

Acting and performance in film essay

[Technology](#), [Internet](#)



In David Fincher's 2010 film *The Social Network*, Jesse Eisenberg brings to life a fictionalized version of Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, portraying a neurotic, yet determined figure who is at once unlikeable and infinitely interesting. There are many elements in Eisenberg's quiet, intense performance that make Zuckerberg one of the more fascinating cinematic protagonists of recent years. In this essay, Eisenberg's use of motivation, heightened language, physical character work, character private moments and substitution in *The Social Network* will be explored.

Motivation loads the action with meaning for a character (Hagen, p. 50). The motivation of Mark Zuckerberg can be a difficult thing to determine; the character, as Eisenberg plays him, is both furiously silent and all too honest about what he wanted to do with Facebook. Eisenberg portrays Zuckerberg with a very restrained, nerdy personality – he is abrasive, misogynistic, and avoidant in his interactions with others, particularly when it allows him to avoid conflict. When he avoids the Winklevoss twins through numerous emails postponing their meetings, it appears as though he means to keep them on the hook and off his back long enough for him to make Facebook. Of course, like many of his actions, the true intention is never known, which is indicative in Eisenberg's performance. He is so quiet, so quick to dismiss when asked hard questions (by his friends and during the depositions), that it makes it difficult to believe his claims, especially when the evidence skews so far in the other direction.

Eisenberg's physical work as Zuckerberg is nothing short of miraculous – he packs so much energy and intensity into such a still, tiny frame so as to leave the audience tense whenever they watch him. As Hagen notes of a <https://assignbuster.com/acting-and-performance-in-film-essay/>

good physical actor, he is “limber enough to respond to the psychological and emotional demands he may make on it when he springs into physical action” (Hagen, p. 14). Eisenberg’s shoulders are constantly raised and slumped forward, and he hardly shows any idle physical movement, indicating a lot of pent-up tension in his physicality. He embodies the clothes he wears perfectly, Zuckerberg always showing a detached indifference to polite society or décor by wearing pajamas to business meetings and flipflops to depositions – these clothes help shape Zuckerberg’s physical reality (Hagen, p. 71). This, combined with his fast-paced, clipped speech, always makes him look like he is on the defensive.

This stillness and defensiveness ties in with his own motivations as well, as the film (and his performance) implies the entire idea of Facebook came from his own insecurities about women and about himself as a person. He has always wanted to succeed at whatever he did, and he opted to do so through scheming. He is constantly intimidated by more physically imposing men, noting that the Winklevoss twins “seem to spend a lot of time at the gym,” in reference to their physical fitness. This physicality allows Zuckerberg to seem both unassuming and hostile at the same time, which is part of the appeal of the character – he is at once uncaring about his image and steadfastly dedicated to defending it. Eisenberg’s quiet intensity (closed lips, direct stares, matter-of-fact speech) allows these elements to come forth in the character.

The physicality Eisenberg offers in *The Social Network* is coupled with the heightened language he often uses. Despite this being a naturalistic film, Zuckerberg relates to it in a heightened way, alternating between both short,

clipped speech and long-winded technical explanations of his hacking techniques and business/coding jargon. His speech is less affected than his peers, sounding formal and intelligent, often at the expense of being empathetic to others (Hagen, p. 32). He is often “wired in,” staring at the computer screen in the beginning scene when he rambles on in voiceover about how to create FaceMash.com, allowing himself to tune out everything around him. His way of speaking is fast and difficult to understand at times, indicating just how faster his brain operates than everyone else. Through sighs and disappointed looks, he often displays his disappointment with how no one can catch up with what he is doing.

The most honest private character moments we get with Zuckerberg are when he is by himself, which is not often the case. Eisenberg does not change much about his physicality or his attitude, but he subtly allows the audience to see him without his self-imposed social walls up – the quick speech, the lack of eye contact, etc. The moments after Sean Parker calls him to tell him about the drug bust, and tells him to go home, Eisenberg looks off into the middle distance, absorbing the direction his life has taken. You can see the emptiness and mild panic in his eyes, without a hint of change in facial expression from Eisenberg, injecting true subtlety into an already subtle performance. This is part of the ‘chaos of life’ Zuckerberg gets thrown into (Clurman, 1983).

This same expression is seen by him throughout the movie, but it is no less poignant than at the end of the film, where he is left alone at the law firm, constantly refreshing his Facebook page to see if his estranged ex-girlfriend

confirmed his friend request. You can see the emotional distance in the physicality, but the eyes are glued to the screen. He cannot move from that position, and nothing is more important to him than getting that girl back. Ever the deceitful and spiteful man, Zuckerberg shows one true moment of honesty when he is by himself.

Eisenberg's demonstration of Zuckerberg's reaction to the charges against him in both lawsuits never betrays any real sense of injustice, but a vague attempt to deny the (true) allegations that were presented against him. He probably had to consider times when he had to lie in order to protect himself from getting caught or being punished for something, e. g. getting caught with your hand in the cookie jar. In Eisenberg's case, he had to consider the utter fear being caught stealing one of the most expensive cookies in the world would be like, bringing to the deposition scenes an added air of desperation. These are the few moments where Zuckerberg actually lashes out in defense of himself, making them all the more poignant.

In conclusion, the use of motivation, substitution, heightened language, physical work and private moments allowed Jesse Eisenberg to turn in a performance worthy of the Oscar it was nominated for. As Eisenberg plays him, Mark Zuckerberg is a frustrated, introverted, arrogant little man who nonetheless wishes to see his dream realized, and had the motivation to do it. His mannerisms and his physical work all betray a deep sense of insecurity, particularly in his private moments when he reveals his anxiety around women and his attempts to be liked. Zuckerberg hides all this, however, with an arrogant and abrasive personality that allows him an

excuse to not need people. When Eisenberg lets the true emotions of the character shine through the mask of indifference, they become a magical moment in film performance.

Works Cited

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