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THE SOCIAL NETWORK

You may have heard that a lot of critics, in their reviews of the film, have been comparing the Facebook saga *The Social Network* to *Citizen Kane*. So before this turns into one of those inaccurate, Al-Gore-says-he-invented-the-Internet sort of myths, let me clarify: They're saying that in terms of its storyline, themes, and protagonist, director David Fincher's and screenwriter Aaron Sorkin's movie is more than a bit reminiscent of Orson Welles' 1941 untouchable. No one, to my knowledge, is saying that *The Social Network* is as good as *Citizen Kane*.

Having said that, *The Social Network* is as good as *Citizen Kane*.

Okay, that's an overstatement, but I'm not sure how else to describe the dizzying, rapturous happiness I felt at the close of Fincher's and Sorkin's remarkable tragicomedy. I left not knowing if I wanted to see it again immediately, or if I wanted to rush home and share my excitement with all my friends ... preferably via Facebook. *The Social Network* is so teeming with pleasures – written, directorial, performance-based – that it's rather overwhelming. Yet the genius of the achievement, to my mind, lies in how much freaking *fun* it is; from the opening tavern sequence (one of cinema's all-time-great breakups) to the climactic image of a man sitting alone with his laptop, the film is grandly, madly entertaining, the rare ultra-smart work that never leaves you feeling stupid.

Fincher's and Sorkin's movie, inspired by the Ben Mezrich book *The Accidental Billionaires*, is a (somewhat or mostly, depending on the source) truthful account of the origins of Facebook, showing how an online prank initiated by Harvard student Mark Zuckerberg led to the development of the world's most popular and powerful social-networking tool. ("Social-networking tool" is also a pretty fair description of the film's Zuckerberg, whom Jesse Eisenberg portrays with an astounding blend of caginess, hostility, condescension, and wicked intelligence.) Vacillating between a chronological exploration of Facebook's creation and a

separate pair of depositions – Zuckerberg is the defendant in civil suits filed against him by former best friend Eduardo Saverin (Andrew Garfield) and twin wannabe-entrepreneurs Cameron and Tyler Winklevoss (both played by Armie Hammer) – *The Social Network* features three running narratives, an intimidating wealth of information, and scenes that shouldn't be the least bit cinematic. Yet as if by magic, everything in it somehow coalesces into one seamless, profoundly enjoyable, and *exceedingly* cinematic, whole.

To be sure, much of the credit belongs to Sorkin – *so* much of it, in truth, that I found it perfectly understandable when my moviegoing companion later referred to the movie as "the Aaron Sorkin show." If, like me, you were a ravenous fan of TV's *Sports Night* and the early seasons of *The West Wing*, you couldn't mistake the writing here for the work of anyone else; so polished that it glows, *The Social Network*'s dialogue blends screwball ebullience with beautifully layered exposition and frequently heart-stopping moments of insight. (Part of my yearning to see the film again lies with my craving to commit its best lines to memory. After one screening, my favorite thus far is uttered by Tyler Winklevoss, when contemplating a Zuckerberg ass-kicking: "I'm six-five, 220, and there's *two* of me.") Yet given no small measure of assistance by the topnotch editors Angus Wall and Kirk Baxter, Sorkin's narrative design is just as marvelous as the words that tumble from the characters' mouths. Every piece of information, among the film's trio of storylines, appears to be delivered exactly when it needs to be, and the chronological leapfrogging is never employed merely as a stylistic conceit. You want to *applaud* this screenplay.

But just as *The Social Network* is unquestionably an Aaron Sorkin movie, it's also every bit a David Fincher movie, and not just in the hypnotically drab, burnt-yellow and olive-green hues so familiar from *Fight Club* and *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*. As is frequently the case (though *not* in *Benjamin Button*), Fincher proves himself a master at eliciting powerful, invigorating performances, most notably from Eisenberg, who fashions what is easily the most thrillingly unlikable protagonist the movies have given us in years. (After his half-hearted "I'm sorry" during the opening breakup scene, the closest Zuckerberg ever comes to apologizing to anyone in

The Social Network
occurs after he insults Saverin, takes a beat, and admits, “That was mean.”) Everyone, though, appears to be working at peak ability here: Garfield, with his big-hearted friendliness and aching emotional honesty; Hammer, delineating his twins – as Zuckerberg calls them, “the Winklevi” – with brilliantly subtle brushstrokes; Justin Timberlake, as Napster founder Sean Parker, exuding such dynamic energy and reptilian charm that he threatens to walk off with the picture; Rooney Mara, fiercely sane and direct as the object of Zuckerberg’s affections-slash-scorn.

And as with his previous masterpiece, *Zodiac*, Fincher manages to take what are fundamentally unexciting activities (thinking, typing, chatting around a boardroom table) and give them the same feverish, electric charge as the most hair-raising encounters in his
Seven
and
The Game
;
The Social Network
is a thriller for the mind, one that keeps you alert and engaged through the whole of its lightning-fast two hours. The movie is emotionally devastating and oftentimes bitingly funny – never more so than when the Winklevoss twins try, unsuccessfully, to convince Harvard’s president (a perfect Douglas Urbanski) of their case against Zuckerberg – but best of all, it’s continually
fascinating
; in this portrait of a young man who gains the world but (it’s implied) loses whatever friends and

soul
he might possess, you feel not only the film, but your brain, buzzing with intense, exhilarating focus. I’d say I couldn’t possibly love
The Social Network
more than I do, but it’s a little early to make that assertion. Ask me again after five or six more viewings.

Author’s note: After writing this review, I did see the movie again. It’s even better on a second viewing. And my favorite line of dialogue remains the same, though it has a lot *of competition.*

[redacted] *There Will Be (Lots of) Blood* [redacted]