the trailer “dark, dramatic,” and the film “a possible award contender.”

She was right. After the film’s release, it swept all nearly all of the critics’ awards—winning Best Picture from the National Society of Film Critics, the New York Film Critics Circle, the Los Angeles Film Critics Association, and the National Board of Review—and took home the prize for Best Picture at the 2011 Golden Globes Awards. It lost, however, at the Academy Awards, where The King’s Speech took home the top award. The defeat caused the Los Angeles Times to ask, “whether the film was too young for the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, which is primarily made up of industry insiders over 50” (Horn and Sperling). Data shows this may in fact have been the case. CinemaScore, which tracks moviegoers’ opinions of films after exiting the theater on opening weekend, showed that the film received a B+ rating overall, but those under 18 years old gave it an A- (Brodesser-Akner). Not only did younger audiences like the film better, but according to YouGov BrandIndex, which measures public perception of certain corporations by surveying consumers, they also had a higher opinion about the actual Facebook site after seeing the film. The group found that there was a dramatic increase in Facebook’s approval number following the release of the movie among 18- to 34-year-olds: the number ticked up from 23.5 points of approval on Sept. 22, to 46.4 on the film’s opening day Oct.
However, the opposite trend held for those over 50 years of age: approval for Facebook had been ticking up in this age group prior to the release of the film, but on opening day, the number plunged (Warren). Many began asking why these two age groups were responding to the film so differently.

The Anti-Social Network: Aaron Sorkin and the Internet

He’s a 25-year-old computer-programming mastermind. He speaks in short, clipped sentences, and he’s angry at a Hollywood movie that’s just been released detailing the founding of a website he created. He thinks the film is so defamatory that he’s taking legal action against its screenwriter. No, this isn’t Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook CEO. It’s Patric Edelstein (Jake T. Carpenter), a fictional character on a February 15, 2011 episode of the CBS legal drama *The Good Wife*. Edelstein explains at one point that the film “shows (him) creating this website, so (he) could pick up girls despite the fact (he) was engaged to be married and had no interest in picking up girls”—similar to a claim the real Zuckerberg made on a December 5, 2010 episode of *60 Minutes* to discredit *The Social Network*. He says he was dating another Harvard undergrad, Priscilla Chan, at the time that he created Facebook, which would invalidate the theory that he created the website as a way of getting back at the girl who broke up with him at the beginning of the film. The show’s many parallels to Zuckerberg and the hullabaloo surrounding the film’s release are no accident though.

The episode is a clever way to satirize Sorkin’s widely known, and well publicized, aversion to the Internet—one that would seem to suggest he did not enter the project with completely unbiased intentions. For instance, in a recent interview with *New York Magazine*, he went on the record saying he’s “not a fan of the Internet” (Harris). The author of the story, Mark Harris, makes sure to clarify that in Sorkin-speak, “‘not a fan’ is not a euphemism for ‘I’m ambivalent’—it’s a euphemism for ‘I hate it’” (Harris). He goes on to list some reasons for Sorkin’s repulsion to the Web: it allows individuals look up information about his 2001 drug bust for all of eternity, and it contributed to the demise of his television series, *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*, because of an outpouring of negative reaction from bloggers. Harris then comments that the film might be in some ways a “well-aimed spitball thrown at new media by old media” (Harris).

This idea is explored on the episode of *The Good Wife*, called “Net Worth,” where Edelstein’s lawyer, Will Gardner (Josh Charles, who in a twist of fate once starred in Sorkin’s own television show, *Sports Night*), questions the film’s screenwriter, Rand Blaylock (Stephen Kunken, giving his best smarmy Sorkin impersonation), what
story he was trying to tell by using events from his client’s life. The two have a heated discussion:

BLAYLOCK: The story of the Internet, this age we’re in, where people just criticize each other anonymously, where all these tiny little loners, in their tiny little rooms, order out for pizza and just flame at each other all the time.

GARDNER: Or when those same loners blog about your drug abuse?

BLAYLOCK: Yes, I’m guilty lawyer-man. Malice. This whole movie was just my attempt at getting back at the Internet. Take that Internet.

GARDNER: You wanted Mr. Edelstein’s character in the movie to show that the Internet was alienating people.

BLAYLOCK: Not just that, but yes that. (“Net Worth”)

Obviously, the scene is a work of fiction, and should not be interpreted as anything more that. However, even if it was not the conscious intent of Sorkin, the explanation that Blaylock proposes in this episode—that his film is about the Internet’s alienating effect on society—is what many individuals have taken to be the main theme of *The Social Network*. Perhaps no one has clung to this view more feverishly than Mick LaSalle, film critic for *The San Francisco Chronicle*, who says that when he watched the movie he felt “angry and disgusted, but also a little afraid” (LaSalle). He cited as evidence the scene that follows the opening title sequence: Zuckerberg has just been dumped by his Boston University girlfriend Erica Albright (Rooney Mara) and goes back to his dorm room. He proceeds to blog about Albright in revenge—calling her a bitch, sneering at her last name, and publishing her bra size. LaSalle says that in this scene, Sorkin and Fincher are saying “something powerful and terrible, that in the years since that day, the social world has, to a large degree, configured itself around the contours of that one young man’s neurosis” and continues to point out that “that act of cruelty to an ex-girlfriend would be repeated a millionfold by others, on Zuckerberg’s invention Facebook” (LaSalle).

To some extent, he has a point. Larry Rosen, professor and former chair of psychology at California State University, Dominguez Hills, approached the film from a clinical perspective, and found that Zuckerberg’s character in the film showed “signs of many DSM-IV psychiatric conditions including adult antisocial personality disorder, Asperger’s, ADHD, and narcissistic personality disorder” (Stewart). He said these characteristics are most apparent in the first scene, where he has a date with Albright at a pub and demonstrates his in-
ability to communicate with individuals face-to-face. Unable to read body language, he is absolutely shocked when Albright reveals that he wants to break up with him. The audience is not. If anything, they’re shocked she didn’t do so sooner: he has insulted her education, her family, and accused her of sleeping with the doorman. But Rosen says the traits he exhibits are not completely out of ordinary, stating that Eisenberg “played Mark Zuckerberg exactly how we see people in our research acting online. Online people are abrupt, callous and nasty, and we accept it” (Stewart). As a result, he concludes that the scene provides a reason why Zuckerberg created Facebook: he needed “ways to communicate online,” where his behavior is more acceptable, so he would not have to interact face-to-face (Stewart).

Responding to the growth of Facebook back in 2006, Chris Cloke, head of child protection at the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, agreed. He said people act differently when they are online, saying that it’s “a completely unregulated world out there. I’d compare it to a modern-day Lord of the Flies. Children say things that are much more extreme and vindictive than they would in their everyday lives” (Kowalski 53). Ironically enough, this was the same argument Sorkin made on an episode of The West Wing, called “The U.S. Poet Laureate,” which aired on NBC on March 27, 2002. While screenwriter Laura Glasser penned the script, Sorkin wrote the teleplay, which was centered on Deputy White House Chief of State Josh Lyman (Bradley Whitford) discovering he has a fan site devoted to following his life. When he decides to post a response to one of the criticisms a blogger leveled against him, Josh finds that they don’t take his “response in the spirit that it was intended” and experiences a major backlash (“The U.S. Poet Laureate”). He later complains,
“It’s Lord of the Flies in there!” (“The U.S. Poet Laureate”). The story is based off a real event in Sorkin’s life. When Sorkin responded to a complaint about The West Wing on a website called Television Without Pity in 2000, he ended up being lambasted by the online community. A New York Times article called this episode of The West Wing “his best and loudest available form of revenge against a phenomenon that has not always treated him fondly” (Sella). Perhaps speaking for Sorkin, Lyman states in the episode, “The Internet is a crazy place. It’s got a dictatorial leader that I’m sure has a muumuu and chain-smokes” (“The U.S. Poet Laureate”).

While the muumuu certainly doesn’t apply, Sorkin actually has Zuckerberg smoking in a May 2009 version of the script. This was probably a detail that had to be removed for legal reasons (there’s no evidence that Zuckerberg actually ever smoked). In fact, many of the rough edges that would have more directly supported the idea of the Internet as an isolating force were smoothed out during the production process. For instance, one of the forces that would have more powerfully proved the brutality of cyberspace was an overwhelming sense of misogyny that was ascribed to Zuckerberg in the original script. For instance, in the May 2009 draft, after hearing about how Zuckerberg created a website called Facemash that allowed Harvard students to rank the hotness of fellow undergrads, Marylin Delpy (Rashida Jones), a second year associate at the law firm representing Zuckerberg, has an exchange with him:

MARYLIN: Eight percent of the male population of Harvard had been on it within two hours?

MARK: Eighty.

MARYLIN: What?

MARK: Eighty percent of the male population. (The Social Network)

The tone of this dialogue is not admiring of Zuckerberg’s technical feat in quite the same way the dialogue in the actual film is. In the final cut, Marylin asks if “the site got twenty-two hundred hits in two hours,” to which Mark responds, “Twenty-two thousand.” The revision seems to emphasize the sheer amount of people Zuckerberg was able to reach with the site, almost marveling at his accomplishment. The original, however, highlights the vengeful, hormonal, morally questionable qualities of the project by reminding the audience that this site allowed men to rate girls without their permission. And this might not even be accurate. As journalist Lucas O’Brien points out in a blog post for Slate, “the real Facemash included photos of both men and women—a fact that cuts against the depiction of Zucker-
berg as a horny dude out for revenge.” It would seem as if Sorkin took liberties with the facts in order to advance his own narrative: that the Internet, as represented by Zuckerberg, is having a detrimental effect on human relationships.

“This is our time”: David Fincher and Innovation

However, this perspective overlooks the fact that many groups have been responding to the film in a completely opposite way, viewing it as an inspirational tale about the “American dream,” the idea that anyone can achieve success regardless of their social standing. For instance, the real Mark Zuckerberg said in an interview on 60 Minutes that:

I can’t tell you how many messages I’ve gotten from people who use Facebook writing in to say, “This movie was really inspiring to me. After seeing this movie, I want to start my own company.” Or “I want to go into computer science.” Or “I want to study math.” And if the movie had that effect on people, then that’s awesome. Great. (Stahl).

Even Eduardo Saverin chimed in. After seeing the film, he wrote an op-ed piece for CNBC, saying, “The true takeaway for me was that entrepreneurship and creativity, however complicated, difficult or tortured to execute, are perhaps the most important drivers of business today and the growth of our economy” (Saverin). He continues by writing that “unlike so many things in life, there are no boundaries as to who can be an entrepreneur” and that “true innovation is blind” (Saverin). Obviously both Zuckerberg and Saverin have clear stakes in what they are writing—they are talking about their fictional onscreen counterpoints here, and it would surprise no one if they tried to put a positive spin on the film in order to better suit their own public image.

But evidence shows, regardless of their motivations, they may be right. A March 3, 2011 article in The Harvard Crimson points out that the number of undergraduates enrolled in Computer Science 50, the university’s introductory course in the field, increased by 56 percent in the fall, citing Mark Zuckerberg—and by association The Social Network—as the force behind the sudden growth (Novendstern and Ye). And in a blog post for The Daily Beast, an online reporting and opinion website founded by former Vanity Fair editor Tina Brown, journalist Rebecca Dana says that Zuckerberg—usually seen sporting Adidas flips-flops, Gap pull-over sweatshirts, and cargo shorts—has become a fashion icon of sorts lately because of the film. The implication of Dana’s article is that the film is having a profound impact on youth culture: it’s even affecting how they choose to dress. Eisenberg, who plays Zuckerberg in the film, described the
trend in a phone interview with *The New York Times* shortly after the film came out:

> I was asked by older people again and again how I could play a character who is capable of being so mean, as if I were almost condemned by this role, but young people never had that reaction. They kept saying, “This guy was genius. Look what he has created.” For a lot of people my age, the message is that technology allows you to create something that can change things from a single computer. You don’t need a secretary, you don’t need an office building and you don’t need employees. (Carr)

The question remains, though: how can audiences come out of the same film with such polarized attitudes about the main character? In an interview with *Deadline Hollywood*, Rudin gave an answer, citing “the unlikely marriage of these two collaborators” (Fleming), referring to Sorkin and Fincher, as the reason. Through his description of Fincher’s role of the set, Rudin is able illustrate how Fincher added an additional layer to Sorkin’s now-Academy-Award-winning screenplay, and it’s this layer that seems to be appealing most to younger audiences:

> The way (Fincher) handled the anthropology of the movie was extraordinary. He really got so brilliantly underneath the culture that the movie was describing. He knows what it’s like to be 19 and come up with something and have somebody older and more monied try to take it away from you. (Fleming)

Fincher himself agrees that he tried to seek out another motivation for Zuckerberg besides just trying to get back at an ex-girlfriend, saying in an interview with *Hitfix.com* that Sorkin “was more comfortable with *Revenge of the Nerds* being kind of the muscle,” but he thought there had to be “something else to this guy that is way more than vaginal retribution” (McWeeny). As Rudin alluded to the previous quote, this new motivation for Zuckerberg ended up bearing a not-quite-so-coincidental resemblance to one from Fincher’s past. In the book *The Director’s Cut: Picturing Hollywood in the 21st Century*, Fincher describes an experience that in many ways parallels Zuckerberg’s own in the film. At 27 years old, Fincher was hired to direct *Alien 3*, the third in a film series whose previous installments had been helmed by major names like Ridley Scott and James Cameron, who would go on to *Gladiator* and *Avatar* fame respectively. Fincher says, “It was probably one of the most expensive movies at the time, and it seemed ludicrous to assume that some 27-year-old kid was given 56 million dollars” (Littger 173). But he also said that as soon as he arrived on set, he started fighting with the studio over what
type of film he should make (Littger 173). The result was a movie that mostly panned, receiving only a 40 percent approval rating on Rotten Tomatoes:

> When you spend all of your time fighting about what are the themes and what is the content. What are the ideas that you’re trying to get across, and are those ideas too lofty and too pretentious, and do they have any place in a sequel or do they have any place in science fiction…? It’s not good if you end up spending all your time arguing about what the contents should be in order for it to be the most successful movie—and by that I mean most profitable! (Littger 174)

In this quote, Fincher expresses many of the same concerns Zuckerberg has in the film. Not only were Zuckerberg and Fincher both young when they first achieved success, but society pushed both of them to compromise on their creations in order to make them more profitable. Fincher was told by the studio to make a film that had greater mass appeal, which meant sacrificing the story he wanted to tell, while Zuckerberg was told by Eduardo to monetize Facebook by selling advertisements, which would have forfeited the site’s “coolness” factor. If the film is analyzed through this lens, Zuckerberg isn’t betraying a friend at all when he removes Eduardo from the company. He is protecting his innovation and staying true to himself.

Besides giving Zuckerberg a new motive for ousting Eduardo out of the company, Fincher also helped to accentuate—through his directorial choices—the idea that society is experiencing a seismic shift because of the Internet. Throughout the film, the audience witnesses the demise of an old social system based on privilege and aristocracy and the rise of a new one that values innovation, entrepreneurship, and meritocracy. While it is true that this idea is integral to the film’s script, it is most clearly articulated by Fincher’s composition of scenes, especially when one compares how he framed the scene where Eduardo is hazed by a final club, with the scene where Zuckerberg interviews interns for Facebook. In the first scene, Eduardo finds himself in the Phoenix Club—one of the most elite and prestigious clubs at Harvard—with other recruits, forced to drink from a bottle of Jack Daniels, and then hand it off to the person behind him (see fig. 3). The camera captures four parallel lines of students doing the same activity, lending it a sense of tradition and routine. The passing of the bottle in a line symbolizes the handing off of the club from one generation to another. All the recruits wear tuxedos, a sign of wealth and power, and chant a low murmur of “Phoenix, Phoenix” while drinking, an example of how individuals need to conform to a set of predetermined behaviors in order to fit into the old social structure at Harvard.
Similarly, Zuckerberg also uses a form of hazing to determine who will join the company in Palo Alto for the summer. Perhaps he got this idea from the final clubs themselves, but the way this scene is staged and shot shows how much the new social structure Zuckerberg has created differs from the old one (see fig. 4).

First of all, the setting of the computer science lab is much more modern than the Phoenix Club—the walls are made of cement instead of bricks. And while alcohol plays a significant part in this selection process as well—applicants must take a shot for every tenth line of code they finish—these students are not evaluated simply on their ability to gulf down alcohol, but on the basis of who could finish programming first, a task that requires skill and is much more meritocratic in nature. If the first still had a linear composition, this one has a circular composition. The applicants are not standing in a regimented line as they were in Phoenix, but sitting around a circular table facing each other, which creates a greater sense of
equality: they are being judged solely on their ability to code, not on their behaviors, their physical appearance, or their origin of birth. The lighting focuses on the table with the computers, highlighting the work at hand, but in the background, the audience sees a crowd uproariously cheering for contestants. There is no stifling of individuality here, and the atmosphere is kinetic, and seems better fitting to a party than to a job interview. This can be read as a movement away from a highly controlled and centralized aristocracy and towards a more open—and less judgmental—meritocracy.

This seems to be the message that most young moviegoers seem to be taking away from the film, and the one the real counterparts of both Zuckerberg and Saverin are trying to promote: the idea that anyone can become a dot-com billionaire and that the barriers once holding individuals back in the past—social class, start-up money, the need for assistance from somebody—are slowly eroding. As Harvard Law Professor Lawrence Lessig mentions in his critique of the film (while arguing the film doesn’t communicate this idea strongly enough):

> Because the platform of the Internet is open and free, or in the language of the day, because it is a ‘neutral network,’ a billion Mark Zuckerbergs have the opportunity to invent for the platform. And though there are crucial partners who are essential to bring the product to market, the cost of proving viability on this platform has dropped dramatically... This is a platform that has made democratic innovation possible. (Lessig)

It’s a stark cry from the idea that the film is a morality tale, as many reviewers have implied. Since this theme seems best expressed through cinematography and compositional choice, it seems clear that Fincher is primarily responsible for its inclusion, with his personal experience with as a young innovator providing the catalyst. And this seems to be one of the major attractions of the film to young adults: the idea that they too can become a billionaire, and start a social revolution.

**Conclusion**

Both Sorkin and Fincher began the project with dramatically different life experiences and perspectives on the technology and the world. For instance, Sorkin started his professional career as a playwright, writing for one of the world’s oldest art forms, while Fincher began by shooting stylized music videos, working with one of the world’s newest. And that’s on top of the fact that Sorkin has had several very public, antagonistic encounters with the Internet while Fincher shares a biographical history that similar to Zuckerberg’s own.

However, it seems a little bit unfair to imply that Sorkin and
Fincher were always on opposite sides of the fence when deciding on the film’s characterization of Zuckerberg. Both of the filmmakers say that they agreed far more often during the creative process than they disagreed (Harris). Unlike most productions though, Sorkin continued to have a very active role on set when the actual filming occurred, making the final product much more of a collaborative effort. Fincher said this marked a distinct change from his previous projects:

That’s what you get with Aaron. You can’t send him away. That’s television. The writers have control because in Aaron’s case, the pages don’t come out of his hand until he comes out of his trailer, you know, comes out of his office. And to be honest, I’ve never worked that way before, and there were things I disagreed with him on, like what was going on or the level of complexity that was going on. (McWeeny)

There are multiple instances in the film where we see the two creative forces compromising. Fincher eventually does have his way with the business cards. For the final cut, Sorkin rewrote the script, so that Timberlake as Parker now says:

What the VCs (venture capitalists) want is to say, ‘Good idea, kid. The grown-ups will take it from here.’ But not this time. This is our time. This time, you’re gonna hand them a business card that says, ‘I’m CEO, bitch.’ That’s what I want for you” (The Social Network).

However, in other cases, it was Fincher who gave in. When Zuckerberg finally gets the packet of business cards delivered to his desk, he takes one out and looks at it solemnly. The music in the background, a score by Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross, is literally an echo of what we heard at the beginning of the film during the title sequence. We are able to see how far the character has come, and how much he has lost in the process. Zuckerberg does end up a tragic hero in the end, exactly how Sorkin imagined the character.

Figure 5. At the end of the film, Zuckerberg has finally achieve his goal: he has a card that says, “I’m CEO, bitch.” However, he finds this does not make him happy. He ends up a tragic hero (The Social Network).
Through an analysis of those few areas where Sorkin and Fincher did disagree—for instance, in deciding who the word “bitch” would refer to—we can see on a smaller scale those divisions that currently exist in society over the role of the Internet. Is the Internet making us more callous and preventing us from making healthy interpersonal relationships? Or has it become an equalizing force, making society more meritocratic in nature since it takes nothing other than talent and a strong will to write a successful computer program? Perhaps, the film was so successful amongst the critic groups because it captures a moment in time where social networking sites like Facebook are growing in users exponentially, and their effect on society is being heavily debated. For instance, the media has cited the role Facebook played in the recent Tunisian revolution—Roger Cohen of The New York Times goes as far as calling Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, the “leader” of the revolution—as proof that the site is “empowering to the repressed, humiliated and distant” (Cohen). At the same time, it has also been called Orwellian because it pushes its users to reveal more information about themselves than they would be comfortable sharing in person. As Daniel Lyons asks in an article in Newsweek, “Who knew Big Brother would be not a big government agency, but a bunch of kids in Silicon Valley?” (Lyons). But perhaps, by giving us a highly nuanced, highly contradictory portrait of Zuckerberg, Sorkin and Fincher are actually providing us a forum where we can discuss our highly nuanced, highly contradictory ideas about the Internet. And in the end, it’s these varying viewpoints that contribute the film’s richness, considering it can accommodate so many perspectives without invalidating any of the others.
Works Cited


