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# Witnessing the Sixties

A Decade of Change in Journalism  
and Literature

EDITED BY

Frank Harbers, Ilja van den Broek &  
Marcel Broersma (eds.)



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# LITERATURE, JOURNALISM AND POSTMODERNISM IN THE NETHERLANDS

Thomas Vaessens

## *Introduction*

In the build-up to the 2010 national elections in the Netherlands, the leading Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad* published a series of forty-two front-page articles about the most important politicians running for public office. A series of six daily articles was devoted to each leader of the seven major parties. What was remarkable about the articles was that none of them were written by journalists. For this occasion, the editor invited seven Dutch writers and novelists individually to shadow a politician for a week and to give a daily account of their experiences. These invitations resulted in a series of rather unconventional portraits of the politicians concerned. The reader was not only informed about the position and views of the top political actors, but also about the more human aspects of politics: the man or woman behind the politician, his or her character, personality, and so on. In the newspaper, the series was not only highlighted with recurring illustrations, but the articles also stood out on the front page thanks to an eye-catching heading: 'Uit de stolp.' The Dutch word 'stolp' can be literally translated as "cheese cover" (a bell-shaped glass cover we use to cover the cheese), but metaphorically it refers to the idea of the 'ivory tower'. In Dutch there is the expression 'de Haagse stolp': the political ivory tower in The Hague which is the parliamentary capital of the Netherlands. Those using the expression 'de Haagse stolp' tend to see the political system in the Netherlands as isolated: politicians who are unaware about what is really going on outside their bubble, meaning outside of their glass cover. So, in the English translation, the title of the series reads something like 'Out of the Glass Cover', say, or, somewhat more imperatively: 'Get out from under the glass bell!' (subtitle: 'Writers Shadowing Politicians').

At first sight, the cheese-cover metaphor in this title seems to refer to the politicians portrayed in the series. It reminds us of the cliché of the political ivory tower.<sup>1</sup> The suggestion is that the disconnected, somewhat unworldly politicians have to be brought back into the street, that they have to be reconnected to the real world, to the world of ordinary newspaper readers. And the suggestion is also that we need writers and novelists to do so. As a literary historian I find the implications of the title very interesting for this reason: It would appear that the editor of one of the leading

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<sup>1</sup> The equivalent in the U.S. would be "inside the Beltway."

newspapers in the Netherlands thinks that writers and novelists are more able to break through the barriers erected by politicians than journalists. Or maybe even that writers and novelists are more closely connected with the everyday world. In this interpretation of the metaphor in the title, the writer is held to be, in a way, superior to the conventional mainstream or newspaper journalist.

But there is an additional interpretation. The idea of disconnectedness that is implied in the cheese-cover metaphor can also be applied to the writers and novelists. If the idea of politicians under a glass cover is a cliché, the image of the writer as someone who lives in an artistic bubble is not unfamiliar either. Complaints about the ivory tower mentality of writers and literary specialists are as old as modern literature and every now and then the literary debate is revived by writers or critics who accuse their colleagues publicly of being disconnected or uncommitted. This could also be the message of the editor in giving the series of articles this title. In that case, ‘Get out from under the cheese cover’ is an incitement to political and social involvement of writers and novelists. It is a cry for literary engagement.

The 2010 series of newspaper articles on politics written by writers and novelists was not a unique event. All of us can easily think of recent examples of the same overlap of the domains of journalism and literature. Writers, not only in the Netherlands, write journalism about current social and political issues—think of Martin Amis and David Foster Wallace in the English-speaking world, Juan José Millás in Spain, Frédéric Beigbeder in France, Abdelkader Benali and Arnon Grunberg in the Netherlands, or Tom Nagels and Tom Lanoye in Belgium. Their literary journalism of the last two decades examines the “lostness” of Generation X.<sup>2</sup>

One could also point in this respect to the many contemporary novelists worldwide who have recently started to write nonfiction, or to the considerable number of recent novels based on true stories. To sum up with just a few examples: Dave Eggers (*What Is the What*, 2006; *Zeitoun*, 2009), and Jonathan Safran Foer (*Eating Animals*, 2009) in the United States; Aifric Campbell (*The Semantics of Murder*, 2007) in Ireland; Thomas Brussig (*Wie es leuchtet*, 2004) in Germany; François Bon (*Daewoo*, 2004) in France; and Anton Dautzenberg (*Samaritaan*, 2010) and Joris van Casteren (*Lelystad*, 2009) in the Netherlands. All these novelists decided to leave the field of fiction, some of them for an indefinite period, others just for the duration of one book. Whether using their authorial imagination or not, they all entered the domain of an external reality, a domain that is usually the territory of the journalist.

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<sup>2</sup> Roiland, J., ‘Getting Away from It All: The Literary Journalism of David Foster Wallace and Nietzsche’s Concept of Oblivion’, *Literary Journalism Studies* 1 (2009), no. 2, p. 96.

What we see therefore in contemporary literature is a considerable number of writers becoming journalists. This has been around for a while, of course (Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway, Truman Capote, among others). Yet the cross-border traffic between literature and journalism also goes in the opposite direction. There are journalists who think that sometimes fiction can be a more useful instrument to investigate reality than the methods of journalism. Recently I came across the example of Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Lorraine Adams, who switched from investigative reporting at the *Washington Post* to writing fiction because she felt it allowed her to tell more of the truth. 'Fiction is much more equipped to capture the complexity of our lives than the missives and reports that come out of newspaper organizations,' she said.<sup>3</sup>

So, what we see is novelists inclined to write journalism in order to enrich their writing, and journalists seeking out fiction and other literary techniques to make their journalism more effective. Writers and journalists are making overtures. The borders between fact and fiction are once again being reexamined and challenged. The recent phenomenon of the so-called 'New New Journalism,' as Robert Boynton has characterized it, underlines this observation. American writers and journalists such as Adrian Nicole LeBlanc, Michael Lewis, or Susan Orlean write research-based, narrative-driven, long-form nonfiction, using all sorts of innovative immersion strategies.<sup>4</sup> Their work exemplifies the process of cross-fertilization between journalism and literature that is clearly of the moment.<sup>5</sup>

The current heavy traffic on the borders between journalism and literature raises several important questions about both disciplines. As a scholar of literature I am first and foremost interested in the literary aspects of this interaction. That means that I ask questions like these:

- What do we expect from writers (writing journalism)?
- (Why) do we think that writers can cure politics/politicians from "disconnectedness"?
- (Why) do writers feel the need to leave their ivory tower?
- Are writers writing journalism because they feel that the old reproach of their supposed other-worldliness and disconnectedness makes sense at this point in history?
- What makes writers opt for a more literary journalism?
- Are they trying to reinforce literature?

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<sup>3</sup> 'Reporters 'are mouthpieces for people in power'', *BBC4*, available from: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid\\_8700000/8700144.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_8700000/8700144.stm) (May 24, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Boynton, R.S., *The New New Journalism: Conversations with America's Best Nonfiction Writers on Their Craft* (New York, 2005), p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> I have reflected on similar issues in: Vaessens, T., 'Making Overtures: Literature and Journalism, 1968 and 2011: A Dutch Perspective', *Literary Journalism Studies* 3 (2011), no. 2, pp. 55-72.



- Is literary journalism a sign of the times?

This last question is a historical one. The current literary interest in journalism is certainly not a new phenomenon. When Boynton coined the term ‘new new journalism’ he was, of course, referring to the New Journalism of the late 1960s. Forty years ago writers were also attracted to journalism. The similarity between those moments in recent literary history—two moments in which authors came out from under their glass cover—provokes a series of historical questions as well, questions concerning the similarities and the differences in the Netherlands between 1968, a critical year historically among the Western European democracies, and today, 2011. In exploring the subject, I will do so by examining two Dutch authors I would suggest serve as exemplars among their peers during each period, first Harry Mulisch (1927-2010), and then Arnon Grunberg (1971).

*1968: Harry Mulisch and New Journalism*

Let us first have a quick look at the Dutch literary journalism of the 1960s and Mulisch. Then an up-and-coming novelist, he was a Dutch representative of the New Journalism movement (although I’m not sure whether or not he was aware of the American version at the time). In the period between 1952 and 1960 he published four successful novels, but after this promising start a lean period ensued and it was not until 1970 that his next one was published. This absence of new work represented a conscious choice by the writer, as he deliberately chose to write nonfiction. In 1962, he published *De zaak 40/61* [*Criminal Case 40/61*], a reportage of the Adolf Eichmann trial; in 1966, he gave an analysis of Dutch Provo – a counterculture movement in the mid-1960s that focused on provoking violent responses from authorities using nonviolence as bait – and the disturbances in Amsterdam during 1965 and 1966 (*Berict aan de rattenkoning*); in 1967, he collected a number of political and satirical pieces (*Wenken voor de jongste dag* [Suggestions for the Youngest Day]); and in 1968 gave his sympathetic view of the Cuban revolution in *Het woord bij de daad* [Suit the Word to the Action]. Not much of Mulisch’s nonfiction is translated into English but his book on Eichmann is. Mulisch witnessed the Eichmann trial in Israel and wrote a series of articles that first appeared in a Dutch weekly *Elseviers Weekblad*. The entire collection was then published as a book in 1962. Six years ago, the English translation came out under the title, *Criminal Case 40/61: The Trial of Adolf Eichmann, an Eyewitness Account*.

Mulisch’s switch to nonfiction was a well-considered choice. He had come to the conclusion that writing fiction at this point in history was not what a writer should do. He even accused his fiction-writing colleagues of

conservatism, saying that ‘a writer who agrees with the theory of *l’art pour l’art* chooses the side of the reactionaries.’ He continued by saying that objectivity is an illusion, and that writers should speak from their own unconcealed consciousness.<sup>6</sup>

This emphasis on consciousness fits in with the established patterns of New Journalism as part of a historically broader literary journalism.<sup>7</sup> In his book *True Stories* Norman Sims gives very similar definitions for the New Journalism and literary journalism. According to Sims, ‘The New Journalism movement . . . sought to return the voice and consciousness of the writer to journalism.’ And ‘literary journalists recognize the need for a consciousness on the page through which the objects in view are filtered.’<sup>8</sup> Both definitions emphasize the fact that writers give up their ambition to be objective and that they do so because they think it is important that journalism is written from the position of a writer’s individual consciousness. ‘Writers should let their consciousness speak,’ said Mulisch in 1968, emphasizing this crucial concept in the discourse of New Journalism or literary Journalism.

The idea is that writers can let their consciousness speak by using the technical instruments of the novelist and by using their imagination. Mulisch provides the reader with a novelist’s perspective on the trial and utilizes literary devices, particularly the use of imagery, to complete his picture of Eichmann. The image that the reader takes away is that the most frightening enemy might be the average man walking down the street or even the face in the mirror (an image that reminds one of Hannah Arendt’s ‘banality of evil’ to be found in the average and normal). As a writer, Mulisch says he is ‘less concerned with what he [Eichman] has done than with who he is,’ and he doesn’t use historical facts, but rather his psychological insight and his imagination to find out ‘who he actually is.’<sup>9</sup>

Throughout the work, Mulisch relies on imagery, a useful tool given the graphic nature of the subject. The descriptions of Israel, the Holocaust, the city of Berlin during and after the war, and of Eichmann, provide the reader with constant and lasting images. In describing Eichmann, Mulisch provides a series of photos of Eichmann. The real photograph, the one in the middle, is divided in half. Each half is reproduced and matched against

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<sup>6</sup> Auwera, F., *Schrijven of Schieten* (Antwerpen, 1969), p. 96.

<sup>7</sup> I follow John Hartsock here in not drawing a sharp distinction between those two forms, assuming that the boundaries between them are fluid. Hartsock, J., *A History of American Literary Journalism: The Emergence of a Modern Narrative Form* (Amherst, Mass., 2000).

<sup>8</sup> Sims, N., *True Stories: A Century of Literary Journalism* (Evanston, Ill., 2007), p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> Mulisch, H., *Criminal Case 40/61: The Trial of Adolf Eichmann: An Eyewitness Account* (Philadelphia, 2005), p. 111, 117.

itself to create two additional photos.<sup>10</sup> One photo is the two left sides put together and the other photo contains the right side of the face in its mirror image. The first one portrays an average, inoffensive-looking middle-aged man. The latter shows an image not unlike a monster, or as Mulisch describes him: a beast. Thus, we have the ‘two faces of Eichmann,’ one good, the other evil. This emphasis on imagery plays a major role in providing a portrait of Eichmann, at least from the perspective of Mulisch, the novelist and witness.

In 1968 Mulisch believed that nonfiction would in the end replace the novel. Like Tom Wolfe, spokesman of the American New Journalism, he claimed that the kind of literary nonfiction he was writing displaced the monumental literary form of the novel.<sup>11</sup> His literary journalism was, in Maitrayee Basu’s words, meant to be a response to an issue raised by the novel in the nineteenth century, namely, the correspondence between literary illustration and the reality that it imitates.<sup>12</sup> This supports Wolfe’s rationale in the 1970s for the New Journalism as the rightful successor to the novel, which he claimed was in a “retrograde state,” stagnant for over half a century. But it also supports Mulisch’s claim that literary journalism was a superior form of journalism as well as a superior form of historiography. In an interview, he said that his nonfiction would be used in the future by people who would really want to know about the 1960s. “They will not nose around in old newspapers,” he claimed. And he triumphantly stated that his nonfiction books would have become a replacement for reality by then: ‘That means that my book has become reality.’<sup>13</sup>

What Mulisch does here is frame traditional journalism as the antithesis of literature. His new literary form is thus presented as a synthesis in which the virtues of journalism (its seeming closeness to an external reality) and of literature (consciousness, imagination) come together.

*2011: (New) New Journalism after 9/11—Amis, Eggers, Grunberg*

Before crossing over to present-day literary journalism, I would like to return to the metaphor of the glass cover for a moment. In 1968, explaining

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<sup>10</sup> See Ronda L., ‘Review of ‘Criminal Case 40/61: The Trial of Adolf Eichmann’’, available from:

<http://www.bsos.umd.edu/gvpt/lpbr/subpages/reviews/mulisch0106.htm> (2006).

<sup>11</sup> Wolfe, T. and Johnson, E. W. eds., *The New Journalism: With an Introduction* (New York, 1973), 41.

<sup>12</sup> c.f. Basu, M., ‘‘New Journalism’’, *Subjectivity and Postmodern News’*, *Proof* (2010), no. 2, available from: <http://www.proof-reading.org/-new-journalism-subjectivity-and-modern-news>.

<sup>13</sup> Roggeman, W., *Beroepsgeheim 4: Gesprekken met schrijvers* (Antwerpen, 1983), p. 122-23.

to a journalist why he stopped writing novels, Mulisch said that it was time for literary writers to leave their ivory towers. At that moment in history, fiction to Mulisch was something of a renunciation of the world and a waste of time. 'It is war,' he said, referring to Vietnam first of all, but also to the Cold War. 'In times of war one should not waste one's time writing novels. There are more important things to do.'<sup>14</sup>

Although the nonfiction Mulisch published in the 1960s was not about Vietnam, nor about the Cold War, for him there was a clear connection between topical matters—the current events in the world—and his decision to stop writing novels. Other things were more important.

One could say that the same goes for many literary writers writing nonfiction and working as journalists today. I have chosen Martin Amis as a spokesman for these writers. This is what he wrote in the *Guardian*, looking back upon 9/11 and its effects.

After a couple of hours at their desks, on September 12, all the writers on earth were considering the course that Lenin menacingly urged on Maxim Gorky: a change of occupation. . . . An unusual number of novelists chose to write some journalism about September 11. . . . I can tell you what those novelists were doing: they were playing for time. The so-called work in progress, the novels they were working on, had been reduced, overnight, to a blue streak of autistic babble.<sup>15</sup>

It is not my intention to reduce the revival of nonfiction and the current fascination with 'true stories' to a mere reaction to the War on Terror that started on September 11, 2001. Then again, the fact is that Amis certainly was not the only writer who made a connection between a writer's inclination to journalism and the turbulent times they are living in.<sup>16</sup> For Amis, as for Mulisch forty years ago, unrest and turmoil are the catalysts for literary journalism.

Many of Amis's colleagues, most of them novelists, have chosen to write nonfiction in the last few years. All these writers account for their switch to nonfiction as a kind of social service for writers. Apparently they seem to think that sometimes writing a novel is not enough, even for a novelist. Or, in Mulisch's words, sometimes there are more important things to do than writing a novel.

Clearly, another point of similarity between 1968 and the present is that novelists writing nonfiction use their typically literary skills and qualities. By doing so, these writers claim that their nonfiction is of a higher order than conventional journalism or other forms of factual writing. To support

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<sup>14</sup> Auwera, *Schrijven of Schieten*, p. 96.

<sup>15</sup> Amis, M., *The Second Plane: September 11: 2001-2007* (London, 2008), p.11.

<sup>16</sup> Boynton, *The New New Journalism*, p. xxix.

this claim, let us have a quick look at two authors, one American and one Dutch.

American Dave Eggers's *What Is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng, a Novel* is one example. The double subtitle of this 2006 book combines fictional with nonfictional elements: it refers to the life of a real person, the Sudanese refugee Deng (nonfiction); but in the second part of the subtitle the book is qualified as a novel (fiction, or the suggestion is that the book contains rhetorical strategies normally associated with fiction, such as richly colored description).

Eggers started to write the book as a factual report of Deng's life. In an interview he said that he wanted America to know what every immigrant to the U.S., whether legal or not, is going through now.<sup>17</sup> But then he gradually realized 'that he'd have to fictionalize it, for the fullest effect.'<sup>18</sup> 'Fictionalizing,' then, means something like making it lively, compelling, affective. I quote Eggers:

All these things in the book—the facts of the war, the movement of people and troops—are historically accurate, but what's necessary to make a book compelling is shaping it in an artful way. . . . I wanted . . . the book to come alive, and not be dry, so . . . I decided the important thing was to tell the story well and bring an audience that might not otherwise come to it if I had written only what Deng could remember, and only what we could prove. Only maybe 433 people would've read that book. So I made it a novel.<sup>19</sup>

Eggers does use fictional elements in the sense of made-up details, , as well as the techniques of the literary writer, to broaden the impact of his writing, just as Mulisch did back in the 1960s. Although forty years later it has been given, in my view, a contemporary touch of commercialism, it is still imbued with the same principle.

Eggers obtained a degree in journalism from the University of Illinois and he credits that training, along with his experience in daily journalism, with giving him the tools to report real-life stories, for instance the interviews he did for *What Is the What*, and the immersion journalism he undertook to report *Zeitoun*.

Eggers's Dutch colleague and contemporary Arnon Grunberg has no degree in journalism, but apart from that, there are many points of

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<sup>17</sup> Kirschling, G., 'Dave Eggers on "What Is the What"', *Entertainment Weekly* (October 28, 2007), available from: <http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,20154178,00.html>.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*; Eggers himself: "This is a work of fiction. Names characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously," in Eggers, D., *What Is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng, A Novel* (New York, 2007), p. x.

agreement between his work and that of Eggers. Grunberg is a novelist, yet to an increasing degree his novels are based on journalistic fieldwork. In his novel *Onze oom* [Our Uncle] (2008), for instance, he incorporated the results of research into illegal arms trade and interviews with imprisoned women in Peru.

In 2010 Grunberg published *Kamermeisjes en soldaten* [Chambermaids and Soldiers], a collection of recent pieces written for *NRC Handelsblad*. In his introduction, he characterizes this new journalistic work by contrasting it with his earlier contributions to newspapers:

For 10 years I have been writing for the newspaper every two weeks. I wrote about my life and my traveling. Now I feel the need to write about other people's lives. I want to go get out and about, to see people, following the advice that Maxim Gorky gave to Isaac Babel.<sup>20</sup>

The reference to Babel as a role model is significant in the introduction to a collection of journalistic work that includes pieces of immersion reporting about military missions in Iraq and Afghanistan. In 1920, Babel joined in a campaign of the Red Army against Poland in the Russian Civil War. He wrote about his experiences, not only for the army's newspaper, but also in his novel *Red Cavalry* (1926). For that reason, his biographer called him an embedded journalist *avant la lettre*.<sup>21</sup> Grunberg follows Babel's example: he becomes embedded in the Dutch and American armies, he writes about it for several Dutch newspapers, and he incorporates this journalistic material into his novels.

Keywords for the description of Grunberg's immersion strategies are embedding, grounding, and participation. In several recent interviews he declared that, as an author, he wanted to really be part of something: 'Sure, there are writers who stay in their study all the time,' he says, 'but I don't want to be such a writer. . . . I want to be in contact with people, I want to be part of the world.'<sup>22</sup> Grunberg, who started his career as a politically unconcerned writer of ironical novels, now clearly feels the need to get out from under the glass cover, just like his predecessor Mulisch in 1968. And his new work, based as it is on journalism and fieldwork, reminds one of Mulisch's literary journalism.

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<sup>20</sup> Grunberg, A., *Kamermeisjes & soldaten: Arnon Grunberg onder de mensen* (Amsterdam, 2009), p. 8.

<sup>21</sup> An interview with G. Freidin: Haven, C., 'Isaac Babel's Stanford Biographer explores the Russian writer's world of violence, irony', *Stanford News*, February 16, 2010. Consultable at: <http://news.stanford.edu/news/2010/february15/freidin-babel-biography-021610.html>

<sup>22</sup> Grunberg, *Kamermeisjes & Soldaten*, p. 8.

Grunberg's beliefs about his new, journalistic style of writing are congruent with what scholars in the field of journalism studies have said about the power and purpose of literary journalism.<sup>23</sup> A primary characteristic has to do with the idea of literary journalism as a kind of social service by the author. Sims, referring to Kenneth Burke's definition of literature as 'equipment for living,' wrote: 'Whether or not literary journalism equips me for living differently than other forms of literature, I read it as if it might.'<sup>24</sup>

Grunberg also thinks that literary journalism, and the novels that are based on it, are very special styles of writing. Both the reader and the writer are likely to find answers to their key question: how to live? For Grunberg, literary journalism is the art of everyday living. 'It is my task to find answers to the question how to live,' says Grunberg in his introduction to the collection *Kamermeisjes en soldaten*.<sup>25</sup>

Other scholars emphasize the subjectivity of literary journalism, a subjectivity that doesn't distort the truth, but instead provides the facts with new, literary perspectives. John C. Hartsock claimed that literary journalism's 'purpose is to narrow the distance between subjectivity and the object, not divorce them.'<sup>26</sup> Grunberg confirms this line of thought every time he emphasizes that he is not just a journalist in search of objective facts but also a novelist. In an interview with Frank Harbers he said that as a journalist he has no shining example: 'In my literary reportage I have only been guided by novelists.'<sup>27</sup> Grunberg here seems to imply that a reportage written by a novelist is of a higher order and is richer than mere journalism, thanks to the subjectivity and the imagination of the novelist.

The third characteristic of literary journalism that is often mentioned is the idea that literary journalism realizes a relationship between art and politics.<sup>28</sup> If literary journalism is not about 'objective truths,' maybe instead it is about working toward the discovery and presentation of pragmatic truth (or truths). Grunberg also confirms this idea. To him, conventional journalism is about conventional truth. In an interview he said that he tries to pursue 'a higher truth,' not only in his novels but also in his literary reportages.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> cf. Roiland, 'Getting Away from It All', p. 90.

<sup>24</sup> Sims, *True Stories*, p. 6.

<sup>25</sup> Grunberg, *Kamermeisjes & Soldaten*, p. 8.

<sup>26</sup> Hartsock, *A History of American Literary Journalism*, p. 132.

<sup>27</sup> Harbers, F., 'Between Fact and Fiction: Arnon Grunberg on His Literary Journalism', *Literary Journalism Studies* 2 (2010), no. 1, pp. 77.

<sup>28</sup> Roiland, 'Getting Away from It All', p. 90; Roberts Forde, K., *Literary Journalism on Trial: Masson v. New Yorker and the First Amendment* (Amherst, Mass., 2008), p. 205.

<sup>29</sup> Harbers, 'Between Fact and Fiction', p. 78.



*1968 and 2011: Differences*

What have we seen so far? If we accept Mulisch and Grunberg as exemplars of their periods in the Netherlands, we can see that there are considerable similarities between the literary journalism of 1968 and of 2011. Harry Mulisch, forty years ago, and Arnon Grunberg, today, switch to nonfiction and literary journalism because as writers with a growing awareness of their social task they feel the need to leave the comfort zone of the writer, to get out from under the glass cover. They place their ambitious literary journalism in the service of big questions (equipment for living, how to live, and so on); they feel that the world is in need of their subjective views and they deliberately enter the domain of politics. Inevitably, however, there are differences too, and I will consider three of them.

*1. The Devaluation of Literature*

The first difference has to do with the declining standing of literature. Much has been written about what William Marx called ‘the devaluation of literature,’ and I am not going to add another pessimistic statement to the endless series of proclamations on the death of literature.<sup>30</sup> What I will do is merely record the fact that a novelist like Mulisch, in the sixties, seventies, and eighties, was credited with all manner of virtues. His position as a prominent novelist earned him a good deal of respect, not only in literary circles, but in all walks of life. In the public domain he was a well-known intellectual and television personality. He owed his vast reputation to his novels, the novel being an art form that had little competition.

Today, Arnon Grunberg is the undisputed *jeune premier* of Dutch literature. His award-winning novels are prominently reviewed in all the newspapers in the Netherlands and Flanders. Yet Grunberg is not Mulisch and he probably never will equal his predecessor’s fame and prestige. Grunberg would not complain about this, of course, but that does not mean that he is not worried about the social impact of the novel or the novelist. I believe he is for the following reason: His characterization of literary journalism as ‘the novelist’s oxygen mask,’ in the above-mentioned interview with Harbers, suggests that to him the switch to journalism and research-based novels is a survival strategy: you require oxygen to survive.<sup>31</sup>

After his nonfiction period in the 1960s, Mulisch returned to the novel in the early seventies, saying that war was now over, and that it was time to

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<sup>30</sup> Marx, W., *L’adieu à la littérature: Histoire d’une dévalorisation xviii-xxe siècle* (Paris, 2005).

<sup>31</sup> Harbers, ‘Between Fact and Fiction’, p. 76.



tell stories again. And right he was: In the years that followed, the American press compared him to Homer, Dante, and Goethe.<sup>32</sup> He did not need his nonfiction to be the distinguished and influential public intellectual that he was. But, whereas the journalists once felt humbled by the novelist, we now live in an age in which the novelist lives in a state of anxiety about nonfiction, as Michael Lewis puts it.<sup>33</sup> This reversal of fortune may have come about because news has become the “de facto literature of our times,” which is used by many people for distraction and entertainment as well as information.<sup>34</sup>

Grunberg works in a world that ascribes more authority to the writer of nonfiction than to a novelist. In his manifesto *Reality Hunger*, David Shields writes that ‘urgency attaches itself now more to the tale taken directly from life than one fashioned by the imagination out of life.’<sup>35</sup> And Hartsock said in an interview that his students are always startled when they read literary journalism. The work of literary journalists always makes them hungry to read more, he says, and that is no small accomplishment with today’s young people: ‘I think it’s all because it’s about real life.’<sup>36</sup>

In the 1960s Mulisch made an excursion outside his discipline, after which he returned to the novel permanently. Today Grunberg lives in another world. His rapprochement with reality can be considered as part of a strategy against the devaluation of literature. In order to regain the authority that was once self-evident for a literary author Grunberg places himself in the position of the journalist. To be more precise: as an embedded writer he places himself in the position of a war journalist, adopting a role that—according to Stuart Allan and Barbie Zelizer, two experts in the field of war journalism—is perceived as even more authentic and more authoritative than an average journalist.<sup>37</sup>

## 2. *The Rise and “Fall” of Postmodernism*

Now we move on to the second difference between the literary journalism of Mulisch and his contemporaries on the one hand, and Grunberg and

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<sup>32</sup> Mulisch, H., ‘Archibald Strohalm’, website of the Dutch Foundation for Literature, available from: <http://www.nlpvf.nl/book/book2.php?Book=782>.

<sup>33</sup> Lewis, cited by Boynton, *The New New Journalism*. p. xii.

<sup>34</sup> Seymour Krim, quoted by Boynton. See also Basu, ‘New Journalism’.

<sup>35</sup> Shields, D., *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (London, 2010), p. 200.

<sup>36</sup> Schulte, B., ‘John Hartsock on the Lasting Power of Narrative Journalism’, *The Washington Post*, available from: [http://blog.washingtonpost.com/story-lab/2010/04/narrative\\_journalism\\_a\\_convers.html](http://blog.washingtonpost.com/story-lab/2010/04/narrative_journalism_a_convers.html) (April 23, 2010).

<sup>37</sup> Allan, S. and Zelizer, B., ‘Rules of Engagement: Journalism and War’, in: Allan S. and Zelizer, B. eds., *Reporting War: Journalism in Wartime* (London, 2004), p. 3-21.

company on the other. That second difference has to do with the colorful history of postmodernism between 1968 and today. Back in the sixties, Mulisch's New Journalistic distrust of the novel was consistent with early postmodernism. He had passed beyond the essentially modernist view of the world that considered it possible to determine the nature of reality by the scientific method of objective observation. Mulisch was a child of his (postmodern) time in part, but only in part. He made the shift from scientific belief in the progressive elimination of uncertainty and ambiguity, to a belief in the indeterminate nature of reality. On the other hand, Mulisch at the time clearly distinguished facts from fiction. For him, those were two ontologically divided categories, and that is what sets him apart from postmodernism. While Mulisch resorted to nonfiction, postmodern writers developed a kind of writing that implied that reality only existed in the language that described it, with meaning inseparably linked to writing and reading practices.

Forty years later, well after the heyday of postmodernism, Grunberg would not dare to distinguish facts and fiction so decisively anymore. To him it is more self-evident that one cannot think of a reality outside of the fictions we create when we try to describe it. Unlike Mulisch in the sixties, Grunberg knows and emphasizes all the postmodern clichés, that there is nothing outside the text and such. However, like so many other writers today, he also holds the opinion (at least in most recent years) that postmodern discourse, half a century after its appearance, has got bogged down in cul-de-sac relativism and detached irony.<sup>38</sup> Grunberg admits that postmodernism, in demolishing the essentialist cultural ideal of liberal humanism, has had an important cultural function, yet he is left wondering what answers postmodernism can give to today's questions. And one of the questions that is of special importance to him is the question of how we can speak about reality (external phenomenal reality) again, after postmodernism deconstructed the distinction between reality and fiction.

Mulisch and Grunberg made the same move by switching to literary journalism and leaving the glass cover of literature but each had different opponents. Mulisch was opposed to the art-for-art's-sake idealism of his colleagues, whereas Grunberg is fighting the noncommittal attitude of postmodernism. In doing so, he sometimes returns to statements about fiction and reality that remind us of Mulisch's distinction between fact and

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. Vaessens, T., 'Realiteitshonger: Arnon Grunberg en de (non-)fictie', *TNTL*, 126 (2010), pp. 306-26; Vaessens, T. ed., *De Revanche van de Roman: Literatuur, Autoriteit en Engagemet* (Nijmegen, 2011); Vaessens, T., 'Dutch Novelists beyond 'Postmodern' Relativism', *Journal of Dutch Literature* 2 (2011), no. 1, available from: <http://journalofdutchliterature.org/>.

fiction. Here is an example of such a remark, in which Grunberg makes fun of the alleged postmodern denial of reality:

Doubt and skepticism about what constitutes reality are very healthy, but denying the distinction between fiction and reality just like that points to an attitude that results from a lack of skepticism and doubt. Reality offers a few “truths,” which leave not a lot of room for skepticism. Go and stand on a rail track for instance, and wait for the train to come.<sup>39</sup>

Grunberg is not attacking postmodernism here, but an idea commonly associated with postmodernism. Just like Mulisch, he embraces external reality, and he resists popular relativism—a relativism that was not there when Mulisch decided to stop writing novels. What we’re seeing here are similar responses to different critical idealizations or hegemonies during different historical periods.

### 3. *Media Revolution*

The third and last difference between 1968 and now that I want to discuss has to do with the fundamentally changed context of the media in which nonfiction and literary journalism manifest themselves today. Let’s have another look at the manipulated photographs of Adolf Eichmann that Mulisch used. This handiwork shows us that, back in the sixties, Mulisch was already very well aware of the power of images and how perception could be manipulated. In this sense, the somewhat naïve and amateurish photographs used in *Criminal Case 40/61* are a fast-forward, a prophecy even, of one of the most prominent themes of present-day literary journalism. For Grunberg and many of his colleagues, living in a world dominated by mass media, images, signs—and any other simulacra, mediation, and the steering of our perception by media industries—are at the very centre of attention. In his pieces of immersion reporting, for instance, Grunberg ceaselessly questions the discursive authority that is, as we have seen earlier, ascribed to embedded journalists such as himself. In today’s climate, to write as if one’s writing were neutral and unbiased is sufficient to show that it is anything but. Instead, there is widespread suspicion that any such “independence” of the writer is nothing but an institutional voice steeped in specific ideologies that benefit the mainstream news industry.<sup>40</sup>

Shields, in the above-mentioned manifesto *Reality Hunger*, offers a background against which the current attention of literary journalists to the theme of hyper-reality can be understood. His book is about the inclination

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<sup>39</sup> Harbers, ‘Between Fact and Fiction’, p. 80.

<sup>40</sup> Basu, ‘New Journalism’.

of present-day writers and artists of putting as much reality in their work as they can. Shields claims that the incorporation of 'raw material, seemingly unprocessed, unfiltered, uncensored' is one of the hallmarks of today's culture.<sup>41</sup> We live in a time dominated by innumerable forms of extra-literary fiction, Shields argues, and he mentions politics, advertising, the lives of celebrities, and the world of professional sports. Everything on television is fiction, whether it is packaged as such or not.<sup>42</sup>

In his journalism, Grunberg frequently shows his fascination for the ways in which, in today's hyper-reality, facts and fiction merge into one another. One of the pet notions in his newspaper articles about military missions is the idea that for soldiers there isn't that much difference between their actual situation in the army and the military video games they used to play at home. And he notices that when we think about war our frame of reference is determined by war movies, not by reality or any real experience:

What we see of war are often movies about war. . . . Soldiers imitate such movies, [and it is . . . nice to show how that works. You need a frame of reference, even when you are in a war zone for the first time, and when it concerns me that frame is the war film. . . . With that, fiction and reality can still be separated from each other, but some kind of interaction does take place.<sup>43</sup>

He concludes by saying that not only 'reality influences fiction' but that 'fiction influences reality' as well.<sup>44</sup>

'Our age has a great liking for true stories,' says the Dutch writer Christiaan Weijts, 'even though we keep coming across fiction all the time.'<sup>45</sup> For Weijts, as for Grunberg and the other contemporary writers of nonfiction, it is clear that today, more than ever, we are aware of the fact that seemingly harmless fictions can shape reality. We are more than ever aware of the manipulative character of rhetoric, journalism, and nonfiction. We have to be, in our current world in which we combine collective dependence on mass media with a very lively, individualized activity in social media like Facebook and Twitter. This mediated world is the context from which the current popularity of memoirs, New New Journalism, and other nonfiction draw their meaning. It is also the context in which we have to deal with the striking popularity of journalistic forms and television formats in which the illusion of reality plays an important role. Although

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<sup>41</sup> Shields, *Reality Hunger*, p. 5.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Sante, L., 'The Fiction of Memory', *New York Times* (March 14, 2010).

<sup>43</sup> Harbers, 'Between Fact and Fiction', p. 79.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem.*, pp. 79-80.

<sup>45</sup> Weijts, NRC Handelsblad, 12 June 2010.

the formula of the reality television series *Big Brother* was not entirely new when Dutch producer John de Mol invented and developed it in the late nineties, the success of this format all over the world clearly indicates a considerable amount of reality hunger.

*Conclusion: The Writer's Responsibility*

Today's literary journalism continues an ongoing tradition that can be detected at least as far back as the New Journalism of the sixties and seventies. Nevertheless, we can also see remarkable differences. Since 1968 we have seen the devaluation of literature, the rise and fall of postmodernism, and, above all, the fundamental changes in the way news is brought to and perceived by the public. Because of these developments, the current practice of literary journalism must be viewed in a dramatically changed context.

Many novelists and writers of nonfiction today are fascinated by the role of fiction and imagination in our global media industries. The relation between fact and fiction is an appealing theme for writers. It seems to me that they are very much aware of the increasing precariousness of that relation, and also that they claim their own role as writers in those processes of fiction that shape reality. Recently, the Dutch novelist and nonfiction writer Anton Dautzenberg caused a controversy in the Dutch press. In a magazine, the *VPRO-gids*, he published a series of three interviews with Lemmy Kilmister, leader of heavy-metal rock band Motörhead, about the global financial crisis. The interviews, however, turned out to be faked. Dautzenberg never actually spoke to Kilmister, and every word in the series originated from his imagination. The hoax was much talked about. Journalists accused the author of trifling with the interview format, this unique mode of professional journalism, and, indeed, of doing away with reality, a deadly sin for a journalist.

Dautzenberg defended himself on his website by calling into question the very concept of 'reality.' He referred to the war in Iraq to support that remarkable move. We were not dragged into the war because of reality, Dautzenberg said. We got involved because Bush, Blair, and (former Dutch prime minister) Balkenende told us there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, which of course was not true. What happened therefore is that, once again, fiction shaped reality: the fiction of a few politicians precipitated the harsh reality of real people risking their real lives (and actually dying!) because of a real war. And at that point, Dautzenberg writes: 'I conclude

that inventing fictions now is the exclusive domain of politicians. Writers may no longer enter this domain. I do not take the slightest notice of that.’<sup>46</sup>

I don’t think Mulisch was right when he said that in times of war one should not waste one’s time with fiction. By saying so he downplayed the role of the novel and the role of the writerly imagination in some way. Contemporary writers like Grunberg and Dautzenberg attempt to escape the isolated position in which Mulisch had left the novel. Today’s overtures between journalism and literature indicate that contemporary writers feel responsible for the current discussion about the role of fictions in contemporary politics and in the public debate. They want their work to play a role in that discussion, whether it is fiction or nonfiction.

It is no wonder then that in the 2010 Dutch national elections there were attempts to break the glass bubble of political and mainstream journalistic rhetoric that tend to perpetuate the fiction. Only the integrity of a personal voice can do that, a David with sling and stone confronting a Goliath of mindthink—a flung stone is capable of breaking a glassine brittleness. After all, in the reality hunger, everybody wants a piece of the cheese. What we are seeing are similar responses to different critical idealizations or hegemonies during different historical periods.

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<sup>46</sup> Dautzenberg, A.H.J., ‘A.H.J. Dautzenberg reageert op ophef ‘Lemmy’’, available from <http://www.ahjdautzenberg.nl/2011/03/a-h-j-dautzenberg-reageert-op-ophef-lemmy/> (March 18, 2011).