

Jesse Eisenberg (left) and Justin Timberlake in *The Social Network*

Traps

by STUART KLAWANS

If the word “breathless” were still available, maybe David Fincher and Aaron Sorkin could have chosen it as the title of *The Social Network*, their lightning-quick zig-zag through the rise of Facebook and the demise of all the nonvirtual relationships from which it sprang. Reviving the old Warner Bros. tradition of ripping films from today’s headlines—or, rather, carrying back into a big-studio production the headline-tearing methods that remain common in television, where Sorkin is their master—*The Social Network* makes crackling, often hilarious drama out of events that began in Mark Zuckerberg’s Harvard dorm room a mere seven years ago, reached a (very temporary) legal stopping point in 2008 and were put into book form (as Ben Mezrich’s *The Accidental Billionaires*, credited as the screenplay’s source) only in 2009.

You’d better not get self-indulgent if you want to toss off a film this fast; and indeed, Fincher has directed *The Social Network* head-on, without fudging a single camera setup or wasting a single shot (except for putting in one too many images of a caged hen—and that doesn’t matter, since the chicken is funny). You may judge the efficiency of Fincher’s methods by that zigzag effect I mentioned. Although *The Social Network* is structured as a double flashback—scenes of two different legal depositions in 2008 call up memories of 2003–04—the to-and-fro seems only to make the action accelerate.

The result is not a work of reliable reportage (something that only a mug would have expected it to be); nor is it, as some commentators are claiming, the story of a generation. (If the latter film is what you want, don’t go looking for it in the portrait of an exemplary billionaire. Wait for the

movie about the 20-year-olds who were shipping out to Iraq and Afghanistan when Zuckerberg had his brainstorm, or can’t find jobs today.) In fact, *The Social Network* doesn’t even tell you that much about social networks. What it does go into, fictionally but with strong critical intelligence, is the presumed difference between Zuckerberg’s attitudes and expectations and those of other people, members of his own generation included, whose thinking was about five minutes behind his. I take this difference to be the real subject of the movie. If the word had not already been taken, maybe Fincher and Sorkin could have called it *Contempt*.

This is a story that begins with a callous put-down, immediately escalates to public slurs (against one young woman at Boston University and every female undergrad at Harvard) and reaches its thematic high point when a character proudly remarks that one of his actions had not been a smart business move but was a great way of saying “Fuck you.” Formally, *The Social Network* makes its strongest statement through a densely layered soundtrack in which the voices are often thoroughly blended into the ambient noise: an environment of omnidirectional chatter and continual buzz where you lean in to catch one line of dialogue while the speakers are already racing into the next. Dramatically, though, the most lasting impression *The Social Network* might leave is the image of its fastest thinker and talker as he rouses himself from a seeming torpor to tongue-lash an attorney three times his age. In return for a perceived condescension, Zuckerberg returns the real thing, red-hot and self-righteous, while scarcely looking at the object of his scorn.

This act of self-revelation is all the more

striking for its rarity. Zuckerberg allows himself only a couple of others throughout the course of the film, and one of those hardly counts, given that he delivers it as a drunken blog post, written after his girlfriend walks out on him. The wonder of *The Social Network* is that Jesse Eisenberg, with his smooth and melancholy Jewish face, gets you precisely halfway onto Zuckerberg’s side. A specialist in bright, vulnerable brooders with a bit of a mean streak (see *The Squid and the Whale* or *Adventureland*), Eisenberg plays Zuckerberg as a genius-level wolf-boy: someone who is so smart that he feels entitled to say whatever’s on his mind, however brutal, and resents other people for resenting him for it. Abrasive in voice and manner, arrhythmic in gesture, humorless (though he doesn’t think so), the character doesn’t bother to talk about his feelings because nobody’s worthy to hear about them, and besides, he’s really interested only in behaviors. Meanwhile, behind the actor’s deep-shadowed eyes, you sense an almost desperate sweetness. It’s Zuckerberg’s fatal flaw that he would never let anyone see that part of himself, and Eisenberg’s triumph that he gets through the entire movie without once begging you to notice it.

As foils to this character, and rather schematic contributors to the movie’s theme, quick-witted British actor Andrew Garfield (as Eduardo Saverin, Zuckerberg’s original business partner and sole friend at Harvard) and the very large Armie Hammer (in a dual role as Cameron and Tyler Winklevoss, upperclassmen in all senses) briefly imagine they have hired Zuckerberg to work for them. The first mistakenly thinks that well-formulated, carefully executed business plans still lead to success (and can hold Zuckerberg’s attention). The second foolishly believes that scholar-athletes with old money naturally have success coming to them (and can excite anything in Zuckerberg other than rancor). The only character to catch on to Zuckerberg, and catch what passes for his loyalty, is another online entreprovocateur: Sean Parker, inventor of Napster, played brilliantly by a snaky yet sexless Justin Timberlake.

A movie about the least cool guy in the world who invents the next cool thing, the guy who can’t accommodate himself to any group and so smashes all of them, *The Social Network* delivers a current-affairs jolt that’s been sorely lacking in the multiplexes. You know what it’s about even before you see it, and you know why it’s relevant without being told. But at the deepest level of its investigation into Internet capitalism, portrayed here as a nonsystem with an aggravated ethos of creative destruction, *The Social Network*

blurs recent history into contemporary myth. What is its central figure, if not the Ivy League fulfillment of Heath Ledger's Joker in *The Dark Knight*? Zuckerberg, too, could say, from atop his pile of money, "I don't make plans. I just—do things."

OVER THE PAST SUMMER, YAEL Hersonski's *A Film Unfinished* began to play theatrically across the country, bringing audiences the disquieting experience of viewing authentically fabricated images of the Warsaw

Ghetto. These pictures—about sixty minutes of them, which serve as the core of Hersonski's documentary—were shot in the ghetto in May 1942, shortly before the beginning of the deportations to Treblinka, capturing whatever was placed in front of the camera. But because these scenes were planned and realized by the Nazis for their own purposes, they are, in large measure, inventions.

Seemingly abandoned while still in rough cut, with neither a soundtrack nor titles added, this dubious material was never accounted for

in the Nazis' meticulous records of their propaganda work. The reels disappeared until 1954, when archivists discovered them in the East German vaults. Subsequently, filmmakers began to use snippets of this semi-raw footage to illustrate the misery of the ghetto. They did so, however, without commenting on the source of the images or acknowledging the existence of the strange, improbable scenes of Jewish luxury that alternated with the pictures of utter wretchedness.

This willfully naïve approach became less

In Our Orbit Fair Warning

by FREDERICK DEKNATEL

The embarrassing percentage of Americans who believe Barack Obama is a Muslim Manchurian candidate sent to impose Sharia—or is it socialism?—from sea to shining sea should take a look at the Pentagon's books. Earlier this year Obama, formerly the partial antiwar candidate, sent Congress the largest defense budget since World War II: \$708 billion for the fiscal year 2011, a sum that surpassed the 2010 defense budget of \$626 billion, which grew this spring by \$33 billion—the initial outlay for an additional 30,000 soldiers in Afghanistan. Nearly \$160 billion of the 2011 budget (up from \$128 billion in 2010) covers "Overseas Contingency Operations," the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. These bloated numbers, plus the less-reported budgets and contingencies that reveal themselves in drone strikes in Pakistan and Yemen, are not just "part of Pentagon blank-check-ism in Washington," in Tom Engelhardt's terms. They are also proof that "war is now the American way," as he writes, "even if peace is what most Americans experience while their proxies fight in distant lands." At the outset of his damning new book, *The American Way of War: How Bush's Wars Became Obama's* (Haymarket; \$16.95), Engelhardt, a Nation Institute fellow, writes, "And peace itself? Simply put, there's no money in it."

The collection is a culling of essays published on Engelhardt's TomDispatch website since 2004, and the same note is struck in piece after piece after piece: America is an empire, its actions imperial. The signs are not just Iraq and Afghanistan but the increased drone attacks in Pakistan and the Pentagon's expansion of "lily pad" bases—

relatively small posts from Central Asia to Southeastern Europe and the Horn of Africa that are "meant to encircle and nail down control of this vast set of interlocking regions." The massive fortified embassies under construction in Baghdad and Islamabad, home to more soldiers, spies and cost overruns than diplomats, "will, assumedly, anchor the U.S. presence in the Greater Middle East."

Engelhardt does not trace American militarism solely to the "war on terror." With quick pace, he tells a history of fear and triumph that followed Pearl Harbor and the atomic bombings of Japan, which not only exposed the world to the reality of nuclear war but also showed Americans, with Hollywood's help, the image of a catastrophic attack on the "homeland." The term that was forged on 9/11 "once was an un-American word, more easily associated with Soviet Russia or Nazi Germany." Yet it has "replaced 'country,' 'land,' and 'nation' in the language of the terror-mongers. 'The homeland' is the place that terrorism, and nothing but terrorism, can violate."

History and polemic mix in punchy chapters about the rise of aerial warfare, the acceptance of civilian deaths as "collateral damage" and the language of war. Engelhardt laments the lack of journalistic coverage of the air wars over America's distant battlefields, whether by manned jets and helicopters or, increasingly, remote-controlled drones. Media reports rarely cite "any cumulative figures on air strikes in Iraq or Afghanistan per day, week or month." Why are no reporters taking to the skies above Iraq to survey the destruction of its cities? Along with the permanent American bases in Iraq, in Engelhardt's view, "the expansion of U.S. airpower is the great missing story of the post-9/11 era."

Also missing is the willingness of the political class to imagine a foreign policy not in thrall to a war machine. Since war and

security are now synonymous, and victory is meaningless, Washington is a war capital, and the United States a militarized country, even if it doesn't look like it at home. "We live in a world of American Newspeak," he writes, "in which alternatives to a state of war are not only ever more unacceptable, but even harder to imagine." America has been without a decisive military victory since World War II—Grenada, Panama and the 1991 Gulf War aside—but that is irrelevant. The reality, created in the cold war and exploited after 9/11, is an "ongoing war system [that] can't absorb victory," because victory is the end of military spending and rhetoric. War, Engelhardt argues, "is increasingly a state of being, not a process with a beginning, an end, and an actual geography." National security and the "war on terror" feed a perpetual state of insecurity that sustains and justifies the national security state. At least four times since the invasion of Iraq, the United States has declared Iraq sovereign. After every announcement, garrisons of American troops have remained, with billions in Congress-approved budgets supporting them, whether they are designated for combat or not.

Engelhardt excels at extracting lurid details from the annals of America's ongoing state of war. He has an editor's eye for the most revealing line buried at the bottom of a war correspondent's dispatch or an intelligence report filed in Washington. One of his best details is of the pilots who operate the unmanned drones that drop missiles on Afghanistan and Pakistan. Some work at computer screens on the outskirts of Las Vegas. When a day's work is over and the pilots leave Creech Air Force Base, a sign warns them to "drive carefully"—this is "the most dangerous part of your day." A fair warning; the threats are made at home. ■

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tenable in 1998, when a British researcher stumbled upon some thirty minutes of apparently discarded material from the Warsaw Ghetto film: multiple takes of scenes, which left no doubt that they had been staged. Still, until Hersonski, no one has thought to exhibit this material as an artifact, drawing attention to its puzzles, self-contradictions and lies.

In *A Film Unfinished*, Hersonski has embedded the extant footage within a critical scaffolding—one with several tiers, not all of them equally sturdy. Its elements are a discursive soundtrack narration; readings from the diary of Adam Czerniakow, head of the ghetto's Jewish Council, who made notes about his forced participation in the filming; a dramatic re-enactment of official testimony given by one Willy Wist, the only member of the Nazi film crew ever to have been identified; and scenes of octogenarian Warsaw Ghetto survivors watching the footage, and responding to it, in a screening room in Israel. The method is complex; but what we learn from *A Film Unfinished* can be summed up simply enough. The Nazis most likely intended to represent the Warsaw Ghetto as a hell of the Jews' own making. In manufacturing this horrific fiction, they unavoidably recorded traces of horrific reality.

It's perfectly clear which side Hersonski takes in this conflict between actuality and fabrication; but it's also clear that she is a media sophisticate who is familiar with the argument that supposedly nonfiction films have always been paradoxical, starting with *Nanook of the North*. If it's accurate to say that even the most blatantly made-up movie retains a residue of the facts that were before the lens, then it's also necessary to admit that the documentarian's camera records circumstances, not truths, out of which the film's subject is constructed more than revealed.

This argument is incontrovertible, in a minor way. How minor, Hersonski shows by an implicit contrast: between the magnitude of the crime witnessed (and covered up) in the Warsaw Ghetto footage, and the triviality of the offense she herself commits by staging scenes for *A Film Unfinished*.

But there is perhaps an even stronger case to be made for the potential truthfulness of documentary constructions, as seen in a film that's just now being released—another artifact, as it happens, from the era of the Warsaw Ghetto footage. This film, too, is tendentious, and even propagandistic; but it is going into theaters with no interpretive scaffolding, as if the people responsible for reviving it trusted audiences to understand the material on their own.

Released in Germany in 1948, this documentary—*Nuremberg: Its Lesson for Today*—

was made as the US government's official film account of the Allied powers' trial of Nazi high officials. Written and directed by Stuart Schulberg, and produced by Schulberg and Pare Lorentz (who dropped out, or was pushed, before the project was completed), *Nuremberg* was meant to be shown not only to the vanquished Germans but also to American audiences. That latter release never happened. Although it seems that at least some US officials tried to secure domestic studio distribution for the film, the government shelved *Nuremberg*—perhaps because by 1948 it was no longer politically expedient to show scenes of a Red Army prosecutor taking the moral high ground. *Nuremberg* became another unseen, all-but-forgotten film.

It has resurfaced thanks to a restoration by Sandra Schulberg (daughter of the writer-director, and a distinguished figure in independent film) and Josh Waletzky (best known as the director of *Partisans of Vilna*). Because the prints found in an American archive turned out to be badly deteriorated, Schulberg and Waletzky based their restoration on a German print—a fortunate necessity, since it makes the intention of *Nuremberg* unmistakable. Over introductory images of Germany in utter ruin, a narrator intones, "The people wanted to know the answers. They wanted to know what happened, and why." (We get to hear these words in English, recorded by Liev Schreiber in perfect reproduction of the period style.) Whether "the people" actually wanted to know is not so certain; but the trial was meant to tell them, and films, this one included, were integral to the telling.

The prosecutors introduced two compilation documentaries into evidence at Nuremberg: *The Nazi Plan*, detailing the party's rise to power and pattern of aggression, and *Nazi Concentration Camps*, showing what US and British troops had found at the liberation. In making *Nuremberg*, Schulberg followed the prosecutors' case point by point, going back and forth frequently from the images shot in the courtroom to the images presented in evidence. You might say, then, that *Nuremberg* is a construction made largely out of other constructions.

It is not a lie. You can judge for yourself, thanks to the clarity with which Schulberg and Waletzky have chosen to present it. *Nuremberg* is unquestionably a fabrication, which bears the marks of its time and purpose—but the reason it has the power to shock, appall and infuriate is because of its truth.

Nuremberg does have a lesson for today—which can be studied at its special presentation at the New York Film Festival, and at its US theatrical premiere run at New York's Film Forum. ■