

# Literature after Radio: Tuning in to Ivo Michiels's *Alfacyclus*

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## Abstract

This essay analyzes Belgian author Ivo Michiels's works for radio (collected in *Samuel, o Samuel* (1973)), as well as his prose writings of the 1960s and the 1970s (the *Alfa Cycle* (1963-1979)). Taking its cue from media theorist Friedrich Kittler's suggestion that the introduction of new analogue media such as the gramophone and the radio had a profound influence on modernism's relation to language, the essay argues that the stylistic rupture in the development of Michiels's oeuvre that occurred in the late 1960s should be understood in relation to the author's preoccupation with the medium of radio. By the 1970s, the radio play became for Michiels the paragone art form – the art that served as a model for his own writing – because radio captures and broadcasts disembodied yet corporeal voices. It is precisely the voice (rather than language) that became the central concern of Michiels's *Alfacyclus* [*The Alfa Cycle*], and that plays a crucial role in the author's understanding of militarism and fascism.

Keywords: Ivo Michiels, Modernism, Media Theory, *Alfa-Cycle*, Radio, Radiophonics, Voice, Fascism, Intermediality, Literature and Psychoanalysis

*No one listens to the radio – what loudspeaker or headsets  
provide for is always programming – never radio itself.<sup>1</sup>*

Friedrich Kittler

*Rhythmos denotes form at the moment it is assumed by that which is moving,  
mobile, fluid – the form of something that does not have organic form.*

Émile Benveniste

*[...] and in the scorching sun the cold impersonal voice from the radio, the millions of voices  
(including the hoarse, the brave, the untiring God-and-fatherland-voices) from the millions of  
radios with which the ether was filled – and the air filled with the left right left right left right  
within the walls behind him [...]<sup>2</sup>*

Ivo Michiels

In an essay published in 1958, Paul Rodenko makes the remarkable statement that radio was invented by the literary avant-garde of the 1920s.<sup>3</sup> Or, to do more justice

to his enigmatic claim, he predicts that in an unspecified future, radio *will turn out to have been* invented by the writings of the avant-garde since, he adds, *true* radio does not yet exist. By the end of the 1950s, Rodenko maintains, radio existed merely as a technical medium to broadcast information or entertainment. An authentic form of radio art had yet to be discovered. Rodenko writes:

What we call 'radio' is currently nothing more than a technical apparatus that broadcasts sounds; as a form of art, it remains in transit. In France and Germany, there are some attempts to create authentic forms of radio art, in the area of music (as radiophonic music) as well as in the area of spoken word (the radio play), but these experiments are largely conducted by technicians, sociologists and psychologists. As of yet, no Pudovkin or Eisenstein of radio has presented himself.<sup>4</sup>

Rodenko goes on to assert that even though a true 'radio art' had not yet (in 1958) come to be, its arrival had been announced by the writings of Van Oostaijen, Bonset, Tzara and Chlebnikov, whose poetic explorations of the materiality of language unwittingly anticipate the future discovery of radio's potential to create an art of pure sound. When that moment (i.e. the emergence of a true Radio Art) arrives, Rodenko muses, it will become clear that the experiments of the avant-garde had testified to poetry's desire to become radiophonic. Avant-garde poetry, Rodenko seems to suggest, has dreamed of radio, and this dream has pushed it forward into new experiments, new domains and new forms.

In this essay I will follow up on Rodenko's suggestion that experimental modernist writing can (and perhaps should) be understood in relation to radio.<sup>5</sup> Rodenko's claim, I contend, may have seemed idiosyncratic in 1958, but it has gained a new relevance in light of recent developments in media theory. Critics inspired by Friedrich Kittler (and before him Marshall McLuhan) have become attentive to the ways the break between modernism and the literature preceding it can be understood in relation to developments in media technology.<sup>6</sup> In a series of books, Kittler has argued that the emergence of new means to capture and disseminate vocal sounds in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century had a profound impact on the understanding of language and communication.<sup>7</sup> Technological media such as radio, the phonograph and the telephone confront us with disembodied voices and highlight what in communication theory is called *noise* – the sounds of the apparatus of transmission itself – and with the bodily, noisy nature of the voice. Kittler suggests that this emphasis stimulated new forms of literature in which writing is not considered to be the representation of a voice in which an individual expresses his thoughts, spontaneous feelings or inner self. Language is now seen as something material – a sequence of sounds – and writing becomes a manipulation of the noises that are inherent in language itself.

I propose to test Rodenko's suggestion that modernist experimental literature is haunted by the spectre of radio in an explorative reading of Belgian author Ivo Michiels (born in 1923 as Rik Ceuppens). As many critics have pointed out, Michiels (albeit of a different generation than the writers mentioned by Rodenko) is an author whose oeuvre is organized around a break between a series of realistic, often confessional pseudo-autobiographical novels, in which language is largely used for expressive purposes, and a series of experimental texts in which the author is mainly preoccupied by the materiality of language. It has become a commonplace in Michiels criticism to understand this rupture in Greenbergian terms as a purification, in which the author liberates himself from non-literary (ethical and moral) concerns, in order to focus on the medium of literature itself.<sup>8</sup> As Michiels has acknowledged in an often quoted remark, in his later works literature itself has become his main subject.<sup>9</sup> I do not disagree with this interpretation as such; but here I will embark on a reading that is attuned to how the rupture in Michiels's work can be understood in relation to his preoccupation with radio. Radio, I contend, is crucial to an understanding of Michiels, not only because he is one of the few writers in Dutch who has written original work for radio but, I argue, because his later writings aspire to become what I will call 'radiophonic', to use Rodenko's term. To put it in an old-fashioned way: in the 1960s and 1970s radio became, for Michiels, the *paragone* art form, the art that served as a model for his own writing.<sup>10</sup> Radio became the prism through which he understood language and literature. I will suggest that this radiophonic dimension is crucial, not only to properly assess his development as an author but also – and perhaps more importantly – to understand the issue that is central to his oeuvre, namely the aftermath of World War II. The 'rupture' in Michiels' oeuvre, I propose, coincides with a new understanding of what a 'coming to terms with the past' entails. It implies a transition from a model in which the past is confronted in a confessional setting, in which feelings of guilt and shame are expiated, to a paradigm in which literature works through the haunting radiophonic nature of fascism.

In what follows I will first discuss the *Alfacyclus* [*The Alfa Cycle*], the series of five experimental books written from 1963 to 1979, and then turn to what I take to be his most important piece of radio art, 'Hoe Laat is Het?', broadcast by Dutch and German radio in 1972, in order to raise the question of how we can understand his literary production as a writing after radio – that is, modelled on radio and preoccupied with the voice as transmitted by radio.<sup>11</sup>

## Hearing Voices in the *Alfacyclus*

Everyone knows that the most daring soldiers go no faster than the music.  
Michel Serres, *Genesis*

The publication of the first volume of the *Alfacyclus*, *Het boek Alfa* (1963), created a stir among critics, not only because it was experienced as ‘difficult’ but also because it was largely seen as a radical departure from Michiels’s earlier works. In the 1940s and 1950s Michiels had established his reputation with a series of semi-autobiographical novels (*Het Vonnis* (1949) and *Kruisocht der Jongelingen* (1951)) that were seen as a reckoning with the ideals of his conservative background (Michiels had been involved with Catholic Flemish-nationalist youth movements), and a reflection on his wartime experiences (Michiels was sent to work as a nurse in a military hospital in Lübeck).<sup>12</sup> By the end of the 1950s, however, Michiels’s writing had become increasingly less realistic and more allegorical, culminating in *Het Afscheid* (1957), a novel about the crew of a ship, *The Gambetta*, that lies docked at Antwerp before embarking on a secret mission while the crew are not sure of the exact date of departure.<sup>13</sup> Each morning the crew members leave the ship for twenty-four hours and when they return they do not know whether they have left their families temporarily or for good. Departure becomes for them a permanent state, or (as it was put at the time) an existential situation that is explored in the novel.

Like its predecessor, *Het boek Alfa* also revolves around a temporal experience rendered as something permanent. This time, the experience of waiting is central as the book is about a soldier who stands guard outside a military barracks in the war’s final days. Rather than using this situation as a starting point for a string of events, the book presents us with a montage of voices, sounds and sights coming from the street and the barracks, interspersed with flashbacks, fantasies and anticipations that are not set apart by textual markers but are rendered in solid blocks of text.

Upon its publication, *Het boek Alfa* was widely interpreted as a stream-of-consciousness-novel in the vein of Faulkner, Joyce or Woolf.<sup>14</sup> This reading, however, became harder to sustain with the publication of later installments of the series. As Cyrille Offermans observes, *Orchis Militaris* (1968) and *Exit* (1971) offer, like *Het boek Alfa*, ‘streams’ of impressions but they are no longer anchored in the consciousness of one central character.<sup>15</sup> In *Orchis Militaris* – the title refers to the Latin name of an orchid, known in Dutch as ‘*Soldaatje*’ (little soldier) –, only the opening pages contain hints of a narrative about a central character, a ‘he’ who travels by train into enemy territory, deported to work in a military hospital. The novel subsequently evolves into a montage of different impressions, voices and, most crucially, fragments of dialogue that can neither be easily located within a chronological sequence of events nor always be attributed to specific characters. These dialogues are uncannily repetitive, as seen in a six-page sequence where a soldier’s words (a description

of his hometown) are followed by an almost verbatim reiteration of these words by a second soldier, or in recurring scenes where various authority figures deliver very long strings of short authoritative declarations, each time followed by a 'yes' of a second speaker: 'ja dokter, ja zuster, ja generaal, ja mevrouw de barones' ('yes doctor, yes sister, yes general, yes madam barones'). A similar, exhaustive repetitiveness typifies the long mantra-like monologues in the second half of the book, in which a speaker testifies to a series of beliefs and utters a large number of promises and oaths, phrased in sentences with a similar syntax and wording, each of which is rendered *twice*. This leaves the impression that these passages should not be understood as fragments of a *monologue intérieur*, since they do not seem to follow the logic of a thought process (or a series of sensations) but adhere strictly to a formal linguistic pattern that is pursued in a mechanical, machinelike way, perhaps as a response to a series of dictations and injunctions.

At first sight it seems that the text's radical fragmentation and its impersonal use of language should be understood in relation to the theme announced by the novel's title. *Orchis Militaris* would then be an exploration of the experience of de-personalization that results from being subjected to a strict hierarchical order of which the soldier's experience would be the paradigmatic case. This reading is indeed confirmed in the opening pages, which describe in long meandering sentences the experience of being locked inside a packed train – perhaps during a bomb scare – as the constitution of a new collective body that consists of an assemblage of various openings and limbs touching one another. This description segues mid-sentence into a succession of different scenes, set within the army, in hospital and in church. In each case, the subject is integrated into a larger body by being on the receiving end of a mind-numbing series of directives and orders (sometimes bordering on the nonsensical) that always demand a response – a yes. The automatism with which this 'yes' is delivered suggests that what is demanded is not so much an expression of an agreement as a vocal, *bodily* sound. What seemed like a dialogue is in fact closer to a call-and-response routine, a rhythmic chant.<sup>16</sup>

In these passages, Michiels seems to be evoking the experience of what Henri Lefebvre would later call – in a metaphor derived from animal training – undergoing *dressage*.<sup>17</sup> Lefebvre uses this word to explain how techniques such as military drilling employ repetition to transform a group of individuals into a collective body.<sup>18</sup> By subjecting someone to a steady, monotonous drill, one imposes a new rhythm upon the biological rhythms of the body, effecting an automatic, semi-conscious pattern of behaviour, a habit.<sup>19</sup> Repetition, as any animal trainer knows, allows one to 'break into the bodies' of individuals and to reconstitute them as a part of a new, collective body that has a *rhythmic consistency*.<sup>20</sup>

*Orchis Militaris* highlights that *dressage* leaves traces in the body in the form of an internalized voice that imposes a certain pace on the subject, a pulsating beat that pushes him forward and urges him to commit acts of violence. This is made plain in a long and remarkable passage at the heart of the novel where the description of

a series of violent events (a fistfight, a punishment, an interrogation and a scene of sexual violence) are rhythmically interjected by repeated exclamations such as 'komt dat zien, komt dat zien, hier worden klappen uitgedeeld' ('roll up, roll up, this is where he action is')), 'op en neer, op en neer' ('up down, up down') and 'de hand, de arm, de hand aan de arm, de arm aan de hand' ('the hand, the arm, the hand and arm, the arm on the hand'), which string the various incidents together and give these pages a certain cadence. These phrases, referred to in the novel as a refrain, cannot easily be attributed to any of the characters.<sup>21</sup> At times they seem to come from a crowd of bystanders that emerges out of nowhere to watch and cheer on the violence. At other times they come from within the subject engaged in violence. More frequently, though, they are inserted into the text as free-floating melodic phrases that have no clear source but seem to resound *between* the various subjects (perpetrators, victims and bystanders) as a haunting melody that each can tune in to and that gives the crowd its 'rhythmic consistency'.

This refrain offers a protective shield that desensitizes the subject and allows him to hit and be hit (and to shoot and be shot) *without thinking*, as the novel puts it repeatedly. It brings about an emotional numbness that is perhaps necessary to fulfil one's duty as a soldier, nurse or member of a church, and to blend into the drone of a praying, fighting or nursing collective. Yet, despite these passages – that clearly contain an implicit critique of militarism – the text as a whole should not be understood as a humanist defence of the individual since – and this is crucial – the book does not include an authentic voice as a counterpoint to the drilling and drilled voices. Nowhere in the novel do we witness the events from the perspective of someone capable of resisting the drilling experience. Each voice in the text seems to be traversed by a similar rhythmic pulse, and thus the reader is left feeling that no escape is possible: perhaps the subject itself is formed by the various injunctions, interpellations and drills that besiege him.

This claustrophobic feeling is even more intense in the next novel in the series, *Exit* (1971). As the title indicates, this novel deals with the desire *and* impossibility of departing and is more or less set in a military barracks. It consists again of a series of pseudo-dialogues and speeches, now intermingled with detailed reports about card games, long discourses about the rules of discourse, senseless alphabetical lists (such as a nine-page inventory of everything that could possibly be made from paper) and exhaustive annotations of small talk between soldiers, referred to by their military numbers. Within the context of the novel, the focus on games, rules and symbolic systems can be read as a metaphor for the experience of a subject in the grip of an administrative apparatus from which there is indeed no exit. The opening phrase of the novel – 'ik pas' ('I pass') – a phrase derived from a card game, appears throughout the novel to indicate a desire to step out which is, however, never a step outside the coordinates set by the game itself. As a result, the difference between 'passing' and being 'in de pas' ('in step') is blurred.

Hence the *Alfacyclus* (and in particular its first three parts) explores the relation between the body, its training (*dressage*) and language. In other words, to repeat what has become a cliché in Michiels criticism, the novel highlights the relation between violence and language. Language, however, is understood not as a formal system of signifiers that structures the way we experience reality, but rather as something uttered by numerous voices which, as the novel puts it, seem to come from everywhere, descending upon the subject and transforming him into someone who is in the first place a receiver.<sup>22</sup> These voices invariably do something in excess of signification. They call upon the subject, break into his body and leave a trace in the form of a haunting, rhythmic melody that seems to be permeated by a violent sadistic enjoyment. The sexual dimension of these internalized voices becomes clear not only from the joyful cheers of the crowd of bystanders at a beating but also from the same free-floating yells ('op en neer, op en neer') repeated in scenes of violence as well as those of a sexual nature.<sup>23</sup> Military drilling, as Slavoj Žižek has pointed out, is always more than the imposition of bodily discipline; the drill itself is saturated by a blend of sexualization and a humiliating display of power.<sup>24</sup> It is the same melody, therefore, that binds the subject to the collective, that allows him to resonate with a collective body and that seems to embody the surplus enjoyment the subject derives from his joining the collective.

### Saying 'b': Michiels's Works for Radio

*The voice is that which, within the signifier, resists meaning.*  
Slavoj Žižek, *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*

The relation between voice and violence is further explored in the scripts Michiels wrote for radio in the early 1970s, published under the title *Samuel, o Samuel*. These were later added to the *Alfacyclus* as part 3 ½ – that is, as an interruption into the 'proper' series. Although only two of the book's four texts were used as radio plays (broadcast by Dutch, Flemish and German radio), all four should be understood as inherently 'radiophonic', since they are all texts for voices, as the postscript to the book points out.<sup>25</sup> Formally, they radicalize the previous instalments of the cycle. *Orchis Militaris* and *Het boek Alfa* still contained hints of character, setting and plot. These categories are largely absent in *Samuel, o Samuel*. What remains is a series of dialogues between disembodied, *acousmatic* voices, to use Michel Chion's term: voices that are not anchored in particular bodies and therefore exist only as spectral, shadowlike beings, absent in their very presence, hovering in some indeterminate space.<sup>26</sup>

Of all the voices collected in *Samuel, o Samuel*, those of 'Hoe laat is het?' (broadcast by the Dutch KRO and the German Süddeutscher Rundfunk in 1972) are perhaps the most spectral and therefore inherently radiophonic.<sup>27</sup> Devoid of plot, character and development, 'Hoe laat is het?' is best understood as a composition for voices,

a series of 'movements' in which different modalities of language are examined in various tempos. Opening with a dialogue on writing, notating and registering, it continues to probe the ways words can be used to think, anticipate, imagine, doubt, plan and, in a final scene (which renders the nonsensical dialogues between three 'radio-cars' and a 'central station'), to establish contact. These movements do not offer dramatic dialogues but rather careful and systematic examinations of the conventional phrases we use to think, plan, doubt, etc. The very exhaustiveness of the lists of phrases spoken gives the impression that they should not be understood as the vehicles we use to express ourselves; rather, our conventions form a rigid framework that delimits what can be thought, doubted or planned.

The second movement, for example, is a montage of a recorded voice that reads (in what sounds like a lecture hall) a dictionary definition of the philosophical meanings of the word 'idea' as a platonic eternal truth, an opinion or a conception of something. This recording is played seven times, and each playback is followed by a dialogue that undermines precisely the notion that an idea can be defined solely by its content. Ideas, these dialogues suggest, are not abstract; they arise in specific contexts that stipulate genres of speech relying on conventional phrases. 'Ideas' to seduce someone, to engage in political action, to embark on a journey or to plan to make a film are all articulated in idiomatic expressions that have the ring of clichés. As the movement progresses, these preconceived phrases become shorter and more formulaic until, finally, the dialogue is transformed into a cut-up of recorded fragments of sentences – from which the content of the 'idea' gradually disappears, leaving only the formal and socially acceptable linguistic form.<sup>28</sup> The scene ends in a series of disjunctive jump-cuts of empty phrases, which transforms the voice that utters them into a stuttering, mechanical-sounding mouthpiece for a series of conventions devoid, precisely, of ideas.<sup>29</sup>

A similar almost violent assault on the voice takes place in the following scene, that starts as a long, repetitive monologue in which a voice, speaking with the terse slowness and reasonableness of authority, addresses someone to remind him of 'the rule' that the person who says 'a' should also say 'b'.<sup>30</sup> This saying of 'a', which the voice insists has taken place, is defined in a purely physical way as an opening of the mouth, a lowering of the chin and a movement within the throat.<sup>31</sup> The rule stipulates that this be followed by a sound issuing from the same bodily opening (and not, as the voice patiently spells out, by a sound from an opening down below). The speaker continues to make this demand in an increasingly pressing way, until the piece cuts to a montage of a series of vocal sounds issuing from different throats that scream, sing, chant, beg, stutter and cry in a rhythmic way.

The piece, then, plays with the tension between language and voice – or rather with a tension *within* the voice as, on the one hand, a transmitter of signs and phrases and, on the other hand, a purely bodily sound.<sup>32</sup> However, the physical vocal sounds in 'Hoe laat is het?' are not metonyms that stand for the uniqueness of the speaking individuals, nor do they simply highlight what Roland Barthes calls

‘the grain of the voice’, ‘the vibrating of the cavities, muscles and membranes of a singular body’.<sup>33</sup> The voice, in Michiels’s radioplay, and the pre-linguistic utterances it emits, is ‘cut up’ and streamlined by power relations. Emitting an ‘a’ is in itself already a ‘saying b,’ a response to an injunction or demand. The voice is therefore always already ‘drilled’. This is made clear, not only in the passages discussed above, but more generally by the fact that all dialogues start with the question ‘what time is it?’ This question does not ask for information, but it is invariably taken as a call to align oneself with a socially imposed tempo. This is illustrated by a dialogue that starts with ‘what time is it – you’d better hurry’, to which several exasperated voices respond by listing an extensive series of speech-acts they have uttered, ranging from opening a meeting to praising, dreaming, swearing and promising, and which ends in a cacophony out of which one voice emerges that says, in an exhausted way (and closer to the microphone), ‘I have used signs, numbers, the alphabet, words, concepts, slogans, prayers. I have used obscenities.... I have used my tongue. Without pause, I have used my tongue. And you thought I didn’t hurry?’<sup>34</sup>

### **‘Hop-hop-hop’: haunted by voices**

*Writing is also, very literally and even in the sense of an archi-écriture, a voice that resounds.*

*Jean-Luc Nancy*

Samuel, o Samuel uses radio – a medium of the voice – to emphasize an insight central to the *Alfacyclus*, namely that we are not only drilled by voices, but that such drillings also have an impact on the way we use our voices. The speaking voice, as Mladen Dolar reminds us, is located precisely at the intersection of the cultural and the physical; as he puts it, the voice ties language to the body.<sup>35</sup> Vocal tics and automatisms make audible how the body has been broken into by force. As Michiels states in an interview, the ritualized use of repetitive language in ‘psalms, songs and litanies in church impose a rhythm that continues to hold a grip on those who have soaked them up’. The rhythm of those phrases, more than their actual content, Michiels explains, have an afterlife in the subject who has absorbed them.<sup>36</sup> Traces of liturgical and militaristic rhythms are present in every single sentence of *Orchis Militaris* and *Het boek Alfa*, he explains, but they remain under the skin of the text.<sup>37</sup> Hence, the voices of church, army and hospital resonate in Michiels’s books, but not on the level of content. They become audible as an underlying beat, a bass line that propels the text forward.

In *Het boek Alfa* this underlying pulse sometimes reaches the surface when it is rendered by a specific nonsensical word, a ‘hop’ that accompanies the orders given to the protagonist. These orders are not made by concrete individuals, but issue from autonomous voices that seem to come from everywhere:

[...] the harder he tried to close his ears, the more numerous they became; they streamed towards him from the windows of classrooms, they sounded from the kitchen and bedroom, and from the church and on the street and they were at the playground, and there was hardly a minute of the day without orders, and it started early with hop out of bed and hop pray and hop go and have a wee and continued with hop pray and hop kiss your father who leaves and hop your mother who stays at home and hop your bag and hop your brother and hop straight to school with your hand holding your bag and your brother and hop pray hop be silent [...]<sup>38</sup>

'Of crucial importance [to the books] are the "Links-rechts-links-rechts" and the "hop-hop-hop-hop"', Michiels explains in an interview with Lidy van Marissing, 'a rhythm of orders that speaks from within but is dictated by education, conscience, etc.'<sup>39</sup> Writing for Michiels is a listening to these intruding voices that are parasitic towards our own words and hold authority over us, and that Michiels likens to the voices of conscience. To use psychoanalytic terminology, Michiels is interested in the voice of the *superego* that, as Mladen Dolar explains, comes both from within and seems to address us as an alien, commanding voice from the outside.<sup>40</sup> The superegoic voice issues from a zone situated at the 'junction between self and Other', as Dolar puts it, but belonging to neither.<sup>41</sup> It binds the subject to the Law. Yet, as he emphasizes, according to Lacanian theory, this voice should not be confused with the Law itself. The Law, for Lacan, is articulated symbolically; it is a pact that assigns positions and provides stability. The superegoic voice, however, is an insatiable, demanding voice. It is a pure vocal imperative that makes claims upon the subject without imposing specific orders. It makes a call without communicating anything. It is a voice that addresses but does not speak. Therefore, Dolar concludes, 'The surplus of the superego over the Law is precisely the surplus of the voice; the superego has a voice, the Law is stuck with the letter.'<sup>42</sup>

The superegoic voice therefore does not speak our language. It speaks in a nonsensical series of injunctions, a 'hop-hop-hop', a 'links-rechts-links-rechts', or an 'op-en-neer, op-en-neer'. As Slavoj Žižek writes, 'It is this very exteriority which, according to Lacan, defines the status of the superego: the superego is a Law in so far as it is not integrated into the subject's symbolic universe, in so far as it functions as an incomprehensible, nonsensical, traumatic injunction.'<sup>43</sup>

I would like to propose that this nonsensical commanding voice is at the heart of Michiels's later works. *Het boek Alfa* marks a departure from his earlier books since it emerges from the insight that coming to terms with the past involves coping with the persistence of a demanding voice that is not integrated into a symbolic universe of beliefs, ideas and ideologies, and which continues to haunt the subject even after a full symbolic reckoning of the past has taken place. The transition from the earlier allegorical or realistic narratives about the war to his later 'texts for voices' implies

a new understanding of what ‘working through’ the past entails. In the *Alfacyclus* the past is no longer confronted in a quasi-confessional setting, in which issues of guilt and debt are resolved, but it appears as a series of voices, injunctions and calls that continue to affect the innermost aspect of our speech.

The persistence of these voices is made plain on the final pages of *Exit*. The book ends in a quasi-testament which consists of a long list of items the speaker seeks to leave behind, ranging from the ground on which he stands to the colours he has seen, the hours he has lived and the words, numbers and phrases he has used. One thing, however, is bound to remain as the text states enigmatically: the fifteenth letter of the alphabet, the ‘o’, which is printed on the otherwise empty final page of the book. This ‘o’ is, as many critics have pointed out, similar in shape to a ‘0’ – a zero. Its lingering may testify to a desire for a language emptied of meaning. But it is also the conventional letter of the vocative, the sign of the rhetorical figure of the apostrophe, as in the title of *Samuel, o Samuel*. Therefore, the ‘o/0’, I believe, stands for the excess of address over signification. It refers to the afterlife of a call. And since the title *Samuel, o Samuel* should also be read, as the postscript to the book spells out, as the acronym for SOS, an appeal transmitted over radio waves, the call of the ‘o’ can perhaps also be understood as something profoundly radiophonic, as a disembodied apostrophe, a free-floating address, cut loose from the body that uttered it yet lingering as a spectre.

## Conclusion: Literature after Radio

In the wake of Paul Rodenko, who speaks of ‘radiophonic poetry’, I would like to call Michiels’s later works examples of ‘radiophonic prose’: texts no longer structured as narratives with embedded narrators and vocalizers but as montages of acousmatic, disembodied, radiophonic voices. The shift in the formal organization of his work coincides with a different use of language. In the ‘radiophonic’ prose pieces, language is no longer used for referential purposes nor does it function as a medium to express ideas or to render symbols whose meanings lie *behind* the words used. Language for Michiels has become something material. This shift in Michiels’s œuvre is analogous to the one Kittler detects in the transition from works written before and after the introduction of new technological media from the late nineteenth century onwards. But whereas Kittler argues that the writings produced after 1900 tend to detach language from its reliance upon the voice, Michiels’s work is characterized by a renewed interest in the voice. For Michiels, however, vocal sounds are not the unique, spontaneous expressions of an individual. The voice is rather the location where power is registered within the body. Vocal patterns bear traces of the drills and the calls that figures of authority make upon the subject. Insofar as radio is the medium that broadcasts bodily voices, Michiels’s writings testify to a desire to become *like* radio. Radio became the model for his writings –

even prior to his actual engagement with radio.

Michiels's interest in the voice as it comes to us through radio, I would like to suggest in conclusion, is related to his thematic preoccupation with the Second World War. As Alice Yaeger Kaplan has argued, radio was instrumental in the Nazi restructuring of the public sphere after taking power in Germany in 1933.<sup>44</sup> The fascists, Kaplan contends, used radio to broadcast not only speeches and political propaganda but also a series of programmes (ranging from breakfast programmes and broadcasts of physical exercises to evening entertainment) that sought to impose certain rhythms upon the nation and to continuously remind its people, to use Michiels's phrase, *what time it is*.<sup>45</sup> Through the use of radio a new type of community was constituted, an imaginary 'Radio Crowd' as Kaplan calls it.<sup>46</sup>

In a series of essays that partly elaborate on Kaplan's observations, Juliet Flower MacCannell points out that the fascist usage of radio coincides with a legal shift in Nazi Germany that had a profound impact on the way its citizens related to authority.<sup>47</sup> Under Hitler, the will of the Führer, as expressed by his voice, replaced the law books as the ultimate source of legal authority. Fascism, Flower MacCannell concludes, is therefore characterized by a vocal imperative usurping the place of written law. It posits a superegoic voice as an authority beyond the law. 'In short, fascism submits itself to what Lacan called the "invocatory drive" and its object', she writes, and this explains fascism's grip on its subjects.<sup>48</sup>

Fascism not only made use of the radio – it was inherently radiophonic in that it sought to constitute the nation as a nation of listeners, to use Kaplan's phrase. Hence, Michiels's *Alfacyclus* is not only written *after* radio (as in *modelled upon* radio) but perhaps also *against* radio, in an attempt to exorcise the radiophonic voices that continue to haunt the author. This attempt at exorcism gives his work a political dimension. This is at any rate what Michiels may have meant in a short essay written in 2008 in which he recalls a visit from a Flemish minister of culture to whom Michiels, to his own surprise, confessed that all his books should be seen as inherently political.<sup>49</sup> Reflecting back on the encounter with the minister, Michiels adds that his books may not be the product of a political *engagement* in the Sartrean sense of the word: in his writings, he does not commit himself to any political ideas nor does he offer a critique of ideas. His writings are aimed at something different, at the rhythmical patterns, injunctions and senseless melodies that sustain political ideologies.

## Notes

- 1 Friedrich Kittler, "Die letzte Radiosendung." *On the Air: Kunst im öffentlichen Datenraum*, ed. by Heidi Grundmann (Innsbruck: Transit, 1993), p. 72.
- 2 All translations are the author's own unless otherwise stated. '[...] en in de blakende zon de koude onpersoonlijke stem uit de radio, de miljoenen stemmen (ook de hese, de dappere, de nooit vermoede God-en-vaderland-stemmen) uit miljoenen radio's

- waarmee de ether was gevuld – en de lucht gevuld met het links-rechts links rechts links rechts binnen de muren achter zijn rug [...]’ Ivo Michiels, *Het Boek Alfa* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1982 [1963]), p. 143.
- 3 Paul Rodenko, ‘Het radiofonische gedicht.’ *De Sprong van Münchhausen* (Den Haag: Bert Bakker, 1959), pp. 31-35.
  - 4 ‘Wat wij “radio” noemen is voorlopig alleen maar een technisch systeem tot overbrenging van geluid; voorzover de radio met kunst te maken heeft is zij transitie gebied. Er worden, met name in Frankrijk en Duitsland, pogingen ondernomen om tot een authentieke radiokunstvorm te komen, zowel op het gebied van de pure klank (radiofonische muziek) als op het gebied van het gesproken woord (het hoorspel); maar het merkwaardige is dat het vooral technici, sociologen, psychologen e.d. zijn die zich met het probleem bezighouden: vooralsnog hebben zich geen Eisensteins en Poedowkins van de radio als authentieke kunstvorm gemanifesteerd.’, Rodenko, p.31.
  - 5 I use the word ‘modernism’ in a broad sense, to include the works of the historical avant-garde.
  - 6 See Friedrich Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, trans. by Michael Metteer and Chris Cullens (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990); *Grammophon, Film, Typewriter* (Berlin: Brinkmann & Bose, 1986); Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964; repr. London: Ark, 1987); Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).
  - 7 Kittler distinguishes two ‘discourse networks’: that of 1800 and that of 1900. Each is dominated by a set of ideas about language and communication. See *Discourse Networks*.
  - 8 This reading of Michiels became canonical through the essays of Hugo Bousset. Bousset suggests that in Michiels’s works Jakobson’s *poetical function* is dominant. ‘Taalkritiek en taalcreatie: het “opus” in de hedendaagse Vlaamse prozaliteratuur’ in *Schrijven aan een Opus. Gesprekken met 9 Vlaamse Auteurs* (Antwerpen: Manteau, 1982), p. 11. See also Anne Marie Musschoot, ‘Michiels, Postmodern’ in *Modern, Postmodern: over auteurs en hun romans*, ed. by Roland Duhamel and Jaak de Vos (Apeldoorn/Leuven: Garant, 1990), pp. 23-32. For Clement Greenberg’s definition of modernism as purification see, amongst numerous other publications, ‘Towards a Newer Laocoön’ [1940] in *Art in Theory, 1900-2000: an Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 562-568.
  - 9 ‘Mijn obsessie is de literatuur als onderwerp van mijn literatuur’ quoted in Cyrille Offermans, ‘Herhaling, Onderbreking: Beckett, Michiels. Notities over techniek en kritiek in de Alfacyclus’ in *Ivo Michiels: een letterwerker aan het woord*, ed. by Luk de Vos, Jaki Louage and Jean-Marie Maes (Hasselt: Heideland-Orbis, 1980), p. 104.
  - 10 See Greenberg, ‘Towards a Newer Laocoön’, for a contemporary usage of the term ‘paragone’.
  - 11 The *Alfacyclus* consists of *Het boek Alfa* (Antwerpen: Contact, 1963; repr. Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1982); *Orchis Militaris* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1968; repr. Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1974); *Exit* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1971); *Samuel, o Samuel* (Amster-

- dam: De Bezige Bij, 1973) and *Dixi(t)* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1979).
- 12 *Het Vonnis* (Leuven: Davidsfonds, 1969); *Kruistocht der Jongelingen* (Leuven: Boekengilde de Clauwert, 1961).
  - 13 *Het Afscheid* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1969).
  - 14 Paul de Wispelaere, for example, writes: 'Het boek *Alfa* is een stream-of-consciousness-roman in de zuiverste betekenis van deze term: het geestelijk drama ervan speelt zich uitsluitend af in de verschuivende bewustzijnslagen van één enkel personage.' English translation: 'Het Boek *Alfa* is a stream-of-consciousness novel in the strictest sense of the term: the psychological drama takes place exclusively within shifting layers of consciousness of a single character', 'Van Belijdenis tot Creatie' in *Het Perzisch Tapijt* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1966) p. 40.
  - 15 'Aan elke indruk als zou de structurering van de tekst uitgaan van een "ik", van een (roman-) personage is een eind gemaakt door een radicale formalisering van de schriftuur.' English translation: 'The radically formal nature of the writing forecloses the possibility of reading the text as structured around the impressions of an "I".' *Herhaling, Onderbreking*, p. 114.
  - 16 See for example 'Antwoordt / Jawel, meneer / Jawel is geen antwoord / U hebt gelijk / Meneer! / Meneer'. English translation: 'Respond / Yes, sir / Yes is not an answer / You are right / Sir! / Sir', *Exit*, p. 24.
  - 17 Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time, and Everyday Life*, trans. by Stuart Elden and Gerald Moore (London: Continuum, 2004).
  - 18 'To enter into a society, group or nationality is to accept values (that are taught), to learn a trade by following the right channels, but also to bend oneself (to be bent) to its ways. Which means to say: dressage. Humans break themselves in [se dressent] like animals. They learn to hold themselves. Dressage can go a long way: as far as breathing, movements, sex. It bases itself on repetition. One breaks in another human living being by making them repeat a certain act, a certain gesture or movement. Horses, dogs are broken in through repetition, though it is necessary to give them rewards. One presents them with the same situation, prepares them to encounter the same state of things and people. Repetition, perhaps mechanical in (simply behavioural) animals is ritualized in humans. Thus, in us, presenting ourselves or presenting another entails operations that are not only stereotypes but also consecrated: rites. In the course of which interested parties can imagine themselves elsewhere: as being absent, not present in the presentation.' *Rhythmanalysis*, p. 39.
  - 19 'Rhythm appears as regulated time, governed by rational laws, but in contact with what is least rational in human being: the lived, the carnal, the body. Rational, numerical, quantitative and qualitative rhythms super-impose themselves on the multiple natural rhythms of the body (respiration, the heart, hunger and thirst, enzovoort) though not without changing them.' *Rhythmanalysis*, p. 9.
  - 20 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari employ the phrase 'rhythmic consistency' to refer to collective bodies that do not have a substantial consistency but cohere rhythmically. See *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi (London:

- Continuum, 1987) pp. 363- 371.
- 21 Michiels, *Orchis Militaris* 67.
  - 22 '[...] sedert hij het zich had aangewend spaarzaam en oplettend te zijn met woorden en met antwoorden op de woorden die uit de baden en de bedden en van de tafels naar hem opstegen en vanuit de hoogte op hem neerkwamen [...]'; ['[...] since he had learned to be careful and sparing with words and with answers to the words that rose towards him from the baths and beds and tables, and descended upon him from great heights [...]'], *Orchis*, p.23.
  - 23 A scene of telephone sex in which the general orders someone to undress and engage in sexual activities follows the exact same pattern as the aforementioned dialogues. Each order is followed by a 'yes'. Subjection and sexual subjection are thus presented as comparable activities. See *Orchis*, pp. 33-36.
  - 24 See "I Hear You With My Eyes..." in *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*, ed. by Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 101. See also *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997) p. 20.
  - 25 *Samuel, o Samuel* was broadcast by the BRT3 (Belgian radio) in 1973. 'De madeliefjes, de madeliefjes' and 'Het Laatste Avondmaal' are both plays for voices. The latter piece was meant to be performed on a pitch-dark stage, so that the audience could only hear voices.
  - 26 See *The Voice in Cinema*, trans. by Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999). Chion writes: 'It should be evident that the radio is acousmatic by nature. People speaking on the radio are acousmètres in that there's no possibility of seeing them.' p. 21.
  - 27 I would like to thank the Instituut for Beeld en Geluid in Hilversum for making available a recording of 'Hoe laat is het?'
  - 28 'Dat we de dingen behoorlijk aanpakken / dat we de regels vastleggen / dat we een lijst opstellen / dat we de juiste methode volgen.'; ['That we deal with things properly / that we formulate a set of rules / that we make a list / that we follow a method.'], *Samuel*, p. 28.
  - 29 'Dat we alles bij elkaar / dat we op de keper beschouwd / dat we goed bekeken / dat we ronduit gezegd / dat we bij nader inzien / dat we uit de aard van de zaak / dat we de omstandigheden in acht genomen / dat we welgeteld / dat we hooguit / dat we op z'n minst / dat we noodzakelijkerwijs'; ['That we in sum / that we , all things considered / that we all in all / that we generally speaking / that we on closer inspection / that we – to put it plainly – / that we in retrospect / that we – in view of circumstances / that we – when we add it all up / that we largely / that we at least / that we necessarily'], *Samuel*, p. 29.
  - 30 The Dutch expression 'wie a zegt moet ook b zeggen' (if you say a, you also have to say b) means that one has to draw the consequences from one's words.
  - 31 'Je geeft toch toe dat je a hebt gezegd? Een beetje aarzelend weliswaar, dat willen we in aanmerking nemen, maar niettemin, je mond is opengegaan, je kin is plus minus twee centimeter naar beneden gezakt, het lalletje achter in je keel heeft zich opgetrokken, je tanden hebben zich behoorlijk van elkaar verwijderd – links vooraan is er een kies die

- nodig moet worden behandeld, een bewijs temeer dat je mond wel degelijk is opengegaan.’ English translation: ‘You admit to having said, a? Perhaps, hesitatingly, and we are willing to take that into account, but still, you did open your mouth, you did lower your chin roughly two centimetres, the lobe in the back of your throat moved up, your teeth separated from each other considerably, revealing a tooth that needs to be seen to, which proves that you really did open your mouth.’ Samuel, p. 36.
- 32 In his book about the voice, Mladen Dolar argues that there is a fundamental division within the voice. On the one hand it conveys signifiers, on the other hand it is an object. *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA; MIT Press, 2006), p. 98.
- 33 ‘The Grain of the Voice’ in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), p. 181.
- 34 ‘[...] ik heb tekens gebruikt, cijfers, het alfabet, woorden, termen, leuzen, gebeden. Ik heb obsceniteiten gebruikt [...] ik heb mijn tong gebruikt, zonder ophouden heb ik mijn tong gebruikt. Dacht je dat ik niet opschoot?’; [‘[...] I have used signs, numbers, the alphabet, words, slogans, prayers. I have used obscenities [...] I have used my tongue, without cease I have used my tongue. And you thought I didn’t hurry? [...]’] Samuel, p. 43.
- 35 *A Voice*, p. 32-33.
- 36 ‘En er zijn de psalmen, de gezangen, de litanien in onze kerken, een ritme dat je niet meer loslaat wanneer je er eenmaal van doordrongen bent geweest. Meer het ritme blijft nawerken dan de woorden...’; [‘And there are the psalms, the chants, the litanies in our churches, a rhythm that doesn’t leave you once you have been penetrated by it. The rhythm lingers on more than the words...’], Fernand Auwera, ‘Ivo Michiels’ in *Schrijven of schieten: interviews* (Antwerpen: Standaard Uitgeverij, 1969), p. 248.
- 37 ‘In “Het boek Alfa” en in “Orchis Militaris” is die ritus soms zeer expliciet verwoord, zoals in de litanie-fragmenten bijvoorbeeld, maar hij is ook wel onderhuids aanwezig, alle bladzijden zijn ervan doortrokken.’ [‘In “Het boek Alfa” and in “Orchis Militaris,” certain rites are literally cited, as in the litany fragments for example. But it also remains present under the surface of the text, seeping into every page.’], Auwera, *Schrijven*, p. 248.
- 38 Author’s translation. Original text: ‘[...] hoe harder hij de oren dichtkneep hoe veelvuldiger ze werden; ze stroomden op hem toe uit de vensters van de klassen en ze klonken op uit de keuken en de slaapkamer en ook uit de kerk en op straat en op de speelplaats waren ze en er was haast geen minuut op de dag die zonder bevelen was en het begon al vroeg met hop uit bed en hop bidden en hop een plasje doen en ging voort met hop bidden en hop een kus aan je vader die opstapt en hop een kus aan je moeder die thuisblijft en hop je tas en hop je broer en hop recht naar school met aan de hand je tas en je broer en voort met hop bidden en hop zwijgen enz.’ Alfa, pp. 25-26.
- 39 “‘Het boek Alfa’ [is] opgebouwd op tegenstellingen, die onder meer tot uitdrukking komen in het ritme van het boek. “Links-rechts-links-rechts” en “hop-hop-hop-hop” [...] een ritme dat ons van buitenaf wordt opgedrongen door opvoeding, geweten, enzovoort.’, Ivo Michiels: “Mijn obsessie is de literatuur als onderwerp van mijn

- literatuur.” in *28 Interviews* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1971) p. 151.
- 40 ‘The Ethics of the Voice’ in *A Voice*, pp. 83-103.
- 41 *A Voice*, p. 103.
- 42 ‘The Object Voice’, in *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*, p. 14.
- 43 *Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Women and Causality* (London: Verso, 2005). (Emphasis mine.)
- 44 Alice Yaeger Kaplan, *Reproductions of Banality: Fascism, Literature, and French Intellectual Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).
- 45 ‘The administrators of fascist radio stations sometimes connected their broadcasting success to real crowd-gathering. In the Italy of the 1930s, Mussolini organized a radio show called the ‘Workers, Ten Minutes’ that interrupted all activity in factories [...] As of 1933 [...] *Le Poste Parisien* [...] initiated the first daily “wake-up” weather and news program directed at the private listener [...]’ Kaplan concludes that ‘(t)he tension between the radio experience as a private experience and a public one is at the heart of radio ideology’, *Reproductions*, pp. 135-6.
- 46 ‘The fascist position on radio was figuratively, not literally, collective: the ideal fascist broadcast, whether monitored individually or in a crowd, should extend the listener into an imaginary crowd spirit.’ *Reproductions*, pp. 135-136.
- 47 Juliet Flower MacCannell, ‘Facing Fascism: A Feminine Politics of *Jouissance*’ in *Lacan, Politics, Aesthetics*, ed. by Willy Apollon and Richard Feldstein (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), pp. 65-100; and ‘Fascism and the Voice of Conscience’ in *Radical Evil*, ed. by Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1996), pp. 46-73.
- 48 ‘Fascism and the Voice of Conscience’ pp. 50-51.
- 49 ‘Wie schrijft, die kiest’, *DWB* 4 (2008).

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