

(STARRED) Shields, David
REALITY HUNGER: A Manifesto

The subtitle of David Shields' *Reality Hunger* categorizes it as "a manifesto," which is a little like calling a nuclear bomb "a weapon." In a series of numbered paragraphs, Shields explodes all sorts of categorical distinctions—between fiction and nonfiction, originality and plagiarism, memoir and fabrication, reality and perception. It's a book designed to inspire and to infuriate, and it is sure to do both.

In an era of hip-hop sampling, James Frey, artistic collage and the funhouse mirror of so-called "reality TV," Shields maintains that so many of the values underpinning cultural conventions are at best anachronisms and at worst lies. And he does so in audacious fashion, taking quotes from myriad sources, removing the quotation marks, attribution and context, leaving the reader to wonder what is original to Shields and what he has appropriated from others.

"Anything that exists in the culture is fair game to assimilate into a new work," writes Shields (or someone). He later explains his methodology: "Most of the passages in this book are taken from other sources. Nearly every passage I've clipped I've also revised, at least a little—for the sake of compression, consistency or whim."

The mash-up results in a coherent, compelling argument, a work of original criticism that consistently raises provocative questions about the medium it employs. It asks whether everything we know is provisional—and then asks who's asking that question, or if such authorship even matters.

At his publisher's insistence, Shields includes an appendix of sources for each citation, but urges the reader not to consult it: "Your uncertainty about whose words you've just read is not a bug but a feature," he insists. "A major focus of *Reality Hunger* is appropriation and plagiarism and what these terms mean. I can hardly treat the topic deeply without engaging in it."

Shields' argument isn't a lone howl from the wilderness. Novelist Jonathan Lethem employed a similar technique in his February 2007 essay for *Harper's* ("The Ecstasy of Influence: A Plagiarism"). Bob Dylan's recent releases have invited copyright sleuths to trace the origins of work he presents as original. The artist who bills himself as *Girl Talk* has built a musical career on aural appropriation kindred to Shields'.

As nonfiction increasingly verges on novelistic narrative and fiction continues to draw inspiration from "real life" (whatever that is), as computer technology makes cut-and-paste far easier than William Burroughs ever imagined, as the same image of Barack Obama informs both Shepard Fairey's art and an AP photographer's journalism ("a watershed moment for appropriation art," according to Shields), the formerly firm foundations of ethical distinctions find themselves crumbling. Or were those foundations ever as firm as we believed? "'Fiction'/'nonfiction' " is an utterly useless distinction," states *Reality Hunger*. How so? "An awful lot of fiction is immensely autobiographical, and a lot of nonfiction is highly imagined. We dream ourselves awake every minute of the day."

(Author tour to Boston, New York, Portland, Ore., San Francisco, Seattle)