

David Shields, *Reality Hunger: a Manifesto* (Penguin, 2010)

A manifesto is usually understood as a public declaration of the aims and values of an individual or group, and often signals a radical break from convention. In the case of *Reality Hunger* it is impossible to locate a cohesive set of intentions, or the *what* that Shields is attempting to *break*. Perhaps this is Shields' intention, given his hostility toward genre, nevertheless it is a shame that the relationship between intertexts (in this case all forms of cultural expression including internet; movies; music; traditionally published literatures; television) and the perception of reality is compressed into a series of aphoristic quotes that far from speaking to, and enriching, each other, seem to be conducting separate conversations on vaguely related subjects. The effect on the reader, although not necessarily unpleasant, is disorientating – akin to standing in the centre of a large room and catching snatches of an interesting conversation, but never enough to gain a complete understanding.

In his chapter titled 'manifesto', Shields claims that few novelists manage to capture the 'complexity of life' in rich linguistic terms, making one wonder if he has confused reality with authentic experience (200). He heaps scorn on the 'standard novel', but does not properly define one, offering instead a series of statements that suggest lyric essays and poetry are more closely aligned with the serious business of philosophy and science, and are, therefore, more likely to 'figure out something about the world' (202). Novels on the other hand, (with the exception of the special cases chosen by Shields) deliver genre-laden artifice without answers. Can he really believe this? Art after all, is about asking questions, not answering them.

Reality Hunger includes an exhortation to the reader to accept that the old forms of publishing are passé: given the accessibility of the net, a confident artist should embrace the freedom and creative exchange possible within the public domain and publish without copyright. Shields cites musicians who released albums free to the net and went on to make profits, but overlooks cases such as Stephen King's, whose novel *The Plant* was released in instalments via the net, with readers trusted to pay through an honour system. When payments dipped to 46% on the fourth installment, the project was suspended.¹

Allowing free access to all written works, artistic images, songs and movies is a lovely ideal, but an artist without legal copyright would not receive remuneration, and their work could be used and changed without their consent. One can only assume Shields does not quite believe what he is advocating: *his* manifesto comes in an old-fashioned paperback, complete with three pages of commendations from established authors, copyright clauses and, on the Australian edition, a Getty image on the cover. Surely the strongest manifestos are those advocated via action, not rhetoric?

My biggest disappointment with Shields' manifesto is his lack of engagement with the ethical issues at stake. When technology is used to blur the boundaries between the real and the perceived, or the lived and the imagined, the results are

¹ <http://news.cnet.com/2100-1023-249133.html>
<http://www.betanews.com/article/Stephen-King-Experiment-Ended/975529366>

usually damaging and sometimes fatal.² Given the title and blurb of *Reality Hunger*, I expected some consideration of the way technology is deployed to engineer reality. For example, the packaging and delivery of real events like the war in Iraq, and the impact of heavily-edited ‘reality’ television like *Big Brother*. Instead of discussing the deeper implications of the current explosion of social and artistic cross-pollination across all media, Shields simply tells us that the distinction between the forms of fiction and non-fiction is no longer useful; that ‘an awful lot of fiction is immensely autobiographical, and a lot of nonfiction is highly imagined’ (63). None of this is new.

Reality Hunger is readable and undoubtedly clever, but it wilfully ignores an overwhelming lack of interest in reality within many sections of modern society. Despite, as the back-cover blurb insists, contemporary artists ‘breaking ever larger “chunks” of reality into their work’ (whatever that means), many individuals appear incredibly eager to relinquish their hold on reality. Surely a manifesto about artistic representations of reality in the current intertextual milieu should ask questions. Such as, why is it that there are increasing populations of digital avatars eating, sleeping, dating, working and buying real estate in on-line villages, while their flesh and blood creators spend hours alone at a computer? Why do people ‘hang out’ in virtual chatrooms, or argue endlessly about nothing on online forums? And why are people happy to meet and marry via the web; to update their status on Facebook every hour or monitor the status of people they’ve never met, when they can’t bring themselves to speak to the person sitting next to them?

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² Braithwaite, David and Ben Cubby, ‘Gang rape filmed on mobile phone.’ (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 April 2007).