

# Conquering the Meatspace: The lonely nerd in David Fincher's *The Social Network* (2010) and Baran bo Odar's *Who Am I* (2014)

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**Funding:** See page 26.

**Peer review:** This article has been subject to a double-blind peer review process



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## Abstract

*This article analyses how Baran bo Odar's film Who Am I: Kein System ist sicher (2014) productively engages with its US predecessor The Social Network (2010), directed by David Fincher, to undermine the notion of the lonely nerd. Both films revolve around the distinction between social connections in real and virtual life: on the one hand, this separation allows them to examine the validity of an online community as a remedy for loneliness and a potential catalyst for relationships in embodied meatspace; on the other hand, this enables them to self-reflexively discuss the workings of film narratives. The article will demonstrate how Fincher's film challenges the notion of the lonely nerd by highlighting its constructedness, while presenting a nerdy protagonist who is not able to overcome his real-life isolation. Who Am I, in contrast, takes on the lonely nerd as a transnationally recognisable archetype mediated through Hollywood's cinematic hegemony, moulds it into a specifically German context, and establishes firm social bonds for the nerd in meatspace.*

**Keywords:** The Social Network; Who Am I; German film; Facebook; Loneliness; nerds

## Introduction

In the early twenty-first century, computer nerds and loneliness have gained high public visibility in association with the tech industry's increasing economic, political, and societal prowess. On the one hand, computer nerds such as Facebook's founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg occupy powerful positions not only within their companies, but also within political decision-making and public discourses around social media and social bonds. On the other hand, loneliness has been described as a modern pandemic (e.g. **Spitzer, 2018; Monbiot, 2014; and Bound Alberti, 2019**), with the illness metaphor highlighting the centrality of loneliness as a contagious mental and physical ailment with potentially lethal outcomes, and emphasising its status as an acute social issue in the early decades of the new millennium. Loneliness, nerds, and technological advancement intersect where traditional definitions of nerds associate anyone displaying social awkwardness/isolation and technological affinity as one particular branch of nerddom (e.g. **Eglash, 2002; Kendall, 2011; Bodner 2018; and Lane, 2018a**). As several recent publications on cultural representations of nerds, loneliness, and social media point out (e.g. **Earnest, 2018; Kohout, 2022; Lane, 2018a; Lane, 2018b; and Vrooman, Sia, Czuchry & Bollinger, 2018**), the increasing influence of technology – in particular of social media – on daily life and a greater variety of cultural representations of nerds (**Lane, 2018b**) have initiated a diversification of traditionally negative stereotypes of nerds as their 'almost superhuman ability to control the inner workings of technology' was now seen as 'badge of honor' (**Ibid: 10**). Using social media and other virtual social environments to connect, nerds were able to form online nerd networks that more and more frequently also led to offline equivalents so the nerd was less othered in opposition to a heterogenous society (**Lane, 2018b**) – not the least also because of current economic demands that enable nerds to make a career in embodied life out of their seemingly lonely endeavours in the virtual (**Earnest, 2018**).

If we follow historian Fay Bound Alberti's definition that contemporary loneliness is a 'social phenomenon' that depends on a version of the self developed in relation to an 'external, secular identification with peer groups and communities that share, and outwardly perform, rituals of belonging' (**Bound Alberti, 2019: 37-38**), then this impacts our discussion of nerds, loneliness, and technology in two ways: first, whilst nerds traditionally tended to be seen as social outsiders, they often have a strong connection with a small peer group of like-minded people, whose connection might well be their passion for technology; second, the internet and social media can also easily provide the platform for performing the relevant rituals of belonging to maintain connection within a peer group. In this context, social media sites such as Facebook have

entered public discourse as a potential cure for loneliness. Meanwhile, their creators have become global icons who create social bonds through global connectivity and who inspire fictional works such as David Fincher's Zuckerberg-biopic *The Social Network* (2010) or Danny Boyle's *Steve Jobs* (2015). Recent sociological research on loneliness and social media, however, has been divided over whether the technology in question can fulfil the desire for human connection that is projected onto it. *In Alone Together* (2011), Sherry Turkle recognises the arrival of a 'robotic moment' in which people demonstrate willingness to accept machines as romantic partners and friends, so that technology becomes the tool with which loneliness can be defeated. She also asks whether performed virtual intimacy is a sufficient substitute for real-life interaction (Cf. Turkle, 2011: 9–10 and 12). In the introduction to *A Networked Self and Love*, Zizi Papacharissi states that 'Facebook does not cure loneliness' (Papacharissi, 2018a: 4), meaning that solely relying on technology to resolve a lack of social bonds will not prove to be successful. Moreover, Bound Alberti states that the 'paradox of social media is that it produces the same isolation and loneliness that it seeks to overcome' (Bound Alberti 2019, 38). In line with this assessment that social media can both alleviate and foster loneliness, films such as Fincher's *The Social Network* or Baran bo Odar's *Who Am I: Kein System ist sicher* (2014) tap into the creative potential of nerds, technology, and loneliness in fiction. What is crucial in their depiction of the issue is the validity of real-life and virtual networks and their relation to each other. Turkle argues that new technologies have created a 'new state of the self...split between the screen and the physical real, wired into existence through technology' (Turkle 2011, 16). The films explore this tension between relationships in real and virtual life, ask whether virtual relationships represent a lack of companionship, or if the simplification of real-life relationships via virtual simulation is the desired ideal (for the latter see Turkle 2011, 17).

In the two films to be considered in detail here, *The Social Network* and *Who Am I*, the computer nerds Mark Zuckerberg and Benjamin Engel emerge as test cases for lonely protagonists that navigate the challenges of the real and the digital world in their search for human connection. My comparative analysis will focus on the German film's engagement with the American predecessor and which aims to deconstruct preconceived assumptions about the stereotype of the lonely nerd. Even the term 'nerd' did not circulate widely in Germany until the late 2000s and particularly prominently only when the *Piratenpartei* – Pirate Party Germany – was founded in 2009 (Kohout, 2022: 18 and 122). Both the term and the corresponding social role then had significant social impact with the huge success of the US-sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* (2007–2019; in Germany the series only premiered in July 2009), which further coincided with a more

widespread acceptance of technology and of popular culture (**Ibid: 210 and 126–7**). Last, Germany supposedly became a ‘Nerdrepublik’ (republic of nerds) during the Covid-19 pandemic (**Ibid: 235**) – a time when technology played a major role in connecting people kept apart by protective measurements such as social distancing. With regard to the fictional representation of nerds, *Who Am I*’s productive engagement with its Anglo-American predecessors illustrates what Randall Halle calls a ‘broader trend in German and European filmmaking, which is toward a diversification of genres, themes, production values, and aesthetic qualities’ (**Halle, 2020: 522**). *Who Am I* is a coproduction between the German companies Wiedemann & Berg and Seven Pictures, and the German branch production arm of Columbia Pictures, which thematically and economically links Hollywood and the German film industry. Through the Danish actress Trine Dyrholm as Hanne, as well as episodes set in New York and the Hague, the film presents an international network of investigators and hackers, which is further emphasised by the frequent use of English rather than German as the hackers’ *lingua franca*. Moreover, the film premiered in the Toronto Film Festival’s section on Contemporary World Cinema in 2014, whose guiding principle promises ‘compelling stories, global perspectives’ (**Toronto, 2020**), which suggests an international appeal that transcends the German film market. *Who Am I* is a hybrid transnational film not only on a production level, but also on a visual and a content level: Whilst its main setting is never explicitly named, Berlin’s landmark television tower can be seen in the background when Benjamin states that the city was not interested in him (**bo Odar, 2014**). Associations with German institutions such as the Bundesnachrichtendienst – BND (Federal Intelligence Service), well-known television stations and news anchors covering the hacker group CLAY’s actions further augment the distinctly German setting. Mirroring possibilities for connection created by the internet, the film thus adapts internationally popular narratives whereby the lonely computer nerd functions as a recognisable archetype from the Anglo-American context, which in turn provides a means of transcending the Germanophone context to make the story palatable for a broad audience.<sup>i</sup> In this article, I will show how Baran bo Odar and Antje Friese use the established narrative of the digital native unable to find connection in real life to mislead its audience and to establish a more positive image of a nerd firmly grounded in real-life friendships, which in line with this special edition’s overall agenda not only provides a more nuanced image of the nerd in their social environment but also a transnational study of nerddom that transcends dominant Anglo-American narratives.

## Status Update: The Social Network's Mark Zuckerberg and the quest to belong

In *The Social Network's* final scene, Marylin Delpy (Rashida Jones) – a member of a team of lawyers for Mark Zuckerberg (Jesse Eisenberg) – points to the mechanics of the film's narrative on a meta level. Telling Mark about her specialism in jury selection, she states that her most important task is to fashion 'what a jury sees when they look at a defendant. Clothes, hair, speaking style, likability' (Fincher 2010). Marylin's function within the lawsuit is hence similar to that of a film director who, in collaboration with an actor, creates a particular image of their protagonist. The film's portrayal of the Facebook founder matches many typical aspects of the nerd: Foundas, whose article – echoing the 1984 film *Revenge of the Nerds* directed by Jeff Kanew and the narrative trope it established – is entitled 'Revenge of the Nerd', describes Zuckerberg as pale and slight in his signature hoodie and 'fuck-you flip-flops' (Foundas, 2010: 42), which resembles the stereotypical appearance of a nerd; Jones hints at typical non-physical features of nerds when he says that Eisenberg's Zuckerberg is 'socially awkward' because he mimics functions of the internet when interacting with the people around him (Jones, 2010: 35). This image was emphasised in *The Social Network's* marketing campaign, particularly the film's trailer, in which Scala and the Kolacny Brothers' cover of Radiohead's *Creep* (1992) offers 'a dynamic performance of Facebook's bedrock of isolation' (Benson-Allott, 2011: 58; Tyree, 2011: 54). This highlights the nerd's status as a lonely social outsider, who is unsuccessful in romantic matters and hence has a tendency towards obsession, often uncomfortably so. The film's playing with the public image of the real Mark Zuckerberg and the socially established image of the nerd has hence been read by several academics not only as a narrative about Facebook as such, but also about life in the digital age, with the computer nerd as its main protagonist.

Whilst this is true, I would argue that Fincher and screenwriter Aaron Sorkin further demonstrate their awareness of the constructed nature of these narratives by discussing the effect on the audience within the film itself. In the final scene, Marylin claims that she can get a jury to believe anything, no matter if it is the truth or not: 'Doesn't matter, I asked the question and now everybody's thinking about it. You've lost your jury in the first 10 minutes' (Fincher, 2010). Within the constellation of a trial, the jury occupies the same position as the film's audience. The film's ability to take fictional liberties in the depiction of the real-life entrepreneur Mark Zuckerberg enables *The Social Network* to manipulate the audience's perception, which also mimics the identity performance of a social network profile – Turkle compares Facebook profiles to 'being in a play.

You make a character' (Turkle, 2011: 183). This conflation of various processes of fictionalisation is further demonstrated when Mark appears from the perspective of a diegetic camera filming him, with him rendered a tiny, highly fictionalised profile of his real-life equivalent, removed from the real Mark Zuckerberg by one more diegetic level. In doing so, the film reveals the complexities of constructedness. In relation to the cultural preconception of the socially awkward lonely nerd, likeability emerges as the decisive factor upon which the jury/audience will base their verdict.

When Marylin suggests that creation myths need a devil, she highlights the fictionality of the portrayal which puts the nerd in the position of a villain (Foundas, 2010). Within the context of Fincher's oeuvre, Tyree speaks of 'Fincher's isolated freaks': 'almost all of them, like Mark, are portrayed as male loners without close family or successful love relationships, many are independently wealthy and incapable of enjoying their money, and more than a few develop ambitious schemes that are obsessive if not deeply antisocial or murderous' (Tyree, 2011: 46). Particularly on the part of the audience, this perception is, of course, heavily influenced by Mark's story being told from the perspective of his plaintiffs, the Winklevoss twins (Armie Hammer) and Eduardo Saverin (Andrew Garfield). That Mark is not a traditional villainous antagonist<sup>ii</sup> is particularly clear from his interaction with the former. Tyree argues that with the exception of Marylin, Eduardo, and Mark's ex-girlfriend Erica Albright (Rooney Mara) everyone in the film is an asshole, especially the twins (Tyree, 2011: 48). Indeed, with their inherited privilege, physical strength, and condescending attitude towards Mark (e.g. they receive him in the entrance area of their club thereby denying him access), they are the 21st-century version of the nerd's traditional opponent, the jock, and appear as pompous snobs steeped in the privileged atmosphere of New England, as is drastically evident in Cameron's exclamation: 'Let's gut the frigging nerd' (Fincher, 2010). Mark's triumph over them demonstrates a crisis of toxic masculinity that is overcome by the tech-savvy intelligence of the physically feeble Mark, which is obvious in the highly stylised scene of the Henley boat race, as the video of the twins' defeat comes to circulate on Facebook (Schreiber, 2016).

Whilst Mark does appear sympathetic in comparison with the twins, the ousting of Eduardo, who is tricked out of the company by Mark and Sean Parker (Justin Timberlake), eventually discredits Mark, as he has betrayed his 'only friend' (Fincher, 2010) and one of the film's few characters with social competence and warmth. When Marylin advises Mark to aim for an out-of-court settlement because the jury will not take his side, it becomes obvious that however good or bad his intentions might have been, it is his lack of social skills and the inability to form proper attachments, presumably typical for a nerd, which become the main aspect of Mark's

villainousness and turn the audience against him. As Marylin says, 'You're not an asshole, Mark. You're just trying so hard to be' (Fincher, 2010). Marylin's statement about Mark closes the narrative circle of the plot as it echoes a remark made by Erica in the opening break-up scene.

The film's first scene can be read as a *mise en abyme*: it establishes the central conflicts of the film's portrayal of social networks and functions as the origin scene for the creation of Facebook. The central question that *The Social Network* asks is about the interplay between Mark's identity in real and virtual life. Turkle calls the engagement with social media 'identity work', which 'can take place on social-networking sites as well, where one's profile becomes an avatar of sorts, a statement not only about who you are but who you want to be. ... They ... ask you to compose and project an identity' (Turkle, 2011: 180). For Mark, the identity work primarily concerns projecting a certain status of belonging and social connectivity, whereas his real life is characterised by rejection and exclusion. This first happens in the real world: the film opens within the most common setting of social life and connectivity at university: a student bar. Mark would normally not be able to participate in this social setting due to the United States' drinking laws – only Erica's social connections help him to get past the mechanism for inclusion and exclusion which he cannot control.

This setting frames the main topic of conversation, which leads to the break-up of the young couple: the prestigious, exclusive clubs at Harvard, which – according to Mark – guarantee social advancement and to which Erica needs to gain access in order to form social networks. Particularly when their conversation concerns these exclusive clubs, cinematographer Jeff Cronenweth's camerawork isolates Mark from Erica in her role as a down-to-earth student at Boston University. The film opens with a two-shot of Mark and Erica in profile, then follows the dialogue's rhythm via shot/counter-shot medium close-ups of the speaker in one corner of the frame, with the other's back in the picture on the opposite site (always the left side for Erica, and the right side for Mark). It becomes clear that they do not really fit into one another's picture. This is stressed when both of them are shown in separate close-ups when they first mention the clubs and discuss Mark's chances of getting accepted. The film visually performs the break-up between the two, which leaves Mark isolated.

Mark never really shares the screen with anyone in the film – be it during the meeting in the Winklevoss twins' club, or during the party in the house rented for Facebook in Palo Alto, which he watches alone in the garden through the window as a screen that separates his world. Whilst this might appear as a clear separation between the nerd living in virtual space and real life, *The Social Network* does not present this as so clear-cut. Erica wraps up the opening scene with a damning assessment of Mark: 'Listen,

you're probably gonna be a very successful computer person. But you're gonna go through life thinking that girls don't like you because you're a nerd. And I want you to know, from the bottom of my heart, that that won't be true. It'll be because you're an asshole' (Fincher, 2010). The narrative of the romantically unsuccessful lonely computer nerd is central here. Mark's nerddom will be beneficial for a tech-based career that will bring financial success and social status as an entrepreneur. In private matters, nerddom is distinguished from social isolation, with the notion of the lonely computer nerd debunked as a rhetorical strategy to excuse appalling social behaviour and to blame social isolation on others, rather than engaging with its more complex personal aspects and isolating processes.

Let us turn back to Turkle's question about how far simulating social bonds online is enough to not feel lonely and to compensate for failures in real life. Turkle perceives this to be true for many internet users who use the virtual as practice for the real (cf. Turkle, 2011: 193) and achieve a crossover effect, in which a rich virtual life with people one would not ordinarily meet enters the real (Ibid: 214f). For Mark, this initially works the other way around with Erica's rejection – tellingly, the song played in the bar, The White Stripes' *Ball and Biscuit* (2003), includes the lyrics 'And right now you couldn't care less about me / But soon enough you will care, by the time I'm done', which clearly sets Mark on the trajectory of the revenge-trope of traditional nerd-narratives (see Kohout, 2022: 62–73 and 159–68), where at the end the lonely High School nerd would not only take revenge on the male rival of the jock, but also on the women who rejected him once their tech-skills made them successful entrepreneurs. Moreover, his inability to join a club serves as an impetus to create his own virtual one, much bigger and more illustrious. A further rejection by Erica, during which she states that she has never heard of Facebook, increases his ambition to expand the reach of his website, which she condescendingly describes as a 'computer game' (Fincher, 2010), further removing the nerd Mark from the social interactions of the adult world.

Nevertheless, the creation of Facebook is not portrayed as a solitary achievement, as Mark has support from not only the suave Eduardo but also other 'Harvard undergraduates, who are depicted as geeks in Gap hoodies, drinking light beer and doing shots', which is to say 'not just as the social media network-to-be, but as always-ready socially and cultural embedded practices' (Dinnen, 2018: 22). This shows that the shared interest of the computer nerds and the performance of rituals of belonging online can be manifest in real-life interactions and connections (see Turkle, 2011: 220– 221). Processes of connection and isolation – in public and private – influence the functions of Facebook when Mark states that his goal is 'taking the entire social structure of college and putting it online'



(Fincher, 2010). For the more public side, the film's intercutting and parallelising highlight Mark's ambition to create a virtual club, e.g. the initiation rituals and work parties of Facebook versus the clubs, or the creation of Facemash and Mark's blogging versus a party at a final club, where women are subjected to the male gaze with equal brutality (see Tyree, 2011; Schreiber, 2016; and Dinnen 2018). In private, Mark loses intimate relationships as the film progresses – Erica, his only friend Eduardo, and Sean Parker, who stumbles upon Facebook, and ends up enabling the public sharing of 'every mistake and false step' (Turkle, 2011: 186), replicating real-life behaviour and multiplying it through the net's global reach. The rapidly increasing number of Facebook users from around the world – virtual friends that are joining Mark's club – contrasts with his increasing social isolation.

At the end of the film, and with his success at a peak, Mark is alone in front of a screen showing Erica's page on Facebook, incessantly refreshing the page to check whether she has accepted his friend request. Mark thus projects his desire for human connection onto his creation. High user numbers remain insignificant for his longing, since Facebook is a 'world in which fans are "friends". But of course, they are not friends, they have been "friended". That makes all the difference in the world, and [it isn't possible to] get high school out of [one's] mind' (Turkle, 2011: 182). Turkle's assessment of Facebook matches the website's effect on Mark in the film: in Eduardo's terms, Mark has millions of 'groupies' (Fincher, 2010), but he lacks real-life social connection. The social isolation of college is replicated: 'social media and digital technologies do not transform social relations but reproduce them; how people engage on social media tends to sit alongside existing forms of connection, reproducing the patterns and habits of interacting that already exist' (Bound Alberti, 2019: 161). Mark's website cannot fulfil his desire for connection; it replicates his lonely college experience. The website does not function as a compensational tool for loneliness: 'it is inherently destructive to the utopian conception of the Internet as a nerd's interzone' (Tyree, 2011: 52). In the end, it cannot help Mark to reconnect with Erica, who is the one person in real life that he hopes to connect with through the success of his virtual social network (for feminist implications of Erica appearing as a virtual version in comparison to the embodied version of her in the opening scene, see Schreiber, 2016: 17). In a reversal of the traditional revenge trope the nerd thus still triumphs over his rival the jock – at least in economic terms – but he cannot form the profound social bonds in adult life that were denied to him in his adolescence. Hence, *The Social Network* challenges the stereotype of the lonely nerd on a meta level but eventually emphasises how loss, trauma, and loneliness lie at the very basis of Facebook's creation, and are replicated in the virtual

community that the website creates: Mark gains prestige and financial prowess, but he does not surpass the status of the lonely nerd, a point further emphasised at the end of the film by The Beatles' *Baby, You're a Rich Man* (1967), released as the B-Side of All You Need Is Love.

### **It's Just a Magic Trick: Social Engineering in *Who Am I***

Baran bo Odar's film *Who Am I* adopts *The Social Network*'s basic character constellation. Like Mark, the protagonist Benjamin Engel (Tom Schilling) is a computer-savvy, socially awkward outsider who engages in hacking<sup>iii</sup> in order to win the affection of his teenage love Marie (Hannah Herzsprung), who occupies the same catalytic function for Benjamin's online endeavours as Erica does for Mark. Composer Michael Kamm's musical score of the scenes with Marie is strikingly similar to the Trent Reznor's and Atticus Ross's theme which accompanies several scenes in *The Social Network*, most importantly Mark 'running his lonely way across America's most venerable campus in his hoodie, jeans and flip-flops' (Jones, 2010: 36) after Erica leaves him, establishing the tone of romantic failure and the social exclusion of the nerd that is carried forward in *Who Am I*. Similar to Eduardo and the roguish Sean Parker in *The Social Network*, the charismatic and socially connected Max (Elyas M'Barek) functions as a counter-image of Benjamin, who invites him not only to join the hacker group that becomes CLAY, but also helps him to overcome social awkwardness and isolation. Hence, *Who Am I* distinguishes between social connection in the virtual and the real but, unlike *The Social Network*, does not establish the virtual as compensation for the real. This is obvious in the super-hacker MRX's third rule, which becomes the mantra for Benjamin's group: 'Have fun in Cyberspace and Meatspace' (bo Odar 2014).<sup>iv</sup> Here, the virtual and the real are presented as equals that – ideally – co-exist in a productive symbiosis to ensure the nerd's social connections in both realms.

Whilst *The Social Network* never portrays the virtual space with more than brief shots of website content, *Who Am I* presents it as a highly stylised embodied space that, befitting of the topic of the dark web, resembles a sombre underground train carriage. The players in cyberspace, albeit anonymous because of masks, have a big physical presence that is very different from the limits of Facebook profiles, so their criminal actions in the virtual world have as much gravitas as those in the real world, as the link between cyber- and meatspace becomes more pronounced. This leads to a second crucial difference: whilst both films focus on interrogation scenes, their narrative situation differs strikingly, as Benjamin is in control of the narrative throughout and can powerfully manipulate the perception of the Europol prosecutor Hanne Lindberg (Trine Dyrholm), as well as the audience by extension. This is relevant for a supposed distinction between

social connections in cyberspace and meatspace, as Benjamin's efforts to trick Hanne rely on the preconception of the lonely nerd in meatspace as established in *The Social Network*. To pull off the trick, the screenwriter Jantje Friese and bo Odar engage with the audience's familiarity with the trope of the lonely nerd and draw upon interfilmic references to Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999) and Christopher Nolan's *The Prestige* (2006). In doing so, they expose the notion of the lonely nerd as a fabricated stereotype with no basis in reality, and ground Benjamin within a community of friends in meatspace.

Benjamin is the only hacker that is given a surname. Engel ('angel' in German) is a telling name because the metaphor of the angel has significance for the relationship between the virtual and the real. Analysing the connection between angels in angelology and bots called Ashley's Angels which mingle with human profiles on the Ashley Madison website for adult hook-ups, Tero Karppi states that the bots, just like biblical angels, only exist in the moment of interaction so they become intermediaries between the divine and the earthly, the virtual and the real (Karppi, 2018: 179–180). Benjamin originates in the virtual world as a digital native who can interact with the real – indeed, his career as a hacker begins with Marie, for whom he wants to hack into a university server to steal her upcoming exam, which resembles the impetus that Erica gives Mark to start his tech career – but is firmly grounded in cyberspace. As the success of Benjamin's trick depends on him making Hanne believe that his friends from CLAY never existed and that Marie never dated him, his surname becomes another misleading sign which would allow him to be classified as a lonely nerd along the lines of *The Social Network* and its lonely Mark.

From the beginning of the interrogation, Benjamin appears as a typical isolated computer nerd, wearing a hoodie which is evocative of *The Social Network*. This is not the only interfilmic reference to 'Fincher's isolated freaks' (Tyree, 2011: 46). With his short brown hair and youthful, pale, everyman appearance, Tom Schilling's Benjamin resembles Edward Norton's physique as The Narrator in Fincher's *Fight Club*. A poster of that film can be seen in the background when Hanne enters Benjamin's room and there is a sense of anti-establishment sentiment along the lines of *Fight Club's* Project Mayhem (Tyree, 2011; 46/50; Dinnen, 2018: 46), which is also far more characteristic of the hacker than of rather apolitical entrepreneurial second-generation Silicon Valley nerds such as Mark Zuckerberg. After founding the hacker group CLAY, Benjamin, Max, Stephan (Wotan Wilke Möhring), and Paul (Antoine Monot Jr.) target political, social, and economic institutions such as the convention of a neo-Nazi political party, a porn website, stock-exchange reports on television, and a pharmaceutical company. Media platforms and social networks

allow their videos to spread rapidly and widely so that they become stars, and Marie becomes a fan without knowing that Benjamin is behind it. The success is linked with the notion of the superhero who can come to Marie's rescue in stealing the exam paper or presenting his vehicle to her.

Benjamin starts his narrative by telling Hanne about the trauma of his mother's suicide, relating it to the origin stories of prominent superheroes such as Spider Man, Superman, or Batman, with the latter being redolent of the director Christopher Nolan, whose narrative in *The Prestige* is integral to Benjamin's trick in *Who Am I*. Just like the actions of Batman and Project Mayhem, the group's break-ins at the Federal Intelligence Service (*Bundesnachrichtendienst – BND*) and Europol drift into criminal territory. The death of Benjamin's mother due to a dissociative identity disorder is akin to The Narrator and Tyler Durden being the same person in *Fight Club*. Just when Hanne begins to suspect that Benjamin might have inherited his mother's condition, which would exclude him from the witness protection programme, the poster of Fincher's film appears in the background. Along with the audience, Hanne begins to consider an alternative narrative, in which Max, Stephan, and Paul are products of Benjamin's imagination. The references to Fincher's *Fight Club* and *The Social Network* combine with the isolating effect of mental illness (see e.g. **Klein, 1963; Turkle, 1995/2011**) to foster the perception of Benjamin as a lonely nerd, who has connections in virtual or imaginative space but is isolated in meatspace. This wins him pity and compassion from Hanne and the audience.

A reading revolving around the idea of a lonely, mentally ill outsider is one of the two possibilities that the film offers. From the very beginning, there is a counterbalancing reference to Christopher Nolan's *The Prestige*, when Benjamin performs a magic trick for Hanne in which he shows four pieces of sugar, makes three disappear, and then brings them back: 'Hacken ist wie Zaubern. Bei beiden geht es darum, andere zu täuschen. / Hacking is like magic. Both are about deceiving others' (**bo Odar 2014** [my translation]). The three-part-trick mirrors the three-act structure of magic tricks established by the magic engineer Cutter (Michael Caine) in Nolan's film:

1. *the pledge, in which something ordinary is presented, e.g. an animal or a person;*
2. *the turn, in which something extraordinary happens to what was presented in the pledge, e.g. it disappears;*
3. *the prestige, in which you bring back the thing (Nolan 2006).*

In Nolan's film, this is the structure of the central trick – The Transported Man – and the narrative structure, whereby magic becomes a metaphor for the creation of art, a device employed in many works from the literary and cinematic canon such as William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1610–1611) or Thomas Mann's *Mario und der Zauberer / Mario and the Magician* (1929). This in turn also echoes the artistic aesthetic aspect of hacking. Nolan highlights film's powers as a manipulation machine, with the magician standing in as proxy for the filmmaker: 'you are not really looking; you want to be fooled' (Nolan, 2006). In *Who Am I*, this metaphorical notion is projected onto the hacker, who is the narrator of the piece, and aims to mislead the audience over the ontological status of the crucial image of his dead friends in the hotel after the Europol disaster. In order to escape persecution, he has to convince Hanne that he is mentally ill and a lonely nerd, so that she is willing to help him hack into the witness protection database to regain anonymity. This contradicts the classical revenge-of-the-nerd narrative which typically concludes with the nerd gaining high popularity and visibility. In this attempt at social engineering, a human hack, Benjamin (unlike Mark) keeps control over the course of the narrative and the interpretation of the presented images.

Benjamin does not really manipulate his story in many ways, except when he has to hammer a nail through his hand to re-create a scar that Max got in Benjamin's story. Here, the body acts as a referent that has to be marked, and that grounds Max and Benjamin in meatspace. This is similar to the twin magicians portrayed by Christian Bale in *The Prestige*, who have to cut off one twin's fingers to maintain the illusion of a single magician after the other twin has two fingers shot off. The main reason why Benjamin's trick works is that the stereotype of the lonely computer nerd stands in contrast to the story he tells Hanne. Unlike Mark, who cannot take part in the parties with Facebook employees at Silicon Valley, Benjamin celebrates with the group, who acknowledge him as one of their own. In the words of Paul, 'Du bist einer von uns. Wir lassen dich nicht im Stich. / You are one of us. We won't let you down' (bo Odar, 2014 [my translation]). Moreover, in contrast to Mark and Eduardo, Benjamin and Max reconcile after Max kisses Marie and they acknowledge their respective weaknesses in the real and the virtual world. They are thus able to engage with each other to improve their skills, fostering their competence in meat- and cyberspace. In addition, Benjamin and Marie connect in meatspace, whereas Mark futilely hits refresh to connect with Erica. Hence, whilst Mark's revenge of the nerd succeeds in economic terms, Benjamin renounces his career as a hacker but fulfils the revenge-trope by entering a relationship.

Hanne, not believing that online avatars have the ability to 'boost real-life confidence' (Turkle, 2011: 192), does not look closely but sees what she

wants to see, just like the spectators in *The Prestige*. Since she cannot get beyond the established narrative of the lonely nerd, she settles on the explanation of mental illness, which is more plausible to her. This is emphasised brought to the fore when Benjamin has manipulated her enough to help him escape and he puts the four pieces of sugar on the dashboard of her car:

*Benjamin: Keine Zaubertricks mehr. / No more magic tricks.*

*Hanne: Warte. Eine Sache noch. Wie geht dieser Trick? / Wait. One more thing. How does this trick work?*

*Benjamin: Wenn man weiß, wie's funktioniert, dann ist es fast enttäuschend. / When you know how it works, it's almost disappointing.*

*[One piece remains visible, then he shows her the other three hidden behind the thumb of his other hand, before bringing all four back.]*

*Jeder sieht nur, was er sehen will. / Everyone only sees what they want to see.*

*[A person with a CLAY mask is noticeable in the background.] (bo Odar, 2014 [translations my own]).*

Similar to *The Prestige*, the trick is played out at the end of the film, where the amount of cubes equals the members of CLAY. Whilst Hanne has stayed focused on Benjamin, the other three have disappeared – only on the boat to Copenhagen in the concluding scene do they reappear. Whilst Hanne did not believe his story, Benjamin's 'Jeder sieht nur, was er sehen will' extends to the audience.

Although Benjamin declares the trick to be over, the actual trick of the film is not over. When Benjamin reunites with Max, Stephan, Paul, and Marie, he has dyed his hair blonde and is dressed fancily – if we think of *Fight Club*, he appears more similar to Tyler than The Narrator. This demonstrates that his nerdy appearance was part of the act to fool the audience and that in order to pass as a nerd he has to project a more emasculate gender identity that is neither compatible with more traditional forms of masculinity nor the hypermasculinity of Tyler Durden.<sup>v</sup> In the very last line of the film, he repeats his line about no more magic tricks and thus reconnects with the social hack involving Hanne, which leaves the audience to judge the ontological status of the narrative. Just like Hanne's assessment, the audience's verdict depends on its belief in the social skills of the nerd and whether he can translate community in cyberspace into community in meatspace. Whereas Mark in *The Social Network* remains lonely, *Who Am I* suggests that there is an offline community ready to accommodate the computer nerd. Through engaging

with the narrative established by *The Social Network*, the German film thwarts stereotypes by positioning Benjamin as a social being in the meatspace, able to form meaningful relationships to defeat loneliness.

## Conclusion

Responding to the recent re-evaluation of the nerd, my analyses of *The Social Network* and particularly of *Who am I* have shown a more nuanced and, at times, positive image of the nerd. The Social Network's Mark to a great extent embodies the traditional privileged white male nerd who takes his revenge on the jocks by becoming one of the most prominent and successful second-generation Silicon Valley entrepreneurial nerds. Despite building the world's most popular social networking site, Mark eventually replicates his lonely college experience in his online social network as he is unable to translate the multitude of online connections into meaningful offline relationships that would help him overcome his loneliness. Although Fincher's film implicitly exposes that the lonely nerd stereotype as a social construct on a meta level, it still relies heavily on the trope to criticise the isolating effects of social media. Entering cinema screens a few years after its North American predecessors, *Who am I*'s Benjamin represents a development in fictional representations of the nerd which brings together traditionally unreconcilable character traits: Whilst initially an outsider just like Mark before him, growing up an orphan, barely making a living with odd jobs, and taking care of his ill grandmother, he is definitely not privileged; he combines an air of child-like innocence with the idealistic ambition of first-generation nerds (Kohout, 2022: 140–1) and the nerd's traditional counterpart of the socially popular rebel (Ibid: 33–35) using sensationalist social media to increase the public popularity of CLAY; and lastly, with his technological prowess being compared to the special powers of superheroes that can make a difference for society, his hacking activities increasingly enter the realm of crime, which suddenly makes the nerds social isolation appear to be desirable again. *Who am I* thus presents a complex nerd masculinity that combines previous antagonistic stereotypes in the fight for popularity and social connections. Thereby, the traditional North American nerd identity is merely a performance, a means to an end, that has no bearing in reality, whilst contemporary nerd identities seem to be much more open to various intersecting – and at times contradictory – identity traits, which makes it easier for the nerd to integrate into various social contexts.

Finally, this brings me back to loneliness and technology. Unlike Mark, Benjamin does not create the virtual social network that is supposed to guarantee for social connections, which means that his lonely experience cannot influence the creation of the tool that is supposed to function as cure. For Benjamin, it is rather his outstanding skills – which happen to be

technological and ideally complement the requirements of the hacker group – that gain him respect, friendship, and love. In his case, online contact facilitates relationships in meatspace and his digital nativity eventually translates into real-life confidence to engage in social connections. Hence, Baran bo Odar and Antje Friese succeed in subverting the notion of the lonely nerd epitomised in *The Social Network* through their adaptation into the German cultural context, in which the happiness of the individual is found in community with others, in keeping with Enlightenment ideals.

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### Author's Note

No funding was received for this study.

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**To cite this article:**

Schaper, B., 2022. Conquering the Meatspace: The lonely nerd in David Fincher's *The Social Network* (2010) and Baran bo Odar's *Who Am I* (2014). *Exchanges: The Interdisciplinary Research Journal*, 9(3), 11-29. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.31273/eirj.v9i3.866>.

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**Endnotes**

<sup>i</sup> In this respect, it is no surprise that *Who Am I* qualified Baran bo Odar and Jantje Friese to helm Netflix's first German production, *Dark* (2017–2020), whose transnational production network and subscribers helped the show to gain international popular and critical success (see Jenner 2018).

<sup>ii</sup> Following Kohout's pop cultural history of the nerd, this would also not be coherent with the nerd archetype since nerds, particularly second-generation Silicon Valley tech-entrepreneurs, tend to be rather conservative and to project the image of a cool capitalist (Kohout 2022, 148–9 and 219–21).

<sup>iii</sup> Hackers can be seen as a sub-category of the nerd, who distinguish themselves from the nerd in so far as they create the tools required for online activity themselves, have aesthetic ambitions, and by the virtuosity of their skills that are reminiscent of the artistic genius (Kohout 2022, 110-18).

<sup>iv</sup> The online dictionary Merriam-Webster provides a short history of the term 'meatspace', which emerged as counter term to cyberspace in the early 1990s (see Merriam-Webster 2021).

∨ For analyses of nerds and gender/masculinity see the relevant articles within this special issue.