

The Social Network

reviewed by [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [November 16, 2010](#) issue



David Fincher's *The Social Network*, with a script by the monarch of machine-gun banter, Aaron Sorkin (*The West Wing*), is a smart, funny film that tells the story of how Facebook came into being. It's a comedy of manners about a desperately uncool Harvard undergrad who creates the most popular club in the world and declares himself president.

Jesse Eisenberg plays Mark Zuckerberg, who has been denied entrance to the most coveted Harvard clubs, probably due to both his lower-middle-class background and his chilly, aggressive personality. He and his friends, who were only able to pledge the sole Jewish fraternity on campus, don't have a chance at dating the most attractive girls. When Mark's Boston University girlfriend (Rooney Mara) breaks up with him, he gets drunk and delivers his revenge, an acrid post about her on his blog.

The same night he hacks into the Harvard computer system to access photos of every woman at Harvard and designs a game called Facemash that allows male users to rate them. The stunt earns him a suspension but brings him to the attention of three Harvard aristocrats—identical twins Cameron and Tyler Winklevoss (both

played, wittily, by Armie Hammer) and Divya Narendra (Max Minghella)—who are attempting to devise a computer-based social network. They hire Mark to supervise the technology. Instead of completing the assignment, he constructs his own version, which becomes an instant success. Leaving them in the dust is his way of one-upping these self-proclaimed "gentlemen of Harvard."

Mark lacks a moral compass; he's Sammy Glick—the acquisitive, social-climbing antihero of Budd Schulberg's classic novel *What Makes Sammy Run?*—with a Harvard pedigree. Eisenberg, who generally plays likable schnooks, gives a brilliant performance, using his open, earnest baby face to suggest layers of resentment and a steely resolve that struggles to tamp down unresolved adolescent longing. Mark is both impossible to warm up to and impossible to hate.

The sympathetic role falls to the gifted Andrew Garfield as Mark's best friend Eduardo Saverin, who bankrolls Facebook and is thrilled when overnight he, Mark and another partner, Dustin Moskovitz (Joseph Mazzello), become magnets for desirable women—the kind that never used to acknowledge their existence. Eduardo becomes Facebook's CFO but is later squeezed out. (The movie is structured as a series of flashbacks; in the frame story, Mark, a wealthy businessman at 23, is being sued by Eduardo and the Winklevosses.)

Sudden riches and celebrity tend to reduce adults to children who've just been handed the key to the candy store. Part of what makes *The Social Network* (which Sorkin based on Ben Mezrich's book *The Accidental Billionaires*) such a juicy and original entertainment is that the characters are barely out of their teenage years. Mark and his friends act out the fantasies that they've been storing up only since they hit puberty. Justin Timberlake, in a perfectly calibrated, soft-toned caricature, plays Sean Parker, the California entrepreneur who becomes Mark's counselor and then his silent partner. Sean's bravado, unlike Mark's, is practiced and elegant, and he lives the kind of high life that makes Mark salivate. He has a reputation for self-destructiveness (he's destroyed two companies), and Eduardo is wary of him from the outset. But Mark is too arrogant to acknowledge that he may or should have limits, and Sean's glittering show-off style draws him. Sean is the sort of self-made aristocrat whose ostentation makes the Winklevoss twins look hopelessly *démodé*. Curiously, though, Mark doesn't participate in Sean's party-game high jinks. He may be a climber, but once he arrives he can't shake his workaholic, revenging-nerd personality long enough to enjoy his spoils.

Fincher's previous two movies, *Zodiac* and *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, had superlative ensemble casts, and *The Social Network* follows suit. Everyone in it is terrific, including cameo players like Douglas Urbanski, who has a one-scene part as Harvard president Larry Summers. When the Winklevosses petition him to take action against Mark for stealing their idea, he puts them off with fatigued irony. They're operating on the old Harvard gentleman code, but he treats them like children who soiled their knees in a schoolyard brawl and want their opponent punished for fighting dirty. It's scenes like this one that make *The Social Network* the cleverest comedy so far this year.