

FOR REAL?

ARGUING WITH DAVID SHIELDS

BY HEDLEY TWIDLE

'A literary battle cry for the creation of a new genre'.

'Raw and gorgeous'.

'A work of virtuoso banditry'.

The first and most childish reason for me wanting to pick a fight with David Shields's *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (2010) is that it comes swaddled in praise from London and New York. My Vintage edition is loud yellow and fire-engine red, like a dangerous wasp, slathered in quotes, puffs and blurbs: "A sort of bible for the next generation of culture-makers"; "an invigorating shakedown of the literary status quo"; and, most cringe-inducing of all, "This dude's book is the hip-hop album of the year".

Not only do they occupy the back and spill over onto several pages at the front; they also creep onto the cover, over the title typeface itself, where a critic as tough-minded as Tim Parks salutes this "protean polemic". Other undeniably brainy novelists like Jonathan Safran Foer and Zadie Smith also weigh in respectfully, even as Shields inveighed against their chosen medium in interviews: well-wrought literary fictions *à la* Jonathan Franzen and Ian McEwan, were, he told *The Observer* in 2010, "antediluvian texts that are essentially still working in the Flaubertian novel mode. In no way do they convey what it feels like to live in the 21st century. Like most novels, they are essentially works of nostalgic entertainment". What exactly was going on here? Had mass masochism broken out in literary Anglo-America?

When *Reality Hunger* arrived on these shores, it was swiftly taken up as a kind of hip guide to where the literary was, a text that had nailed an emergent writerly *zeitgeist* – in old New York, at least. Shields was duly channelled by the critic Sarah Nuttall, who gave a lecture on his work at the University of Cape Town in April 2011. Putting together a course on Literary non-fiction in (South) Africa at the English Department of the same institution, I found Shields a useful ally against those who felt that such courses properly belonged with the muckrakers in Journalism. His no-holds barred advocacy of genre-blurring memoir, the documentary impulse and the exploratory essay was a timely fillip for arguing that the many non-fictional texts which have distinguished South

African writing in recent decades are compelling forms, worthy of the same critical attention afforded to prize-winning novels.

The book also proved, I might add, a handy tool in the setting of student assignments. One simply plunders it for aphoristic nuggets, much the same as Shields plunders other writers, and then adds a word:

"All great works of literature either dissolve a genre or invent one." Discuss.

"The roominess of the term *non-fiction*: an entire dresser labelled *non-socks*." Discuss.

"The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures daily that are the envy of any novelist." Discuss.

Respectively: Walter Benjamin, Shields, Philip Roth. To which one might add a pithy line from a guest seminar given to us from our own doyen of investigative journalists, Jonny Steinberg: "South African writers don't know this country well enough to write fiction about it." Discuss.

Yet having worked and taught with *Reality Hunger* for a while now, I find myself wanting to argue with Shields more and more, and for all sorts of reasons – first the petty, then the more serious.

Let us take, for starters, his argument about creativity, plagiarism and intellectual property. What Shields has done – and I have no doubt that a reviewer somewhere in the blogosphere has already used this phrase – is to "curate" a series of resonant fragments. The arrival of the word "curate" in popular culture, which I date to the mid-noughties, is surely a late capitalist marker of how matters of logistics, corporate promotion and consumption have been recast as meaningful creative "interventions". One no longer simply organises a music festival, one *curates* it – perhaps just a precious way of passing off events planners as high priests of culture?

At the start of the Appendix, Shields describes how he wished the hundreds of quotations that go unacknowledged in the main text to remain that way, so regaining a freedom taken for granted from Montaigne to Burroughs, but one we have

DAVID SHIELDS IN *REALITY HUNGER*

"LIVING AS WE DO IN A MANUFACTURED AND ARTIFICIAL WORLD, WE YEARN FOR THE "REAL", SEMBLANCES OF THE REAL. WE WANT TO POSE SOMETHING NONFICTIONAL AGAINST ALL THE FABRICATION – AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FRISONS OR FRAMED OR FILMED OR CAUGHT MOMENTS THAT, IN THEIR SEEMING UNREHEARSEDNESS, POSSESS AT LEAST THE POSSIBILITY OF BREAKING THROUGH THE CLUTTER. MORE INVENTION, MORE FABRICATION AREN'T GOING TO DO THIS. I DOUBT VERY MUCH THAT I'M THE ONLY PERSON WHO'S FINDING IT MORE AND MORE DIFFICULT TO WRITE NOVELS."

QUOTED BY STEVEN W BEATTIE

lost: "Your uncertainty about whose words you've just read is not a bug but a feature". The lawyers from Random House disagreed, however, and so Shields does provide a very grudging list of citations, one which he urges you not to read. Grab a sharp implement, he tells us, and excise pages 207-221 by cutting along the dotted line: "Reality cannot be copyrighted. Stop; don't read any farther."

What one finds in *Reality Hunger* are fragments of text wrenched out of their original context, with precious little soil clinging to their roots. Geoff Dyer remarked that he often thought "I wish I had said that" when reading the book, and then realised that he had. While also committed to blurring genres and to what Shields calls "the critical intelligence in the imaginative position" (and while similarly and, at times, annoyingly flippant), Dyer excels as an essayist who, for all his anti-scholasticism, does at least bed down any artist that he is considering in a richer sense of context and connection. As such, one leaves his work feeling nourished by a rich and extensive

map of reading that underlies the main text, and that beckons us to enter its networks. What one has in *Reality Hunger*, by contrast, is a cherry-picking of the most eminently and obviously quotable – the (sound)byte-sized and most easily Tweeted – as we are asked to believe that (the curator speaking again) “selection is an important a process as imagination”. For real?

These may be pedantic points – academic in the narrow sense of the word. But they lead to something else that grates about Shields’s whole approach. There is an off-puttingly “granddad at the disco” quality about *Reality Hunger*; a sense of wanting to be “down with the kids” as it awkwardly lays down its dub and hip-hop derived metaphors of sampling and remixing. Undoubtedly, many writers wish they had been MCs or DJs instead. They gaze longingly at the instant feedback afforded the performer in a packed venue, then return to the lonely desk and the lengthy cycles of drafting, editing and publication.

The dazzle of the sonic analogy though – its irresistibility and unverifiability – tends to allow a conceptual sleight of hand. Shields, like many other would-be gurus before him, operates under the assumption that sampling sounds and sampling words are the same thing; that he is simply “remixing” Montaigne, Emerson and James Frey to great effect, or subversively “cross-fading” between Walter Pater and Danger Mouse. But is this the case?

Literary influence, in contrast to musical sampling, works via an anxious and Oedipal process: one where, as Harold Bloom suggests, the wilful misreading, caricaturing and the creative “correction” of a loved or hated forerunner are the signs of a truly productive skirmish between tradition and individual talent. Dollar Brand and Duke Ellington could play together; the youthful acolyte could (and did) even sub for his mentor all across America. But Vargas Llosa’s youthful infatuation with García Marquez ended in fisticuffs, not to mention Paul Theroux and V.S. Naipaul.

A further problem that emerges as Shields attempts to make his book funky is that it seems to be competing with the velocity of the digital world, or wanting to be friends with it at the very least. As Adam Gopnik writes in an essay on “How the Internet Gets Inside Us”, there is an ever-expanding library of books explaining why books no longer matter. These can be broadly categorised into the Never-Betters (we’re on the brink of a new technological utopia), the Better-Nevers (the whole thing should never have happened) and the Ever-Wasers (the arrival of new information technologies has always been a condition of modernity). Shields is part Never-Better and part Ever-Waser, but with a dose of Wannabe-Other. If the flickering digital screen has fundamentally altered concentration spans and changed reading habits, the answer (*Reality Hunger* seems to imply) is to make a book look like hyper-text, or hyper-active text. Live feeds and YouTube mash-ups have rewired your brain? Fine: let’s write books in short numbered paragraphs, as if to win back the digital idiots. Social networking has turned you into a reclusive and narcissistic sociopath? OK: let’s probe how your selfhood might be further promoted via various non-fictional platforms. Perhaps the answer lies in the opposite direction: writers, editors and literary scholars

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should be sent to decompress at Wi-Fi-less rehab centres in the Karoo where they are prescribed frighteningly long books – *The Brothers Karamazov*, Robert Bolano’s *2666*, Marlene van Niekerk’s *Agaat* – as a way of re-learning how to read for long uninterrupted stretches, and to access the meditative space that this gives.

Like the ADD-inducing online platforms with which it is alternately competing and chumming up to – those “crude personal essay machines” of MySpace and Facebook which allow such carefully airbrushed profiles to be sent out into the world – *Reality Hunger* points ultimately, and unremittingly, towards self; not towards other. And it is here that reading this work from South Africa reveals its limits in quite dramatic terms.

If the non-fiction boom in America has largely been in the realms of (misery) memoir, in South Africa (as several contributors to a recent issue of *Safundi* remark) much acclaimed non-fiction has emerged from a very different matrix. In a place where a pressured and traumatic history has created very specific kinds of “reality hunger”, the winners of the Alan Paton award for non-fiction tend to be underwritten by modes of oral and social history “from below”; by TRC testimony and investigative journalism; by the jail diary, microhistory, urban studies and archival reconstruction. If contemporary writers, to repeat Steinberg’s formulation, don’t know South Africa well enough to pen fiction about it, the task of the worker in non-fiction is then to find strategies for breaching the enormous social, economic and linguistic gaps that remain. Jeff Peires’s *The Dead Will Arise* (1990), Charles van Onselen’s *The Seed is Mine* (1997), Antjie Krog’s *Country of My Skull* (1998) or Steinberg’s *Midlands* (2002) and *The Number* (2004) – all are exercises in cultural translation on a massive scale: enormous projects of listening to, transcribing, sifting, arranging and intervening in the words of non-literary (and often non-literate) narrators.

How much do we care, finally, or how surprised are we that people make up things about themselves? The fact that James Frey published his drug-fuelled embroiderings in *A Million Little Pieces* as true memoir is less a philosophical problem than a trade descriptions issue (hence misled readers could tear out a page of the book they had bought and post it to the publishers to receive a refund). But the liberties taken by Truman Capote with living subjects; or Krog’s cutting and pasting of TRC testimony; or

Steinberg’s grappling with the question of how to write the story of a man who will not test for HIV/AIDS in the Eastern Cape remain stubborn ethical conundrums that cannot be wished away by glib assurances that all writing is a form of fictionalisation.

This, it strikes me, is the difficult paradox or double-take that one has to hold in mind when considering all those genres which fall under the “non-socks” category. On the one hand, the fiction/non-fiction divide is entirely inadequate and endlessly porous. Their centuries-long rivalry is best set aside for the idea of a whole spectrum of different writings, each jostling for influence and primacy in the literary marketplace. At the same time, though, it is inescapable. Provoking the complex play of responsibility and irresponsibility that lies at the heart of reading and writing, it reconstitutes itself endlessly: inhibiting and energising, inadequate and indispensable.

Shields’s work is a brilliantly provocative meditation in the first mode. About the second it has precisely nothing to say. It is self-involved in deep and often fascinating ways: consumed with the matter of how we narrate, re-narrate and fictionalise our selves (to ourselves) all the time. But there is barely a word in it about the problematic of telling the stories of *other people*: the millions of people who are “offline” in all kinds of ways. Read from Africa South, this “radical intellectual manifesto” begins to look hopelessly inadequate, even parochial. It shows up the kind of category error that arises (if I may “remix” Wittgenstein for a moment) from a man mistaking the limits of his laptop for the limits of the world.

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