Reality Hunger: A Manifesto

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Reality Hunger: A Manifesto

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Review by Jeffrey Barlow

Reality Hunger, by David Shields, is certainly not a book for everybody. From another review, I was persuaded that the work probably had much to say about the impact of the Internet, the understanding of which is our primary charge at the Berglund Center. Indeed, it does; but it takes careful reading and considerable thought to thoroughly understand what the author is saying—assuming that I have done so.

Readers must give the work a chance to develop, because of its mode of organization. It is presented as a series of epigrams [1] organized—very loosely at times—into sections. Some sections present an almost linear argument. Others, however, coalesce at some points then seem to move onto a different focus entirely. From these sections, and from the epigrams, major arguments or position eventually emerge.

Here, for example, are four epigrams from a series dealing with “facts” which are found in section h, “Now”:

255 Facts now seem important.
256 Facts have gravitas.
257 The illusion of facts will suffice.
258 In our hunger for all things true, we make the facts irrelevant [2].

The four linked epigrams establish the author’s belief that, while we desperately seek the real, our “Reality Hunger” has been twisted, by the nature of our media and by our economic structure, to force us to settle for simulations of the real. The same section, in which the above epigrams appear, however, covers many other topics as well, obscuring any central authorial perspective with regard to “Now”.

Here I list the sections, in part because I fear that this review may make more “sense” of this work than the author intends, imposing a unity that he might well find inappropriate. Shields is fully a post-modernist; he wants us to construct our own meaning, because he believes that this
is the only meaning that there can be.

The sections (in the author’s formatting) are:

a overture
b mimesis
c books for people who find television too slow
d trials by google
e reality
f memory
g blur
h now
i the reality-based community
j hip-hop
k reality tv
l collage
m in praise of brevity
n genre
o contradiction
p doubt
q thinking
r autobio
s persona
t ds
u alone
v it is much more important to be oneself than anything else
w risk
x let me tell you what your book is about
y manifesto
z Coda

It should be noted that, throughout this review, I am going to concentrate only on one aspect of Reality Hunger—that touching upon the Internet, insomuch as such a tight focus is possible. The book has many other notable foci, however; much of it deals with questions of “reality” as encountered in fiction, memoir, memory, film, television, biography, music, and many other genres.

This very expansive coverage means that anyone interested in art, broadly defined, and willing to following the terse structure of the book, which is, after all, designed to make the reader impose his or her own structure and understanding, would find the work provocative. This is, of course, the purpose of an epigram.

It is clear, though never clearly stated, that the major cause of the changes we have
experienced across all sorts of media and genres is the Internet because it is the Internet which has facilitated the communication of many new kinds of content in every genre, many of which are created by amateurs [3].

Here is an extended epigram—the literary history of the epigram in fact includes many lengthy examples—in which Shields defines the Internet. (I have deleted in the interests of brevity passages that seem to me to add little to the total):

74 The opposite of broadcast: the distribution economics of the Internet favor infinite niches, not one-size-fits-all. The web’s peer-to-peer architecture: a symmetrical traffic load, with as many senders as receivers and data transmissions spread out over geography and time. A new regime of digital technology has now disrupted all business models based on mass-produced copies, including the livelihoods of artists... Laws based on the mass-produced copy are being taken to the extreme, while desperate measures to outlaw new technologies in the marketplace “for our protection” are introduced in misguided righteousness. This is to be expected: entire industries (newspapers, magazines, book publishers, movie studios, record labels) are threatened with demise, and most will die... Many methods have been employed to try to stop the indiscriminate spread of copies, including copy-protection schemes, hardware-crippling devices, education programs, and statutes, but all have proved ineffectual... In a regime of superabundant free copies, copies are no longer the basis of wealth. Now relationships, links, connection, and sharing are. Value has shifted away from a copy toward the many ways to recall, annotate, personalize, edit, authenticate, display, mark, transfer, and engage a work.

This long epigram reflects one of the author’s continuing arguments. Shields believes that art is, despite all we might try to do, at best loosely anchored in any fixed “reality.” Ownership/authorship itself is ultimately un-attributable; how can we fix the defining moment at which ownership is established when works and authors all build on previous works and authors? He finds, therefore, no problems legal or otherwise, in mixing sources or “mashing” them up; rather to him, such blending has always been a sine qua non for true creativity.

Shields believes that information not only “wants to be free”, but to be fully creative, must be free. The long epigram reproduced above ends: Art is a conversation, not a patent office. The citation of sources belongs to the realms of journalism and scholarship, not art. Reality can’t be copyrighted. (Italics mine)

Our reality hunger comes from our alienation from current forms of content and meaning, from the blockbuster novel through the blockbuster film to carefully merchandized music. The author examines every one of these forms (and many others) as they have evolved. His explanation of the recent development of music, for example, is masterful. Here is part of epigram 275:

... Somewhere along the way, as recording technology got better and better each year, the music lost something; it became too perfect, too complete. Which is why so many artists have
turned to using samples and other preexisting sources in various forms: in this rush of technological innovation, we’ve lost something along the way and are going back to try to find it, but we don’t know what that thing is... We’re clinging to anything that seems “real” or organic or authentic. We want rougher sounds, rougher images, raw footage, uncensored by high technology and the powers that be.

Shields’ perspective is that of an artist who has worked in a variety of genres and seen over his lifetime that the media has indeed become the message. The author’s own creativity commands our respect. He has written a number of works with an astonishing variety of topics (sports, which hardly figures at all in this work is a recurring one) [4]. In addition, he has worked in film and music.

Here, by way of our conclusion for this review, is epigram 262:

Why is hip-hop stagnant right now, why is rock dead, why is the conventional novel moribund? Because they’re ignoring the culture around them, where new, more exciting forms of narration and presentation and representation are being found (or rediscovered).

And although there are many explanations for these changes—largely technological ones—the Internet is first and foremost among them.

The author is fully committed to the electronic distribution of meaning, and on his personal site [5] has made available generous excerpts from Reality Hunger. These give enough of an experience of the work, as well as introductory and concluding remarks, that they might well be a useful guide to a reader’s probable reaction to the work.

There is a great deal more that could, and surely will, be said about this book (if only in college courses in literature and media) but the reader who finds this review interesting should read the book and construct his or her own understanding of it. I have found reading it a worthwhile project and months after doing so, some of its epigrams continue to inform my thinking.

Endnotes

[1] Our search for a precise definition of the term “epigram” was not terribly satisfying. We finally settled on a simple dictionary definition: “any witty, ingenious, or pointed saying tersely expressed.” From dictionary.com found at: http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/epigram
There is a Wikipedia entry on the term, but the site has been disputed on several grounds and as this area is an unfamiliar one to me, I cannot recommend it. For those wanting more background and copious literary and cultural examples, the site “A Dram of Epigrams from Art, Poetry, Literature, Politics, Science and Religion”, compiled and edited by Michael R. Burch at: http://www.thehypertexts.com/Epigrams_in_Literature_and_Poetry.htm will probably be very satisfying.

[2] Because the work is entirely epigrams and each is numbered, I do not cite Kindle locations.
As always in my reviews, I am trying to, in my own language and organization, to capture that of the original work. In this particular case, this review may itself seem choppy and disorganized.

See the author's pages at: http://www.davidshields.com/ Shields has also taken the care to add a “Reader’s Guide” to the work, a trend which can only be applauded as it does much to clarify the work as well as to provide a structure for academic or social discussion of the work. Readers Guide: http://www.davidshields.com/readersGuide/GuideRealityHunger.html

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ONE THOUGHT ON “REALITY HUNGER: A MANIFESTO”

Good article. I am going through many of these issues as well.