

Between Fact and Fiction: Arnon Grunberg on His Literary Journalism

In 2009 Arnon Grunberg was invited to speak at the fiftieth anniversary of the Dutch Society of Editors in Chief. On the occasion he spoke about the relation between propaganda and journalism. He criticized contemporary journalism for its commercially driven, superficial culture, focusing only on scandals and hype, and he connected this form of journalism to propaganda. Grunberg's position was striking in two ways. First, his invitation to speak at such an event is remarkable, for he is known as an esteemed Dutch novelist who has received some of the top literary awards in Holland for his work.

Second, he draws attention to what he sees as the problematic relation between journalism and truth, knowledge and reality, and points out that dominant contemporary journalistic practice is neither the only nor the naturally privileged way to represent reality. This theme links up to his own journalistic work, which is often characterized as literary journalism, and thus is situated at the outer corners of the contemporary journalistic domain. Much like literary journalism, "reportage" refers in Dutch to a textual genre which not only states the facts but also tries to convey the experience of a certain event by using different narrative strategies, like portraying atmosphere, representing dialogue, and building tension. It is a genre that is often situated on the border of journalism and literature. For purposes of clarification, it will be called "literary reportage" in this interview. Grunberg's journalistic approach and his style make these stories one of the best examples of contemporary Dutch literary journalism. His literary journalism is reminiscent of the American New Journalism that heavily indulged irony. And yet, his is entirely homegrown because he is not familiar with the American movement of the 1960s and 1970s. In the following interview Grunberg discusses his views on the relation between literature and journalism, and fiction and reality.

—*Frank Harbers*

INTERVIEW

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FH: What makes literary reportage interesting and different from fiction?

AG: What makes literary reportage interesting are the restrictions; with fiction anything is—or seems—possible. When I write a literary reportage, I find it important to do justice to the reality—whatever we may mean by that—I am conveying. Moreover, I think that every writer should occasionally bathe him- or herself in so-called reality. It seems a fairytale to me that imagination doesn't need to be nourished.

FH: How then does your journalistic work relate to your literary work?

AG: I think I value my novels more. But I certainly do not regard my literary reportage as just some work on the side.

FH: Did the NRC Handelsblad give you specific directions for your stories or did you have complete freedom while writing your reportage?

AG: They have never given me any directions. Only once they asked me to delete the word “undercover” because officially NRC reporters can't go undercover.

FH: Does literary journalism have an added value compared to “mainstream” journalism?

AG: Hmm, do you want me to be immodest? I don't think literary journalism inherently has an added value, but my literary journalism does. Otherwise I wouldn't keep on doing it. For starters, I subsidize my literary journalism. I am able to spend a disproportionate amount of time and money (think only of the cost of my protection in, for example, Iraq) on my literary reportage, considering the (lack of) economic return. Not a lot of newspapers or magazines in the Netherlands—and not only in the Netherlands—can afford to assign a reporter or a different staff member for such a long period. Besides

that, it seems to me that mainstream journalism necessarily applies a strict definition of what is news. It is newsworthy when a roadside bomb explodes in Afghanistan, but it isn't newsworthy when a soldier chooses a pair of panties for his girlfriend. I do consider that news. Also, the added value resides in the way it is written down, but I am not saying that style should stretch the truth.

FH: Could you elaborate a little on the way you finance such costly reportage?

AG: Obviously, a trip to Iraq belongs to the category of reportage that is the most expensive. Expensive for me, because I spent money on protection for the period that I am not embedded with the military; on my last trip this was half of my entire stay. I get 350 Euros for the short articles I write everyday for *NRC Handelsblad*. Let's say I write 25 of these stories during my trip, and later on also a larger article for 1,200 Euros. On my protection and protected transportation I already spent around 17,000 US dollars. The idea is that I "sell" my articles beforehand to a Dutch newspaper and later on to other papers and magazines in other countries. That way I sometimes manage to break even. Successfully selling my articles to other countries turns out better sometimes than others, and at the moment it's obviously not the best time for magazines and newspapers.

Therefore, I have to say that "Arnon Grunberg the novelist" sponsors "Arnon Grunberg the journalist"; it is impossible to reach a different conclusion. And if you take into account the time and energy I spend on my reportage, this financial support is very generous. Although I am not obligated to justify this financial aid, I believe it can be justified, because in the long run these journeys will benefit "Arnon Grunberg the novelist." They are the novelist's oxygen mask.

FH: From your literary journalism I get the feeling that you are not a big supporter of the standard human interest story. In what aspect, then, resides the news value of, for example, the soldier who is choosing a pair of panties for his girlfriend? And what kind of influence does the way of writing it down have on that news value?

AG: I don't need to tell the average human interest story again. It still seems odd to have to argue that my pieces have an added value compared to other articles, but as a novelist I am inclined to say: they are just written better. This issue is connected to the truth claim a journalistic article constitutes: a literary journalist shows the nature of something, based on anecdotal evidence—but that is clear to everyone involved. I suspect that the average journalist has an idea about what news is and he can only write something down if it complies with certain criteria. I consider everything that happens in my presence and that is interesting to me as newsworthy, and I suspect that this highly

subjective way of “newsgathering” amounts to something that might come closer to “truth” or “reality” in this case, than traditional journalism. The fact that my journalistic methods incite irritation with some readers, considering certain letters sent to NRC, could have something to do with the generally accepted ideas about “news.”

About the way of writing it down, I can only repeat what I have said before. What I experience has its effect on me, which I hope to convey to the reader. One of the means I employ to reach this goal is through style. What is style, you could ask, but I think that’s clear. The average news report also uses style. The question is if this style is always effective. By saying this I do not in the least argue that the whole newspaper should only be filled with stories like mine.

FH: Do you have journalistic role models or journalists (from the past or the present) that you admire, and have they influenced your journalistic style or approach?

AG: Literary writers are my role models. In my first reportage I mention Isaak Babel. Babel is a role model, another one is J.M. Coetzee. In my literary reportage I have only been guided by novelists.

FH: Literature is most often associated with fiction, journalism with reality. With regards to literary journalism people often refer to a “higher” truth. In your opinion, does something like literary truth exist, and how does this kind of truth relate to journalistic truth?

AG: I think that a novel, one way or the other, has to search for a higher truth. How that truth is related to journalistic truth seems simple to me. Journalistic truth revolves around the command: Do not invent.

I remember a discussion with a war correspondent who had worked in the Balkans. He said that you would talk to people there with such complicated names that he made up the names. I can understand this. But still I have something against it. I think that you can’t do that. In that case you write: “I couldn’t understand the name of the man on the bus and for that reason I didn’t dare to repeat my question.”

That a journalist writes about himself in a story can be tremendously vain, but it can also do reality more justice.

FH: Are there any differences in your work routines when you are writing literary reportage or fictional literature?

AG: Of course, even something as trivial as story length makes a difference. But more importantly, I think the people that I talked to for my reportage have to be able to recognize themselves in those literary reportages, and they have to think: “Yes, that’s the way it was.” I find it an aesthetical and ethical obligation to do those people justice. A novel—I might apply a somewhat old-fashioned distinction between fiction and nonfiction—is something iso-

lated. It is of course not disconnected from reality, but a novel does not claim to be—and that gives it its power—a truthful reflection of that reality. As I said, a novel pursues a higher truth.

FH: Could you elaborate on that a little—what kind of truth do we have to think of? Is that kind of truth also in some way important for literary journalism?

AG: I want to prevent [myself from] sounding too pretentious, but the point is to show how people live, how they behave, and so on. Literature occupies itself with the study of humankind, as well as, roughly speaking, sociology, philosophy, and economics. It has privileges that a scientific discipline doesn't have and also other pretensions. But it should ultimately pursue the truth—please do not take this as an argument for realism in the narrow-minded sense of that word; quite the contrary.

As far as I'm concerned, literary journalism pursues the same, but other rules apply.

FH: What is possible in your journalistic work that you are not able to do in your literary work?

AG: I can test my imagination and myself against reality, against real-life experience. I can fantasize about how it would be to walk through Baghdad, but to actually be walking there is something totally different—how trivial that may sound. I have sometimes done research for my novels as well, by the way, without writing reportage about those experiences. For my novel *Tirza* [Grunberg's 2006 novel in which the protagonist travels through Namibia], I went to Namibia three times.

FH: How did your experience as a novelist help you as a journalist? Did this experience interfere with your journalistic activities, or the other way around?

AG: Irrespective of whether you are writing journalistic pieces, a letter, or a novel, it helps if you can write—and I think I can. A journalistic story is a story as well. A story does not mean it is made up, but it does mean that you tell a story—or a part of a story, but as far as I'm concerned that actually still is a story.

You can describe, down to the smallest detail, an officer of the American army who welcomes the press at Guantánamo Bay, but you can also convey what he is saying—the choice of which details you deem important and which not are choices that a novelist has to make as well.

FH: What was the biggest challenge in the switch from the work of a literary writer to doing journalism?

AG: It was an excursion, not a switch. The biggest challenge was to expose myself to people and environments to which I am not normally exposed. I

believe that an important part of the work also has to do with the way a writer acts in a strange environment. When he sees himself as a celebrity, it is bound to fail. Such an attitude excludes, so far as I am concerned, a real interest for the people you talk to.

Furthermore, I don't think you can afford to already have a story in mind. You surrender yourself to what you experience and see. That is the best guarantee to observe in the best possible way.

FH: You often write about the war and its effects. What do you find so appealing about this subject?

AG: I don't want to psychologize myself, nor society. In the West we are obsessively occupied with violence and war, even though we haven't been involved in war for a long time. We do send soldiers to war, but with that, war still doesn't draw nearer to us. With all due respect for the victims, even 9/11 wasn't a war.

We occupy ourselves with war, but we want to keep it far away from us in every way possible. I think it therefore justified to ask what that war entails.

FH: Do you have the feeling that after your literary reportage about Afghanistan and Iraq you have experienced war like Isaak Babel described in his stories [Babel was a Russian writer who wrote short stories about his experiences in the Russian Revolution and Civil War, and who Grunberg quotes in his Afghanistan reportage], or would you characterize your experiences with war rather as those from an interested outsider?

AG: No, Babel might have been an outsider, but he was enlisted. Not me. Not yet. I have asked myself, though, whether I would learn much more if I would stay two years. The same goes for cleaning hotel rooms: You can do it for three weeks, three years, or your whole life; I think the "profit" of staying longer is negligible.

FH: In your reportage series about the ISAF-mission in Uruzgan [the International Security Assistance Force, or ISAF, is supervised by NATO to support the Afghan government in securing Afghanistan from the Taliban, and developing a stable democracy] you describe how a soldier based his choice to enlist on the movie Apocalypse Now and you use this movie occasionally as a frame of reference. Are fiction and reality not as clearly distinguished as a lot of people like to think?

AG: What we see of war are often movies about war. It is obviously not something new that soldiers imitate such movies, but it is still 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. Much more even than, for example, CNN; I do not watch TV often. So you

order things you see by asking questions and by paying attention closely, but also by relating your experiences to war films. The funny thing is that it turns out that soldiers, at least some of them, do the same thing. With that, fiction and reality can still be separated from each other, but some kind of interaction does take place: reality influences fiction, fiction influences reality.

FH: Can we live without a (provisional) distinction between fiction and reality?

AG: 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.

FH: Sometimes it seems as though the public only accepts the truth claim of an account if it is filmed by accident and shows a shaking camera (for example, the Zapruder film of the murder of JFK), or if it is written with stylistic imperfections. Would you agree with the postulation that we live in an era in which some kind of “authenticity or reality hype” is prevalent?

AG: There is, in my opinion, an odd need for “genuineness.” As if imitation couldn’t be real or authentic. People clearly haven’t thought this through. Maybe you have to conclude that there are too many silly and bad imitations. This skepticism that borders on paranoia seems to me a reaction to the loss of certainties with regards to what is real and what isn’t. You can’t reason your way out of this paranoia, because it offers in its own way the comfort of absolute certainty about reality. Journalists and editors are not without blame. For too long they have thought that they could determine what is “news”—they were the feudal lords who thought the feudal era would never end.

The paranoia about what is real and what is genuine, which manifests itself in different ways, is a reaction to this behavior of these “feudal lords,” but is obviously also fostered and exploited by movements which think they might profit from this radical, navel-gazing, and self-convinced skepticism of many people nowadays.

FH: What then does the notion “authentic” entail for you?

AG: It is a defective concept. Maybe nice for critics: “an authentic writer’s voice,” “an original novel”. I wouldn’t know how the distinction “authentic-non-authentic” could be helpful to me (or whomever). You might be able to point out what is “new” about a text, but “new” is a relative notion, and “new” isn’t always better.

Of course, as a journalist you sometimes have the feeling that someone is lying to you. As I have argued before, lies can say more about someone than

when that person speaks the truth. But that is not connected to authenticity. People can talk really sensibly about a certain subject. However, there are also many people who can't talk sensibly about themselves. Or they don't want to; it was never taught to them. That doesn't make these people non-authentic. At the most these people are, in most cases, of less interest to me. The "art" is to seduce people to talk sensibly, especially about themselves. That "seduction" is an important part of writing a literary reportage and is made or broken by the attitude the "journalist" adopts.

FH: In your literary reportage you reflect a lot on your role as observer or reporter, and on the whole journalistic process. Do you think that is a typical characteristic of literary journalism?

AG: I don't know. I think you sometimes have to accept that your presence influences a situation. When I was in Afghanistan for the first time and the camp was besieged with a bunch of missiles, I would think it nuts not to write how I reacted to that. I think that you have to watch out for the idea that you have experienced something very special. It is special because I am not normally besieged with a bunch of missiles. Had I been in the position in which I was regularly besieged with missiles, then the absence of the bombardment would have been special and worthwhile.

Sometimes you have to use yourself as the measure of things, but at the same time you have to correct yourself afterwards by acknowledging: I am not the measure of things.

FH: Both in your literary fiction and journalistic work you like to use the perspective of the outsider. Why?

AG: The one who observes is the outsider. If you participate, you are not looking, and it's also the other way around. It can be a painful position, but as far as I'm concerned it is the most honest position for a novelist as well as a journalist. In addition to that, the outsider for the novelist is usually more interesting than the one who thinks he belongs to an exclusive group by birthright. People who do not belong but who actually do want to belong, or people who did belong but as a result of mistakes or unfortunate coincidences were kicked out, are of interest to me.

FH: How did the army react to your articles about Uruzgan—you are not all-out positive about the mission, and you characterize it regularly as a form of active tourism, or even as neo-colonialism.

AG: Well, the soldiers, especially the high ranking officers, are usually no fools. They honestly know what they are doing over there. I got a couple of friends out of it. The Dutch Department of Defense has distributed a collection of the first couple of literary reportages to their personnel.

The Department of Defense did try to keep an interview with a general out of the newspaper. But I have justly pushed through the interview: The general knew with whom he was talking, there was a spokeswoman present. If the defense department isn't happy with what their own generals are saying they should adopt a different personnel policy.

In addition to that, my articles were published in the Cultural Supplement of the *NRC*, or in the art section. That is fine with me. But it is also a conscious choice of the newspaper to disarm the stories a little beforehand. It's as if they are trying to suggest that the articles in the foreign affairs section, mostly written by reporters located in Rotterdam, are closer to reality.

FH: You are sometimes characterized as a writer who likes to play with the relation between reality and fiction. Max Pam [a well-known Dutch literary critic] asks in a review of Chambermaids and Soldiers [a compilation of Grunberg's literary reportage] how accurate your descriptions are. Can you imagine that readers, taking into account your reputation as a writer, take your journalistic work with a grain of salt?

*AG: I would much regret that. I try as hard as I can to make the descriptions as accurate as possible. Of course you can say: "Okay, but an American lieutenant doesn't read *NRC*." No. He could have read a few of those pieces on Salon.com, but okay, let's assume he doesn't read those either. This summer I spent some time with ten families in a suburb of Utrecht. Those families were able to read what I wrote about them in the newspaper. They also knew I visited them to write about them, and afterwards they could react on my visit and the stories I wrote about it by email. Nine out of ten of the families have reacted in approval. I was called a sourpuss by one family, but being a sourpuss is not the same as being a liar or an inventor. Only one family refused to answer the questions, because they were disappointed with my story in the newspaper. But I doubt if that is because they think I lied.*

I would think it sad, no, appalling, if readers would believe that I visited Iraq or Guantánamo Bay to make up things. That the reality has its absurd aspects is not my fault. The fact that I see those aspects only speaks for my capacity to observe.

FH: In your article about David Lynch's "Interview Project" [The Interview Project consists of a 121-part documentary series featuring three- to five-minute portraits of ordinary Americans from all over the country] you call reality "an exercise in persuasiveness." What means do you employ to convince your readers of the truthfulness of your literary journalism?

AG: I select without violating reality. I select certain details but I don't have a specific agenda—that's at least the illusion I have—I make this reservation because you have to distrust yourself as well. I feel the need to investigate

how things work, to answer the question: What kind of family am I visiting? And you'll probably get a different answer to that question if you stay more than one night with that family. And the account changes as you are writing a piece of 400 words for the daily paper or a piece of 2,000 words in the weekly cultural supplement of a newspaper. But that doesn't change the first task—that you need to do the people justice who were friendly enough to welcome you in their home—to talk to you, to take you along in their lives, temporarily or not. It also has to be a readable and if possible an exciting story, but that doesn't mean you can lie.

Ultimately, what is at stake for me is what I described in *Chambermaids and Soldiers*: "I want to know how people do it, live." I write reportage to learn something, to get to know something that I didn't know before. It is on that learning process, on that getting to know something, that I report.

FH: Your answer suggests that your reportages are important experiences for yourself. Can they be seen as a form of anthropological (self-)examination?

AG: Yes. As long as the word "self" remains between quotes, and a footnote is added, saying: the anthropologist is a novelist.



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