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## Entertainment : Film & TV : Interviews

### Nev Schulman

17 Dec 2010

***Catfish* is the other Facebook film. Where *The Social Network* documented the genesis of Facebook, *Catfish* explores the consequences of using it as your main form of communication.**

Yaniv 'Nev' Schulman is a hip, New York photographer who receives a request from an eight-year old girl in Michigan to paint one of his photos. He agrees and the pair strike up a friendship over Facebook. He sends her pictures and she paints them. Abby starts to sell her art, even earning enough money to open her own gallery.

While this is happening, Nev builds relationships with her whole family, namely her mother Angela and Abby's 19-year old sister Megan. Nev's filmmaker brother Ariel (Rel) and his best friend Henry Joost decide to document his friendship with the artistic prodigy and her relatives.

As time goes by Nev starts to fall in love with Megan. She is beautiful, sexy and talented - according to her pictures on Facebook. They talk on the phone, email, Facebook and constantly text each other, but they've never met. This goes on for nine months, then Megan sends him an mp3 file of her singing and he becomes suspicious that she isn't who she says she is. The trio get in a car and drive to Abby's house unannounced and *Catfish* morphs into a brilliant reality thriller.

It strains believability that Rel Schulman and Henry Joost started documenting Nev's life and then, like magic, such an amazing story falls into their laps. Because the initial intention of why they set the cameras rolling isn't sufficiently explained in the film there's been much debate as to *Catfish*'s authenticity and critics have accused the filmmakers of fabricating the story. Initially surprised at the furore they've caused, the Schulman brothers and Joost have now started filming and recording interviews with journalists.

What should be of greater concern to critics is whether the story is well told or not, and it is. *Catfish* explores the ways we are able to portray ourselves in the digital age and where the lines between reality and fiction are constantly blurred. Technology holds the clues to Megan's true identity as Facebook and an iPhone become characters all on their own and the eyewitness to Nev's budding romance.

What's also interesting is that women are usually seen as the victims of internet dating scams and here a handsome, relatively successful young man is the one potentially being taken for a ride. Cyber space believes in equal opportunities if nothing else.

Rachael Scott spoke to Nev Schulman about his bizarre experience and the controversy surrounding *Catfish*.

It's best to go into *Catfish* knowing as little about plot developments as you possibly can, but the interview below holds no major spoilers.

**Can I just start by saying that I really enjoyed *Catfish* and I'm not here to try and catch you out on whether you made it up or whether your film is in any way orchestrated.**  
It doesn't really matter, does it?

**Well no, exactly. What does matter is that it's a really good watch and it's well made, and I'm not up to anything sneaky!**  
OK.

**"This film is by definition a piece of art and it deals with feelings and real life. If everybody has the same feeling or response to something, chances are it's not very interesting because everybody has different lives, everybody has different feelings."**

**I know that the story took on a direction you weren't expecting but can you tell me what the original idea behind making the film was?**

The original idea for me was that my brother was just basically being annoying and filming me talking to these people and asking me to read emails and I didn't really know why because it was sort of weird.

I just had this friend in Michigan, this mum and daughter who were sending me paintings and I didn't really know why he was so interested in it. And to his credit I think he just recognised that it was unusual, interesting and sort of charming and he thought maybe it would be a short film about me and this little girl and her artwork and finally one day we would meet and that would be it.

I never, ever thought I was going to be the subject of a feature length documentary. Not really until we got home from the whole experience and I realised they were very seriously now going to start editing this film.

It really was just this life experience, it was something that was happening to me and you don't think about things in terms of movies. So there was never any intention as to what this would be until it all happened and we all came home and started going through the footage and going through my emails - they hadn't seen most of them - and piecing the story back together.



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**When they were filming you and you'd become emotionally involved with Megan it must have been quite difficult to keep going on. I know you had an argument with your brother about whether you were prepared to continue or not and that's shown in the film, but what made you keep going?**

To some extent it was really being sort of pushed and encouraged by Henry and Rel, but mostly Rel my brother. He had recognised that there was a story, something happening with me over those last few months. In the movie when I discovered Megan was lying to me my reaction, which I think many people would have, was, "OK if I can't trust this girl who I thought I could trust I'd rather not get any more involved". I had confronted her about it and she had continued to try to convince me that the lie was real. So I just figured it was better to walk away now and get less involved than anything.

But Rel said, "If you walk away now not only will you never know who Megan is and why she lied to you about this, but you'll also never know for sure who's making these paintings and what was up with Abby. You're going to have a lot of doubts and your curiosities and a big question mark for the rest of your life".

So he really convinced me over the course of that day to get back involved and eventually we decided we were going to go and settle it once and for all.

**"I think spend as much time as you spend on the internet trying to make a new friend in real life and you'd probably be shocked at how effective that is."**

**When you realised what had really been going on it must have been a bit of a shock and a major comedown once the reality had set in. How do you feel now about the deception and do the lies seem screamingly obvious in hindsight?**

Yeah. Coming home was really hard because what had been a nine-month, very exciting, flattering fantasy quickly turned into a very emotional and traumatic experience. Then I came home and that's when it all sort of hit because I realised I'd been distracting myself living this fantasy, ignoring a lot of the real people in my life and also all these people I had been getting to know and developing a relationship with had just instantly gone, they'd vanished. So I was left very alone and lonely. Fortunately I was able to bounce back because I have a great family and great friends, but it was definitely hard.

And then of course there was the whole process of going back through the emails and watching footage from the nine months that I was getting lost in the story.

Realising in hindsight is so simple and obvious. I couldn't believe I hadn't just thought to really look into things more closely because if I had tried at any point in the relationship to really kind of investigate I would have very quickly discovered that they were being dishonest. That would mean that I assume people are lying to me all the time and I don't do that.

**No. And you wanted it to be true.**

Right. Also, if an eight-year old girl sends you an email I dare you to tell me your first instinct is that she's a liar.



**Yeah. She's a 25-stone bloke sat in a cellar doing something weird - no. That's not what you think. You might do now of course, but not initially.**

Right. It started off very innocently and it was over a course of months that I developed a friendship and a trust with this family. People don't see that in the movie so much because the first seven months of the relationship is condensed into 25 minutes. So you don't get to see all those little daily emails and little things that weren't about anything, they were just sort of funny and cute and that was really the convincing stuff. All those little things that weren't interesting enough to be in the movie.

**So what's your reaction to the many reviews that have not only said the film is an elaborate prank, but have been rather personal in their criticism?**

Well, it took a little while but I've understood now that this film is by definition a piece of art and it deals with feelings and real life. If everybody has the same feeling or response to something, chances are it's not very interesting because everybody has different lives, everybody has different feelings and if you can make something like a cheeseburger for example or McDonalds French fries that everybody likes then yes, it's probably great, but I can't imagine that it's very risky or very intimate or very difficult, it's something easy.

I can't say that someone hasn't made art that everyone has just unanimously agreed is perfect, but for the most part I think that's fair to say.

So the range of reviews has been everything from this is the best movie we've ever seen to I think these guys should rot in hell. And even though there are way more positive reviews than negative, it's occurred to us that you want that. You want people to have a response. You want it to be meaningful and it's up to them if they want to share their feelings and if you've done that then you've accomplished what you set out to accomplish, which is to move people.

**"The range of reviews has been everything from this is the best movie we've ever seen to I think these guys should rot in hell."**

**It's interesting that critics are prepared to accept there's plenty of artistic licence in *The Social Network* but are outraged that you may have dramatised some of the truths in *Catfish*.**

Yes, I know. Not only that but more specifically *Exit to the Gift Shop*. That's being considered for an Oscar nomination as a documentary, which is shocking to me. I think that's very clearly not totally non-fiction. It's certainly much more controversial than our film, I think. I dunno. It's a strange new territory of fiction/non-fiction.

**Yes. It's uncharted ground really so I suppose we're finding our way.**

And Joaquin Phoenix (*I'm Still Here*). He was not really that person. He was really doing that stuff, so in a sense it was a documentary about him doing real things. I don't know. What does it mean?

**Considering your experience, what advice would you give to people who start online relationships?**

My first advice is if you're someone who tends to connect and spend a lot of time on the internet, which is basically everybody, consider spending more time offline. If you're at home one night and you're a little lonely and you think, 'Oh well I'll go on this website or I'll friend request someone, whatever', consider just reaching out to someone in your life. Maybe a friend you don't spend that much time with, maybe your mum who is just across the apartment. Just say, "Hey, I'm lonely, do you wanna hang out, go see a movie?"

It's really hard being yourself all the time, especially as a teenager, popularity and awkwardness, those are really difficult things to deal with at a young age and the internet is a wonderful escape and a wonderful place to meet other people like you and to connect.

But there is something to be said that friends online, even though they're great and supportive, aren't real friends. It might take a little more effort, it might be a little more difficult and awkward and uncomfortable, but if you can develop one real friend in our life you can call and hang out with all the time, that for me can take the place of any number of online friends.

So I think spend as much time as you spend on the internet trying to make a new friend in real life and you'd probably be shocked at how effective that is.



**Are you still in contact with Angela? How do you feel about her now?**

Angela and I still speak occasionally. It's funny because I don't have a lot to talk to her about regarding our lives because they're so different and we wouldn't normally ever have crossed paths. We're now connected of course forever because of this film.

Sometimes I feel like I want to reach out to her and talk to her and see how she's doing, and sometimes I do, but sometimes I guess I feel a little sad because I know how she struggles. Not only with her own feelings about herself, but also her life is difficult even though she's got a wonderful family.

It's difficult and to some extent I feel this experience for both of us has certainly changed us, but from my side of things I'm very, very fortunate to have a wonderful family who's super supportive, an outlet for my creativity, I live in this great city and now this film has come out and I've been able to go around and travel and do a lot of things I know she would like to be doing. So to some extent I wish we could trade places sometimes.

**She's done a couple of interviews hasn't she...**

Yes. She's done one big interview and TV programme.

**I'm sure she must have turned quite a lot of stuff down.**

She did, yeah. We talked about how people are going to want to start talking to her and how comfortable was she doing that? And she said she would rather not, but once she felt ready she would do something. So she chose the *20/20* programme (on ABC) as the one big interview that she did.

**Are you interested in staying in the film business or happy to go back to photography?**

Yeah. I really enjoy the entertainment industry and I think I have a knack for it in so far as being myself on camera. So I'm pursuing that. I'm not sure exactly how that will work out but hopefully something will come of it.

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***Catfish* opens in UK cinemas on 17 December 2011.**

Author: Rachael Scott

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