



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

The (Dis)Locative Effect of Noise: Globalisation, Disorientation and Noise in Marc Isaacs' Lift

Martin, N.

DOI

[10.1080/14735784.2015.1118640](https://doi.org/10.1080/14735784.2015.1118640)

Publication date

2016

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Culture, Theory and Critique

License

Article 25fa Dutch Copyright Act (<https://www.openaccess.nl/en/in-the-netherlands/you-share-we-take-care>)

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Martin, N. (2016). The (Dis)Locative Effect of Noise: Globalisation, Disorientation and Noise in Marc Isaacs' Lift. *Culture, Theory and Critique*, 57(1), 62-76.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14735784.2015.1118640>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (<https://dare.uva.nl>)

The (Dis)Locative Effect of Noise: Globalisation, Disorientation and Noise in Marc Isaacs' *Lift*

Niall Martin

Abstract *This essay considers how thinking about noise can help us explore the relationship between disorientation and globalisation. It introduces the idea of the (dis)locative function of noise as a concept that enables the investigation of everyday disorientation. Such disorientation is encountered not as a loss of bearings arising from some catastrophic event, but as the background condition of living in worlds characterised both by increased connectivity and disconnectivity, mobility and immobility. It analyses the dislocative effect of noise in *Lift* (2001), an early film by British documentary maker Marc Isaacs. Attention to this function of noise, it shows, can provide us with a nuanced understanding of the ways in which everyday disorientation constitutes the condition of inhabiting and negotiating the spaces of communication associated with globalisation. In particular, the dislocative effect of noise can help us in encounters with places that seem to have become unfamiliar, and aid us in thinking through one of the problems associated with such places: the problem of hospitality without ownership.*

Addressing the 2014 UK Independence Party (UKIP) national conference, party leader Nigel Farage spoke of an urgent need to act against mass immigration and reclaim control of the United Kingdom's national borders on the grounds that parts of Britain were now 'unrecognisable' and like 'a foreign land'. Asked by reporters to justify these claims, Farage,

cited a recent experience by on a rush-hour train leaving Charing Cross. 'It was a stopper going out and we stopped at London Bridge, New Cross, Hither Green, it was not until we got past Grove Park that I could hear English being audibly spoken in the carriage,' he said. 'Does that make me feel slightly awkward? Yes it does.' Asked why he minded people speaking in foreign languages, he replied: 'I don't understand them . . . I don't feel very comfortable in that situation and I don't think the majority of British people do'. (Sparrow 2014: n.p.)

Farage's anecdote provides a salient example of the collocation of the themes of disorientation, globalisation and noise that I shall address in this essay. In

addition to populist political rhetoric, the association of globalisation with tropes of disorientation recurs in accounts of most of globalisation's major theorists. In David Harvey's notion of space-time compression, for example, disorientation takes the form of the feelings of acceleration arising from exponential increases in the speed of information transfer (Harvey 1989: 260–308). Likewise, Nancy Fraser argues that if we are to rethink problems of justice in the twenty-first century, we have to abandon our ideas of nations as entities with clear and policeable borders – ideas derived from the Treaty of Westphalia of 1648 – and rethink the world as a post-Westphalian space (Fraser 2009). So, too, Saskia Sassen argues that the world's global cities have more in common with each other than with their own terrestrial hinterlands (Sassen 2001). Globalisation in the work of these theorists is a process that is made manifest through ideas of acceleration, disruption and deterritorialisation whose affective and conceptual consequences find expression in the disorientations of a world that has become unrecognisable.

In one sense at least, the association of noise with globalisation and disorientation appears equally self-evident. Farage's denunciation of the world made 'noisy' by neighbours who no longer speak your language appeals to a general perception that, thanks to the space-time compression described by Harvey, the Other, who was once comfortably remote, is now much more likely to be proximate and intimate. In Fraser's post-Westphalian space or Sassen's global city, there is no longer any possibility of a clear-cut or sustainable distinction between stranger and neighbour. However, if globalisation as a source of heterogeneity – of cultural diversity – is an important source of noise, it is so equally as a producer of cultural homogeneity. As Fred Botting points out, the standardisation necessary to ensure the global transmission of information can itself become a source of noise (Botting 2005). The creation of global brands and global cultures creates noise in the elimination of difference (Botting 2005: 232), producing, for example, that form of disorientation peculiar to the internationalised 'non space' described by Marc Augé (Augé 1995). At a more abstract level, globalisation is unthinkable without noise, for insofar as globalisation emphasises an alteration in and exploitation of the possibilities of communication technology, noise, which information theory tells us is both an obstacle to and precondition of communication, is critical to any attempt to think the relation between globalisation and disorientation (see Grant 2007).

The deployment of the idea of noise within Farage's anecdote is particularly revealing in this respect. One need not question the reality or extent of the discomfort felt by the party leader surrounded by passengers speaking foreign languages to recognise that the passengers on this train have been made to serve a rhetorical function and that this function is achieved through their reduction to a condition of noise. By focusing on that which makes his fellow passengers unintelligible and 'foreign' – defined as the fact that they are in a public space and are not speaking English – Farage separates them from a community that is grounded in the assumption of monolingualism. Effectively, Farage assigns the passengers on this 'stopper' one of the most familiar functions of noise. They are made to signify a system in crisis: their conversation becomes the noise that signals the imminent collapse of something that had previously been taken for granted. They are turned into the

sound that only becomes audible when something is about to stop working. In their conversation, we are instructed to hear the absence of spoken English, and, as noise, the passengers' conversation becomes a message about the inability of public services to cope with the strain of 'mass immigration' and the consequent need to reclaim control over the United Kingdom's national borders. As noise, the conversations on the train become the sound of crisis and through this noise it is difficult to remember that as passengers, and probably workers (given that this is a rush-hour train), it is their custom and labour that sustains the system of whose crisis they have been made the sign.

However, rather than dismissing Farage's anecdote as political opportunism, I want to take seriously the frequently heard claim that UKIP's sentiments on immigration represent the 'genuine concerns' of many British voters and consider more carefully how this vocabulary of awkwardness and discomfort bears on questions of disorientation. If we are encouraged to associate disorientation with catastrophic situations in which terms of reference and frameworks of interpretation have been wholly erased, it may be that the minor affective disorientations of 'discomfort' and 'feeling awkward' – the sensation of not knowing quite where to put oneself – are equally important to understanding the operations of globalisation. Perhaps attention to these seemingly minor elements within the affective register can help us bring into focus disorientation, not as the epochal and world-shattering, but as the constant condition, the background noise, of negotiating – the shifting and fluid cultural terrain of globalisation.

An examination of Farage's anecdote suggests the outline of a possible methodology in this enterprise. The experience of disorientation that Farage invokes, the claim that parts of England are like a foreign country, that globalisation has made the familiar unfamiliar, is produced through the strategic identification of some types of communication (conversations in a foreign language) as noise. In identifying the train's multilingual environment as 'noisy', Farage implies that intelligible communication and, by extension, a politically intelligible community must be ordered around monolingualism: if we do not hear English, how can we recognise this as England? In doing so, he is effectively making use of noise to mark the boundaries of a community, to define what does and does not count as communication. I want to term the strategy Farage uses here the 'locative effect of noise'. In crude terms we might say that the locative effect of noise is the principle that what we hear as signal and what we hear as noise locates us as members of particular communication systems and those systems' associated communities.

However, as it locates, noise also dislocates. When we become aware of noise we also become aware of ourselves as situated within a particular context: we discover ourselves as located with respect to something else. Often this awareness is of ourselves as outsiders, excluded from the communication system that produces the noise. At such moments, the world appears opaque and indecipherable, dislocating and disorientating. However, the locative effect of noise may also be dislocating simply because it locates us in the world: it awakens us to the existence of a world whose existence we had not previously been able to recognise. This discovery of ourselves as situated, Farage's anecdote suggests, is particularly disorientating to those who (perhaps as members of hegemonic language communities) had grown

accustomed to the noiseless operation of the systems that masked the particularity of their positions in the world. To those who only ever hear the same language spoken, the sudden absence of that language must seem particularly disorienting. In describing noise as locative, I am also pointing to the ways in which noise heightens our spatial sensitivities in ways that tend to be dislocative and disorientating.

Michel Serres provides a characteristically vivid account of this locative effect of noise in a description that grows increasingly pertinent as communication technology becomes increasingly pervasive. He asks us to imagine a scene where a guest leaves a banquet in order to answer a telephone in an adjacent room (today the guest needs only to glance at the object lying at the side of her plate). At the table, the sound of the telephone ringing was noise; on the telephone the animated conversation from the feast becomes noise. The seemingly trivial example of the now-familiar lesson that what counts as noise and what counts as message is relative to the position of the observer speaks directly to the problematic of subject formation in a world structured by tensions between the local and the global. The guest, breaking away from a conversation to answer a telephone, is moving between a number of different kinds of communication and their associated spaces: territorialised and deterritorialised, local and global, physical and virtual, analogue (wave) and digital (binary), mediate and immediate. Serres then goes on to posit a hypothetical space 'somewhere between the feast and the telephone ... a spot where, give or take one vibration, moving a hair's breadth in either direction causes the noises to become messages and the messages, noises' (2007: 67). This position, although hypothetical, is also strangely familiar to the subject of global space, a subject which is constituted precisely as a site where different communication systems coincide and shift between message and noise – local and global, territorial and deterritorialised. Serres describes this space of subject formation thus:

Of course this crest is jagged, random, stochastic. Whoever watched me in my comings and goings would think that he was watching a fly ... I am on the saw's teeth of the mountain, at the edges of noise. Not an echo, not at the center of everything like a sonorous echo, but on the edges of messages, at the birth of noises. This erratic path follows the paths of invention exactly. (Serres 2007: 67)

What is truly troubling about the 'stochastic' region traversed by Serres' human fly, however, is its power to undo the very possibility of the border as a line of demarcation, for, as the information theorist Claude Shannon pointed out, noise is constantly turning into information, and information, as its content is exhausted, turns back into noise (Shannon 1948). Rather than a border or jagged edge then, this interdependency of signal and noise ushers us into a space which is relational and processual, the space of becoming rather than being, a space which is constantly dissolving and emerging.

To explore how this stochastic zone relates to the practical issues of globalisation and everyday disorientation, I want to consider the version of the 'becoming unfamiliar' presented in British documentarist Marc Isaacs' *Lift* (2001). In this short film, I argue, Isaacs not only provides a counterpoint to

the version of dislocation of the familiar in Farage's anecdote but also brings into focus a problem of disorientation concealed within the trope of the unrecognisable home, namely the possibility of hospitality without ownership.

Like Farage, Isaacs is concerned with the disorientations that arise when the familiar becomes unfamiliar. As the publicity for a recent masterclass puts it, Isaacs is a creative documentary maker with a particular interest in 'the significance of places and identities transformed through migration' (Isaacs 2014). British-born and London-based, Isaacs' places to date have included the London suburb of Barking which has seen large-scale immigration of the kind denounced by Farage; the City of London during the 2008 financial crisis; Watling Street – the Roman road that connects London with Wales and the Irish ports and the traditional home of new arrivals in London; the notoriously conservative retirement town of Frinton-on-Sea; the steps outside Highbury and Islington Magistrates court and the French port of Calais. As investigations of place, Isaacs' films explore migration from the perspective of the uprooted and those who find themselves in places they no longer recognise as home. He thus brings into view both the people on Farage's train and those for whom Farage claims to speak. In both cases, however, his focus is on the disorientation arising from the kind of permanent transience articulated by the writer Iqbal Ahmed in one of Isaacs' most recent films, *The Road* (2012):

When you leave your country and you come to a new place you lose your home twice. You lose the place you have come from: it will be impossible to go back once you have burned the bridges. And then the place you have high hopes of and you think this must be the most [inaudible] place um in the world, but once you live here then you come to know this cannot be true. You lose both the place you are leaving and the place you are coming to. You lose both of them. (Isaacs 2012)

Or, as Billy, an elderly Irish immigrant, puts it in the same film: 'You don't fit in back in Ireland and you don't fit in here either ... everything about you is wrong' (Isaacs 2012).

This condition of being in-between is established at the outset of Isaacs' career in both the subject and form of his first film, *Lift* (2001) which is shot almost entirely from the back of a council-owned East London tower block. Neither public nor private, inside nor outside, lifts in general provide a familiar example of the kind of stochastic zone described by Serres. In Isaacs' film, the lift is the setting for encounters between strangers who are also neighbours, people who live on top of each other but signally fail to constitute the 'vertical community' idealised by the urban planners that once saw in high-rise residential blocks the replacements for streets of terraced housing. If in general the lift – as one of the paradigmatic spaces of urban modernity – seems to signify a peculiar sort of non-community, in Isaacs' lift, this emphasis on the intimacy of strangers is amplified by the cultural mix of the residents of this particular tower block. Originally a predominantly Jewish community, the block reflects the changing multi-cultural and multi-racial character of the neighbourhood.¹ In an almost absurdist variation of the trope of the



Figure 1. Silvio winks at the camera, *Lift* (2001). Courtesy Marc Isaacs.

unrecognisable home, one of the elderly Jewish residents tells another that when trying to fall asleep the previous evening, instead of counting sheep she had been 'counting white people' – there's no more than 45 at most, she calculates – 'and the rest are a mixture'. The film shows around the millennium that mixture included Scottish, Irish, Bengali and Italian, Muslim and Catholic.

Despite this heterogeneous cultural mix, however, the codes of lift-space will be instantly recognisable to most viewers. Isaacs' film opens with sequences revealing the awkward silences and intricate choreography of acknowledgement and avoidance deployed to negotiate the enforced intimacy with strangers that characterises lift travel far beyond East London. Within this realm of silence and phatic communion, the presence of the camera and the silent cameraman is sufficient to trigger the stochastic properties of the space. Thus Silvio, an Italian coffee-seller, winks at the camera while ensuring he avoids eye contact with his fellow passengers (see [Figure 1](#)). The presence of the stranger, in other words, invites the travellers to acknowledge the comedy of interpersonal relations while continuing to observe their dictates.

Silvio's wink as an indication of his recognition of the solemn comedy in which he is a player places him simultaneously on both sides of the camera as viewer and viewed, subject and object, on Serres' 'jagged edge'. So too, we, as viewers who are familiar with the mores of lift-space, can recognise ourselves in Silvio. Rather than presenting or exhibiting a world that is over there, the wink dissolves the distinction between the viewer and the represented world, transforming documentary itself into a noisy space of mediality, another version of the in-between. By turning the eye of the documentarist back on the viewer, Silvio's wink activates the stochastic qualities within this conjuncture of space, camera and mode. The wink undermines the documentarist's implicit claim to represent the unknown or the remarkable to a viewer constituted by her ignorance of the represented world. It documents

a place that is nominally exotic: an East End tower block which, as one YouTube commenter notes, is to a popular imagination shaped by the press, a place of 'drug dens', criminality, poverty and extremism (Isaacs 2001). Silvio's wink strips this exotic locale of its comforting otherness and reveals in its place a disturbing familiarity that forces the viewer to look again at the nature of this space and the ways in which it is constructed.

To understand more precisely how Silvio's wink works to disorient and reveal the stochastic borders produced through the conjunction of lift-space and documentary space, it is useful to recall the correlation between orientation and the process of turning and returning within Henri Lefebvre's concept of 'rhythmanalysis'. For Lefebvre, we might recall, space is less a bounded entity than a becoming which is stabilised or oriented by the rhythms of its use. Space is transformed into place through the action of our turning towards it and returning to it. This understanding that our oriented sense of place as fixed or permanent is due to our perception of the rhythm that gives it its identity, is particularly productive in relation to understanding the everyday disorientation of globalisation. Most importantly it emphasises the role of temporality in the processes of orientation and disorientation: it suggests that spatial identity is constructed not simply by perception and memory (what something is and what it has been) but also by expectation: what it will be. For rhythm is precisely that which mediates between experience and expectation: we anticipate where the beat will fall by virtue of knowing where it has fallen. Where we can no longer anticipate, no rhythm is discernible and we are once again in the presence of noise.

With Lefebvre in mind it is evident that Isaacs' film is formed in the contrast between the insistent mechanical rhythm of the lift (which, carried over into the editing, allows Isaacs to present some 25 characters in 25 minutes) and the fragmentary glimpses of the predominantly lonely and melancholic lives led by many of the block's residents. Counterpointed, these two rhythms produce something like a state of permanent transience: of constant change but no progress. In Lefebvre's terms, this contrast between the insistent rhythm of the lift and the seeming eventlessness of the residents' lives corresponds directly to a fundamental distinction between the categories of what he terms cosmological and mechanical rhythms. While cosmological rhythms are derived from the solar system and tend to be cyclical – years, seasons, months, weeks, days and times of the day – the mechanical by contrast are tied to the processes of capitalist, or rather Fordist, production and tend to be linear and cumulative. Thus, according to Lefebvre,

Everyday life is modelled on abstract, quantitative time, the time of watches and clocks ... However, everyday life remains shot through and traversed by great cosmic and vital rhythms: day and night, the months and the seasons, and still more precisely biological rhythms. (Lefebvre 2004: 73)

Our orientation within daily life is formed in the conflict between the cosmological and the mechanical, between the 'great indestructible rhythms and the processes imposed by the socio-economic organisation of production, consumption, circulation and habitat' (Lefebvre 2004: 73). At stake in the division

between cosmological and mechanical rhythms, Lefebvre suggests, is nothing less than our ability to make time meaningful through expectation, as he points out when he notes almost casually,

the banal and yet little known difference between the cyclical and the linear, between rhythmised times and times of brutal repetitions. This repetition is tiring, exhausting and tedious while the return of a cycle has the appearance of an event and an advent. (Lefebvre 2004: 73)

Whereas cyclical rhythms are distinguished by the returns that mark time as meaningful (that which we live towards and which we recall), the unfaltering character of mechanical repetition abolishes the distinction between present, past and future. Repetition abolishes the possibility of 'event' or 'advent'. In *Lift*, that distinction is poignantly illustrated when Isaacs asks a man, clearly traumatised by the death of his parents, what had been on his mind that day: 'nothing, working, just watching the clock go by'.²

As a whole, the film demonstrates the forms of disorientation that arise from the subordination of the cyclical to the linear and the consequent removal of the promise of renewal and return from the film world, or space of representation. Thus, apart from three establishing shots of the tower block, the viewer is entirely cut off from visual representations of an outside world and its associated cosmological rhythms. The establishing shot places the action of the film in winter in the Northern hemisphere, a passing reference to Valentine's Day, and the residents' clothing suggests that we remain within or near that season. Occasionally the dialogue or behaviour of the lift travellers provides some indication of the time of day or day of the week. Inebriation suggesting the evening or the weekend; the presence of children and elderly residents suggesting daytime, young revellers, the evening and night. For the most part however, the film space of *Lift* is entirely cut off from any cosmologically spaced time.

It is even cut off from the 'everyday' in Lefebvre's sense insofar as the everyday is comprised of rituals and repetitions that anchor the diurnal within the cyclical rhythms of the cosmological. Instead, *Lift* exists in its own self-contained time-space. In this respect, the disappointment of Lilly, one of the block's elderly Jewish residents, that nobody else from the block had attended a dance from which she has just returned assumes a totemic function. Lift-time is time without event, and in the film the one event worthy of the name is a non-event. So too it seems inevitable that when a young man tells Isaacs that he is going out 'to see what can happen tonight', that his evening will end in disappointment, that he will 'fail to pull'.

Lift-time is also seemingly cut off from historical time. Apart from the absence of mobile phones, the only other markers that help date the film are references to Starbucks' colonisation of London's coffee retail industry, and 'Internet cafes' which would seem to place it around the millennium. (Significantly, both these markers of historical time are indices of globalisation and technological development.) Fashion, one of the most sensitive visual markers of social time, also seems muted to the point of invisibility. The general sense of historical disorientation is nicely summarised in an exchange

on YouTube, where 'billionaire stare' writes 'This is what the world will be like in 2250' to be reminded by 'ikbl' that 'this is what the world was like in 2001' (Isaacs 2001). The larger rhythmic structures that do manage to penetrate this cocoon enter in the form of stories of senescence, illness, old age, loneliness and broken hearts. Many of the block's residents are elderly and single. They look back on better times – 'it was a paradise' – and anticipate worse: 'the knacker's yard is all I've got to look forward to'. We are aware too of the rhythms of illness moving through this population – schizophrenia, alcoholism, nicotine addiction and heart problems are some of the most apparent.

In other words, in *Lift* the attenuated remains of Lefebvre's cosmological rhythms have been overlaid with an overwhelming sense of precarity, reflecting the movement to a post-Fordist economy where the rhythms of production are much harder to detect. Rather than the mechanical rhythms associated primarily with the monotony of Fordist production organised around hard-fought negotiations over the length of the working day, *Lift* conveys the more irregular rhythms associated with production of immaterial value and tertiarised cognitive labour. It reflects a mode of production in which there is no longer any clear distinction between spaces and times of work and the spaces and time of leisure – or employment and unemployment (Standing 2011). This precarisation of social and economic life, the film suggests, can be understood as the disruption not only of existing rhythms, but of rhythm itself. For, insofar as space as rhythm is oriented around expectation, it is precisely expectation that is dissolved in the experience of precarity. Precarity effectively cancels the future and produces a presentism that is usefully described by Isabell Lorey when she writes that

to live under precarious conditions today means that there is no continuity of time at all anymore. Currently time has become as diffuse as the places of production. It is no more only a precarity of work time, but of time as a whole. The task is to deal with the fragmented time and space in the present, with the exploitation and occupation of every time slot and thus of the person's every moment. (Lorey 2012: 173)

Obviously an experience of the absolute present in which nothing can happen poses a particular problem for the orientation within time we call story or narrative. As Judith Butler suggests, this anxiety about form is intrinsic to the disorientation of precarity, for to be precarious is to be excluded precisely from those socially prescribed narratives or narrative structures, through which we make sense of (certain) lives (Butler 2010). It is to be excluded from the narratives whose grammatical rhythm allows things to happen by giving names to events. It is this anxiety that is signalled by Isaacs in an interview where he claims that he considers *Lift* formally his most perfect film but recalls that halfway through filming it, he was overcome by a sense of blind panic, a panic that nothing was going to happen, that there was no story (Isaacs 2009b). The problems of orientation arising from the disorientations of precarity are both social and aesthetic. How is it possible to create a recognisable place out of a space that has been stripped of rhythm? Put another way,

what is Isaacs' solution to creating a story out of this disoriented space and what lessons does that hold for thinking about everyday disorientation?

As a drama of (dis)location, *Lift* unfolds through the movement between three voices and the spaces they produce and assume. The first of these voices might be described as ethnographic in that it divides the world between the spaces of the native informant and the detached observer. This is the voice that is heard at the opening of the film when Isaacs asks a resident, '[d]o people talk to each other much in these lifts?' It is the recognisable voice of the documentary-maker who seeks to elicit information about a scene from which he stands apart as a more or less dispassionate observer. This voice marks the separation between viewer and viewed, subject and object. It is the vocalised expression of something like a Renaissance perspective: the camera assumes the role of an invisible observer that reports upon rather than participates in the scene while the world is transformed into information addressed to viewers normatively constructed by what they are assumed not to know as white, male, heterosexual, middle-class, English-speaking Europeans.

The incongruity of the ethnographic voice within lift-space is due in part to the fact that there is not enough space, literally or metaphorically, to establish the perspective of a detached observer. In this context, the ethnographic voice simply reveals the disorientations of proximity: the camera must of necessity become a participant within the scene and take on the role of fellow traveller. This shift from the ethnographic to the fellow-traveller's voice is heard when Isaacs says 'excuse me?' after a young man informs him, seemingly *a propos* of nothing, that his flat has a Jacuzzi and sauna. Here Isaacs speaks not as a stranger to the conventions of lift interaction but as a fellow traveller who is fully aware of the codes governing behaviour within the lift. He rebuffs the unsolicited information and treats the man not as a documentary maker's subject but as a sharer of the same social space and replies in kind: 'Have you had a few too many beers tonight?'

This voice can in turn be contrasted with one that emerges in a series of existential questions: 'What did you dream about last night?', 'Have you ever been in love?', 'What have you been thinking about today?', 'What is your favourite childhood memory?' Obviously inappropriate within a lift, this voice asks questions which are in every sense too big for this space. This voice recognises the constraints and unspoken rules governing interaction in the lift and in breaking them, makes them visible and explicit – and thus it can be termed the aesthetic voice. This voice emerges after Isaacs has moved from the dramas of acknowledgement to showing the lift as an empty space, a place of ennui, loneliness and waiting. The effect of this voice is to illustrate precisely the topics and types of conversation that are prohibited by the repetitions imposed upon lives by lift-space. In engaging with these questions, the residents are forced to interfere with the rhythms of the lift, most memorably perhaps when Peter, a recovering alcoholic, attempts to convey the size of the golden eagle he saw as a child in Scotland. Holding the door open momentarily to prolong the conversation beyond the space allowed by the lift, he eloquently conveys the ways in which the rhythm of the lift imposes its restrictions on the expression of memory, desire and faith. The interruption of the lift's rhythms through pushing the



Figure 2. Place-making with the 'doors open' button, *Lift* (2001). Courtesy Marc Isaacs.

'doors open' button becomes a gesture of resistance, an attempt to reclaim the lift as a space of human interaction (see [Figure 2](#)).

Increasingly, Isaacs' film focuses on the gestures and incidents that disrupt the lift's rhythm. An Irish woman, for example, returns to an earlier conversation to tell him that his question about whether she has 'faith in her life' has led her to realise that she does. Places are made from such returns, Lefebvre tells us, and, in returning to Isaacs' question, the woman effects the transformation of lift-space into a place of encounter. As such, Isaacs' aesthetic voice removes the lift from the noise of phatic communion and realises it as a place of story. This transformation is further emphasised by a woman who sticks an instruction on the use of the rosary on the wall, suggesting another possibility for the production of space through repetition. It is, however, a Bengali man who repeatedly offers Isaacs food that completes the transformation of the lift-space and provides us with the most important insight into the dislocative function of noise in relation to the everyday disorientations of globalisation.

Along with the sudden appearance of a chair, these offers of food effectively transform a space of precarity into a place of hospitality, thereby making explicit a theme which has troubled the representation of space throughout the film: who here is the guest and who the stranger; who can invite whom and who must give an account of themselves? Mireille Rosello has rightly pointed to the dangers of the assimilation of the discourse of migration into the discourse of hospitality. As is the case with Farage's train, the language of host and guest quickly obscures the fact that migrants enjoy rights and privileges in their own name, not at the behest of others (2001: 9). However, within the context of a disorientation marked by the disappearance of the threshold that will distinguish host from guest and home from away, the problematic of hospitality returns in a different form. As Isaacs' film shows, it becomes a problematic of hospitality without ownership.

To get a better grasp on what is at stake in this problematic, it is instructive to return to Jacques Derrida's classic distinction between conditional and unconditional hospitality (Derrida 2001). According to Derrida, conditional

hospitality is the limited form of hospitality we practice in our daily lives. It is hospitality limited by the knowledge that we can only be hospitable to some, not all, because if we opened our house to everyone there would be nothing of our house left. Hospitality is conditional because unconditional hospitality, although considered ethically an absolute good, would destroy us. As such, it is tempting to think of conditional hospitality as a compromised form of unconditional hospitality: an imperfect copy of an ideal. Derrida, however, argues the opposite. It is not that we cannot have unconditional hospitality, but that we cannot *not* have unconditional hospitality: there can be no hospitality without unconditional hospitality and the intrinsic risk that it involves. We think that by issuing an invitation, we are exerting some form of control over our intrinsic openness, or precarity, but there is no invitation without visitation, a radical opening to an Other over which we have no control. This radical openness is the precondition of anything happening at all.

Lift, however, enables us to reframe Derrida's formulation of the hospitality problematic. It raises the question of what happens to the future of radical uncertainty of which unconditional hospitality is the expression when the everyday disorientations of globalisation have rendered the notion of the threshold problematic. What kind of future can emerge from a threshold which is stochastic and which thus makes it impossible to decide whether one is stranger or host? The film provides one answer to this question in the modulation of voice discussed above, for these modulations are precisely defined by their redefinition of the form of the stranger. In shifting from the ethnographic to the aesthetic voice, Isaacs effectively reconfigures our idea of the stranger by making us rethink the nature of our ignorance. Rather than the ethnographic eye that produces the object as the mirror of its own ignorance, carrying with it the noise of its assumptions about the normative, in deploying the aesthetic voice, Isaacs becomes the stranger whose seeming ignorance exposes what everybody knows: that the lift with its emphasis on communicative efficiency is in conflict with the kind of communication necessary to create a livable community. This making strange of the lift-space is achieved, in other words, by the exhibition of an ignorance which serves to reveal both the constraints of lift-space and the silent orientations of documentary space. In place of the ignorance of the ethnographer normativised around that which a hegemonic subject can be presumed not to know, Isaacs presents us with an ignorance that has the power to reinvent space as place.

In effect, Isaacs' aesthetic voice invokes an ignorance that animates the story: an ignorance about the other that assumes the radical equality of the other. As a 'creative' documentary maker, he will go on to provide his subjects with the opportunity to stage their stories at the cost of documentary verisimilitude (Isaacs 2013). Here, in exchanging the ignorance of the ethnographic eye for the ignorance that precedes the invitation to tell a tale, Isaacs treats his subjects as familiars whose strangeness is predicated on their familiarity. Even as they demonstrate their fluency in the language spoken by the viewer – '[h]ave you ever been in love?' – their stories are interrupted by the rhythms that frustrate their attempts to narrate themselves into being: the rhythms of lift-space as the material expression of precarity. His films confront us with situations that demand we form affective relations in the knowledge that they have no future: with precarity as rupture. In *Calais: The Last Border*, Isaacs' camera

records what will be the last conversation with one migrant who is about to undertake the dangerous trip across the English Channel (Isaacs 2009a). In *Road*, Billy and Peggy, Irish and Viennese immigrants respectively, both die before the end of filming, prompting Isaacs to define his project as recording the lives 'of those whose deaths leave no traces' (Isaacs 2012).

Where documentary's performative creation of an 'I' that claims ownership of the object surveyed conforms to a classic model of space with an epistemic threshold, Isaacs' oeuvre takes as its theme the possibilities of forming relationships across that threshold. Sudeep Dasgupta argues that in Isaacs' films we encounter the kind of redistribution of the sensible that Jacques Rancière makes the condition of the political. For Isaacs, writes Dasgupta,

Film-making, as artistic practice can . . . be seen as an aesthetics of making visible and audible the world of those who do not warrant priority in regimes of art other than the aesthetic regime, because of the 'minute details of [their] everyday life,' and their lowly status in social and artistic hierarchies. (Dasgupta 2008: 190)

Dasgupta offers Isaacs' work as an example of the kind of redistribution of the sensible that can counter Derrida's concern that visibility forecloses any possibility of an ethical relation with the migrant as Other by making her a subject of the Law of 'phallogocentrism' (2008: 189). I would argue further that within Isaacs' documentary practice the possibilities for ethical encounters lie in the understanding of 'the event' as less an element within narrative, or rhythm, in Lefebvre's sense, than as immanent within the openness of documentary as mode. In Isaacs' work the event is not that which is visited upon us, and thus stands guarantee of a transformative future; rather it is discovered in the documentary camera's ability to reinvent its ignorance through a recreation of the figure of the stranger. It is a product of its capacity for disorientation.

Lift, in other words, demonstrates the power of the stranger as a figure of ignorance to create place out of space. At the same time, Isaacs also enables us to recognise the threat posed to the possibility of the stranger by the disorientations of globalisation. Rather than the disorientation experienced by the stranger, he allows us to glimpse the disorientation that arises from the disappearance of the stranger, or the disappearance of the possibility of the stranger. Returning to Farage's train, the problem, or disorientation that his anecdote describes is not that the train is full of foreigners, but that these foreigners are not foreign enough. They are foreigners but not strangers, and without strangers or the possibility of strangers, there is no possibility of hospitality – and without the possibility of hospitality there is no possibility of feeling at home in the world, of transforming space into place. Whereas Farage's nationalist party seeks to reinvent the borders of Westphalian space in order to ensure that foreigners remain strangers, Isaacs invites us to think about the possibilities of hospitality without ownership. He shows how everyday disorientation can give rise to a practice of hospitality that is achieved not through the reinvention of borders, but through the discovery of the stranger within the not-quite-foreign-enough.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

- [1] The block, now demolished, was in the E1 area of East London.
- [2] Lefebvre's model of space can be traced back to just this scene – the lift of a tower block. For as he writes in the opening pages of *The Production of Space*, his idea of spatial practices were defined by 'the extreme but significant case of the daily life of a tenant in a government-subsidi[s]ed high rise housing project' (Lefebvre 1991: 38), which Lukas Stanek traces back to debates in the French Left in the early 1960s about why workers preferred the quintessentially petit-bourgeois free-standing villa to the ideologically correct collective housing provided by the state. The answer proposed is that the villa allowed the dweller to master the habitat and develop a set of practices impossible in the rigid layout of the collective estates (Stanek 2011: 83).

References

- Augé, M. 1995. *Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. London and New York: Verso.
- Botting, F. 2005. 'Culture, Literature, Information'. *Critical Studies, Post-Theory, Culture, Criticism* 35, 215–249.
- Butler, J. 2010. *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* London: Verso.
- Dasgupta, S. 2008. 'The Visuality of the Other: The Place of the Migrant between Derrida's Ethics and Rancière's Aesthetics'. *Calais: The Last Border. Thamyris/Intersecting* 19, 181–194.
- Derrida, J. 2001. *Of Hospitality*. Translated by Rachel Bowlby. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Fraser, N. 2009. *Scales of Justice: Reimagining Political Space in a Globalizing World*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Grant, C. B. 2007. *Uncertainty and Communication*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Harvey, D. 1989. *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Isaacs, M. 2001. *Lift*. Available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJNAvyLCTik> (accessed 4 November 2015).
- Isaacs, M. 2009a. *Lift/Travellers/Calais: The Last Border – Three Films by Marc Isaacs*. London: Second Run DVD.
- Isaacs, M. 2009b. *Sheffield Doc/Fest 2009 - Masterclass with Mehelli Modi*. Available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kQH3nbrXClc> (accessed 4 November 2015).
- Isaacs, M. 2012. *The Road: A Story of Life and Death*. Wortham, Suffolk: Bungalow Town Films DVD.
- Isaacs, M. 2013. *The Way We're Living: The Films of Marc Isaacs*. Birmingham: Birmingham City University. Available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z1P9CtZbREQ> (accessed 4 November 2015).
- Isaacs, M. 2014. 'Marc Isaacs Documentary Master Class'. Available online at <http://floatingcinema.info/events/2014/marc-isaacs-documentary-film-masterclass> (accessed 4 November 2015).
- Lefebvre, H. 1991. *The Production of Space*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Lefebvre, H. 2004. *Rhythmanalysis*. Translated by Stuart Elden and Gerald Moore. London: Continuum.

- Lorey, I. 2012. 'Precarity Talk: A Virtual Roundtable with Lauren Berlant, Judith Butler, Bojana Cvejic, Isabell Lorey, Jasbir Puar, and Ana Vujanovic'. *TDR/The Drama Review* 56:4, 163–177.
- Rosello, M. 2001. *Postcolonial Hospitality: The Immigrant as Guest*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Sassen, S. 2001. *The Global City: London, New York, Tokyo*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Serres, M. 2007. *The Parasite*. Translated by L. R. Schehr. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Shannon, C. 1948. *A Mathematical Model of Communication*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Sparrow, A. 2014. 'Parts of Britain are Like a Foreign Land'. *The Guardian*, 28 February. Available online at <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/feb/28/nigel-farage-ukip-immigration-speech> (accessed 4 November 2015).
- Standing, G. 2011. *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Stanek, L. 2011. *Henri Lefebvre on Space*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Niall Martin teaches Literary and Cultural Analysis at the University of Amsterdam. His main research is on the relationship between globalisation and noise. His monograph, *Iain Sinclair: Noise, Neoliberalism and the Matter of London*, drawing on this research, was recently published by Bloomsbury.