A Common European Home? Filming the Urban Thirdspace in Marc Isaacs's *Lift* (2001)

Laura Rascaroli, University College Cork

Abstract

Focussing on how people dwell in contemporary, late-capitalist, postcolonial Europe, Marc Isaacs's documentary cinema is space-based, insofar as it finds its raison d'être in precise places, whose real and metaphoric values it simultaneously represents, foregrounds and contests. Almost entirely set inside an elevator in a tower block in East London, *Lift* (2001) is an eloquent example of Isaacs's spatial methodology. Mobilising concepts from critical theory and political geography – in particular, Michel Foucault's heterotopia and Edward Soja's Thirdspace – this article argues that, by offering a utopian reading of the common European home, *Lift* upholds a critical mirror to the urban West. Its strategy consists in situating the spectator vis-à-vis non-singular Others through a series of triangulations of subjects, which aim not so much at measuring the distance between what may seem like antithetical, fixed positions, but at suggesting fluidity and repositionings on the plane of both textual and social discourses.

Keywords

Marc Isaacs; *Lift*; space; heterotopia; Thirdspace; postcolonial Europe

Contributor's details and address

Laura Rascaroli is Senior Lecturer in Film Studies at University College Cork, Ireland. Her main field of research is modern and contemporary European cinema, on which she has published extensively, in edited collections as well as journals including *Screen*, *Framework* and *Film Criticism*. She is the author of *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film* (2009) and, in collaboration with Ewa Mazierska, of three books on contemporary European cinema. Most recently, she has co-edited the volumes *The Cause of Cosmopolitanism: Dispositions, Models, Transformations* (2011) with Patrick O'Donovan, and *Antonioni: Centenary Essays* (2011) with John David Rhodes. She is currently General Editor of *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*.

Dr Laura Rascaroli,
Film Studies / Italian
O'Rahilly Building
University College Cork
Cork
Ireland

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Lift **(2001)**

Laura Rascaroli, University College Cork

> In any case I believe that the anxiety of our era has to do fundamentally with space, no doubt a great deal more than with time. Time probably appears to us only as one of the various distributive operations that are possible for the elements that are spread out in space. (Foucault 1986: 23)

Marc Isaacs's 25-minute digital video documentary, *Lift* (UK 2001) is almost entirely set inside an elevator in a tower block in East London. The film's spatial, narrative and formal emphasis on such a constrained environment poses key questions on film as a discursive space, on documentary in its relationship both to discourse and to reality, and on the spatial capabilities of digital video, based on its features of lightness, portability, immediacy and intimacy. Rather than being limited by its totalising focus, *Lift* is opened by it to further readings, notably about the importance of space for our era; and, in particular, about spatial understandings of the postcolonial urban West and the common European home. I will adopt the latter expression, coined at the start of the 1980s by former Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev (who used it in the sense of a commonwealth of sovereign and economically interdependent nations of the East and West), for its ability to capture the idea of the future European Union as an integral whole based on the cohabitation of a variety of peoples, economies, languages, traditions and cultures, and governed by principles such as democracy, the rule of law and the respect of human rights. The

phrase is also especially meaningful in the context of the filmic analysis that follows, which focuses on a building that is home to mixed community.[1]

I propose to look at these aspects of *Lift* through the lens of two concepts in particular that originate from critical theory and political geography: Michel Foucault's heterotopia and Edward Soja's Thirdspace. The first was delineated in 'Des Espaces Autres', a lecture that Foucault gave in 1967 and that appeared posthumously in 1984 in the French journal *Architecture Mouvement Continuité*, and in English as 'Of Other Spaces' in *Diacritics* in 1986. The concept of Thirdspace was proposed by Soja in a book of the same title first published in 1996, which engages extensively both with Foucault's above-mentioned lecture and with Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*, and which is in dialogue with postcolonial theorists such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, bell hooks, Edward Said and Homi K. Bhabha.

As well as commenting on space in the complex and imbricated ways that I have started to outline above, *Lift* is also an exemplary text to begin to study Marc Isaacs's filmmaking practice, in the context of his growing documentary production and increasing international recognition, suggested by such indicators as the various prizes obtained by his films (including Grierson, Royal Television Society and BAFTA awards), a retrospective at the 2006 Lussas Documentary Film Festival, and the release of several of his films by Second Run DVD.[2] Isaacs's documentary work focuses on how people dwell in contemporary, late-capitalist, postcolonial Europe, thus far with a particular focus on England. The topic is treated in a way that openly invites spatial readings of his films. His cinema is, indeed, space-based, insofar as it finds its raison d'être in precise places, which are at once real and metaphoric, and often give the title to his films. Examples are the trains in *Travellers* (2002); the steps outside a London Court in *Outside The Court* (2011); or entire quarters, villages and

towns such as the city of Calais in *Calais: The Last Border* (2003); a Cumbrian village in *Someday My Prince Will Come* (2005); a seaside Essex town in *The Curious World of Frinton-on-Sea* (2008); a suburb of East London in *All White in Barking* (2007); the historic core of London in *Men of the City* (2009); the A5 road in England and Wales in *The Road: A Story of Life and Death* (2013). In interviews, Isaacs has confirmed his awareness of the importance of space to his cinema: 'When I start a project, I am usually in a space that is suggestive, that has a certain meaning attached to it; and I am looking for characters within that space that can develop that idea' (Nightingale and Isaacs 2009).

Far from being strictly observational, Isaacs's method is based on the director's presence in situ and on his personal interaction with his social actors. His camera is not invisible, but sometimes appears in the frame, and is regularly addressed by the subjects via both gaze and speech; often, Isaacs's voice is heard asking questions from the off-screen; and his films convey an auteurist approach which eloquently foregrounds both style and apparatus. Most importantly, Isaacs's presence in the chosen spaces is the sine qua non of the making of his films. By 'being there', often for long periods of time, Isaacs functions as a reagent, eliciting increasingly intense, meaningful, even intimate responses from the subjects he films. Such responses are profoundly shaped by spatial concerns – both because they are revealing of how the subjects dwell in their habitats (flats, buildings, quarters, villages, cities) or exist in places of transit and passage (trains, borders, refugee camps, steps, lifts, roads); and because the films themselves are born of a clearly foregrounded interaction between filmmaker, space and social actor. This interaction shapes the chosen space in both real and imagined ways and is ultimately utopian, insofar as it generates something new.

I will indeed argue that Isaacs creates filmic Thirdspaces. In his work on the Thirdspace, Soja aims to overcome binarisms through a strategy of 'thirding-as-Othering' and, ultimately, to encourage a different way of thinking about space and spatiality. He defines Thirdspace, which is simultaneously real and imagined, as a space of extraordinary openness, a place of critical exchange, which constantly expands to include an Other, thus enabling the contestation and renegotiation of socio-geographical boundaries and cultural identities (Soja 1996: 5-6). Isaacs's approach is similarly based on constantly shifting triangulations of subjects, which aim not so much at measuring the distance between what may seem like contrasting and fixed positions, but at suggesting fluidity and possible repositionings on the social plane.

In his analysis of *Calais: The Last Border*, one of the few scholarly engagements with Isaacs's cinema to have been published to date, S.M. Dasgupta argues, quoting Jacques Rancière, that this film 'questions the contemporary form of European "community", and produces forms of visibility that interrupt the falsely unified and simplified figure of otherness that shores it up' (Dasgupta 2008: 191). Isaacs's filmic work, indeed, is often concerned with otherness and issues of multiculturalism, multi-ethnic cohabitation, identity and class. While foregrounding these matters, Isaacs's films produce spatial reconfigurations of the relationships between subjects. In *Calais: The Last Border*, according to Dasgupta, this is mainly achieved through a pluralization of the singular Other, through displacements/disjunctions of meaning, and through filmmaking as a way of making visible subjects who occupy a lowly status in both social and artistic hierarchies:

Through the everyday, though not ordinary, details of the people living in Calais, the symptoms of a social order that constructs a violent and 'proper' distribution of spaces – nation-state, border, camp – are given visibility. The film's disjunctive threading of dialogue and imagery, both specific to the medium, has a political stake in that it disturbs the meaning of the designation 'migrant' by both pluralising the term across different individuals, and by establishing relationships between them and us through its configuring of space and time into alternative constellations (Dasgupta 2008: 190).

Dasgupta here rightly attracts attention to the role of the medium in Isaacs's work on spatial and social relationships. The reconfigurations of human space achieved by Isaacs are, indeed, utterly filmic.

Foucault's Heterotopia and *Lift*'s Spatial Practice

Isaacs's spatial methodology is probably nowhere as clear as in *Lift*, his directorial debut. *Lift*, as already mentioned, is almost entirely set in an elevator in a tower building in East London, in which the filmmaker spent about ten weeks, standing sometimes for entire days, and talking for a couple of minutes at a time to the residents travelling up and down, from their floors to the ground floor and vice versa (Nightingale and Isaacs 2009). Due to the perfectly circumscribed dimensions of the setting, the film is based on an extraordinarily enhanced sense of Aristotelian unity of space. The camera is almost always inside the elevator, or so it feels; the exceptions, which in fact are not so rare, are the fifteen shots of the shaft in which the elevator runs, or of the elevator's reeling cables. These images, arguably, are mostly there to remind us of the fact that the lift is a moving place; a place not only of transit, but that is itself in transit. Because what we are shown is still part of the elevator, however, these shots do not truly take us out of it, and do not break up the unity of space. Similarly, a couple of shots show us the inside of the elevator from the outside (in one, we see the filmmaker through a glass pane). The true exception and deviation from the norm is constituted by the only three shots of the tower building at the beginning, middle and end of the film, each of which is framed from below, against the sky, twice at night and once in daylight. Because of the low camera angle, however, the building is isolated from its context, and looks more like the involucrum of the lift than as something that is part of the urban fabric – although, of course, it is also suggestive of it. In brief, even these exterior shots do not significantly disrupt the focus of the film on its single, and confined, setting, but they do remind us that its space is an urban space.

The sense of a unity of time and action is somewhat less strong, as it is clear from the conversations with the passengers that the meetings have happened over days and even weeks. Yet, because most indicators of the passing of time are absent (due to the lack of natural light as well as of linking shots intimating intervals and gaps), and because the conversations between Isaacs and the residents always resume from where they previously stopped, an effect of unity of time and action is indeed achieved. Furthermore, and most importantly, the three shots of the building from the outside suggest a progression from night-time to morning, as if the events of the film took place over one night. Such unity is entirely the result of montage work, which combines different moments in time to suggest continuity and coherence.[3] The result is a highly intense and compact filmic piece, characterized by a strong narrative, visual and atmospheric concentration. The narrowness of space, further highlighted

by the presence of the filmmaker, makes the passengers uncomfortable or, alternatively, favours intimacy; the film capitalizes on its self-imposed physical constraints, which become the generating principle of both narrative and style.

Lift the film is born of the actual East London lift that, arguably, works at multiple metaphorical levels. Firstly, it encapsulates all lifts – odd non-places, confined spaces of transit, which seem to exceed their specific function of people carriers to produce a peculiar and not always comfortable experience of space. Secondly, because of the variety of passengers we encounter in it, the tower-block lift can be said to work as a metaphor of the city and, indeed, of spaces of increasingly larger scale: East London; London; postcolonial Europe; the urban West. At the same time as being metaphorical, however, this lift also offers itself as an actual place, where specific people are met and, as such, it is irreducible and, of course, nonfictional.

In this lift, indeed, we meet a series of social actors all of whom – some shy, some outgoing, some keen to talk, others afraid of the camera – have a story to tell, and are memorable for something they say or do. Among them are Lilli, an outspoken elderly woman with a dry sense of humour who moved to the block twenty-six years before; a religious sister who appears embarrassed by a question about love; a young Italian man who works for Starbucks and lives in London 'for the money'; a black man who lost both his parents in childhood, and suffered from paranoid schizophrenia as a consequence; an old man with a heart condition; a single, white Englishman in the process of changing jobs, who is very keen to socialize; an old man who is trying to quit drinking; two little girls who giggle and smile at the camera; a man who keeps offering food to Isaacs; a black boy who comes to the building to visit his girlfriend even after breaking up with her; and many others.

At the start of the film, we find ourselves in the shaft of the elevator, and travel forward through the tunnel, while hearing muffled voices and noises ostensibly coming from the outside – from the building, the floors, the flats. This sequence establishes that the shaft is like the insides of the building, which we go through almost as in an act of being born and, indeed, the first sound we hear after the cabin is set in motion is a baby's cry. This organic metaphor at the film's inception intimates that we think of the spaces that will be shown to us not in literal or purely documentary terms, but in multiple ways – and it certainly emphasizes the spatial singularity of the lift.

The concept of heterotopia as described by Foucault in 'Of Other Spaces' may be fruitfully brought to bear on such a singularity. It is useful to start from Foucault's claim that inviolable spatial oppositions that have to do with the 'hidden presence of the sacred' in our society still govern our lives:

> These are oppositions that we regard as simple givens: for example between private space and public space, between family space and social space, between cultural space and useful space, between the space of leisure and that of work. (Foucault 1986: 23)

With respect to these binaries, elevators appear excluded from a straightforward categorization of spaces. It is in this sense, first of all, that elevators may be seen to be heterotopias: because they merge two opposite types of space – the private and the public, the familial and the social space. Once the doors are closed and we are inside a lift, in fact, we generally tend to feel alone with ourselves, protected from other people's gazes and, thus, in a private mode – although one is always aware of the

potentially social dimension of the lift. For instance, if the lift, as often happens, contains a mirror, usually to create the impression of a larger space (or perhaps because the mirror, as Foucault clarifies, is a heterotopia, and thus suits the heterotopic space of the elevator), we check our appearance one more time in it, before stepping out and into the social space. I would go even further and suggest that lifts provide an experience of spatial isolation and suspension of time that detaches us from the demands of social reality, and that induces a private and inward-looking mode of feeling and thinking.[4] Incidentally, it is perhaps in this key that we should read Isaacs's comment, provided in the same interview quoted above, that in order to make his film it felt important to him 'even to just being in that space, because it is thorough being there, you know, dreaming in that metal box, that the film took on a life of its own – through that kind of imagining and dreaming up the possibilities' (Nightingale and Isaacs 2009).

When we must share a lift with another passenger, then, we may feel slightly uneasy, arguably because their presence is experienced as an intrusion, which emphasizes the conflict between the private and public dimensions of the elevator. Lifts, furthermore, not only merge two opposite types of space, but are also places of transit and in transit, which allow us to go from the private space of the home to the public space of the city, and from the family space to the social space. Thus, they are heterotopias in the sense of a separate space, whose functions are different or even opposite to those of the space in which it is found. While the tower building provides abode, fixity, separation and privacy, the elevator is based on transit, mobility, cohabitation and social interaction. Hence, the lift makes thoroughly evident the border between private and public – by foregrounding, challenging and collapsing it. This border is all-important not only in the definition of the spaces of individual identities, but also of national and supranational ones. In the common European home (or its nemesis, Fortress Europe), the private/public divide may also be conceived of in terms of border control; what is public for some is private with respect to others.

These ideas are explored by Isaacs's film in multiple ways; and, firstly, via the presence of the filmmaker in the cabin, which is an intrusion in the private space of those who feel they own the lift – an intrusion with which the residents must deal each time they step into the elevator and find Isaacs in it. Some of them, indeed, hesitate to get in; some walk away. Once, a drunk resident does not allow Isaacs to step into the elevator, banning him from it.

In 'Of Other Spaces', Foucault talks of the importance of the act of entering heterotopias, an act that is sometimes compulsory (as in the case of barracks and prisons) and sometimes requires a rite of purification (Foucault 1986: 26). His analysis ultimately attracts attention to the threshold of the heterotopia and to the heterotopia as limen, to use the terminology of anthropological theories of ritual, such as those of Arnold van Gennep (2004) and Victor Turner (1995). The liminality of the lift and of the experience of the lift are fully captured in a sequence of the film in which a veiled young woman is forced to share the confined space of the elevator with a drunken man. The girl hesitates to step in, and then tries to create some room between her and the man, by placing herself between him and the camera, thus keeping him in her field of vision. Once the man steps out of the elevator, the woman pauses on its limen, with a gesture that marks the lift once again as a safe, private space, and that almost aims at purifying it. When she turns and sees the camera, however, she is horrified at the sudden realization that the re-sacralized, safe space of the lift was all along violated by the filming lens; that she was in turn the object of somebody else's gaze. It is as if she saw herself in a mirror (indeed, the camera is

literally in the place of the mirror, which we can see in a couple of shots, but which is normally invisible precisely because it is behind the camera); and it is as if she experienced the displacement of her Self in the heterotopian space of the mirror, which, according to Foucault (who here echoes Lacan), 'exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there' (Foucault 1986: 24). More in detail, for Foucault:

> The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there (Foucault 1986: 24).

Most of all, the young woman's reaction comes across as her surprise at seeing us, the spectators, looking back at her; as if, instead of reflecting her image, the mirror reflected the image of the spectator; as if the eyes of the spectator and those of the social actor met in the heterotopian space of the mirror of the film screen. At this moment, the apparatus is foregrounded, and the nature of the filmic image as reflection becomes glaring. Furthermore, the 'fourth wall' is shattered, and we look at ourselves on the screen, through the eyes of the Other.

When introducing his third principle of heterotopias, which are 'capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible' (Foucault 1986: 25), Foucault uses the example of the cinema, suggesting that this is 'a very odd rectangular room, at the end of which, on a two-

dimensional screen, one sees the projection of a three-dimensional space' (25). Although we do not always experience films in cinema theatres anymore, the screen – any screen on which we watch a film – is a heterotopian space, one that is simultaneously real and fantasmatic, and within which a two-dimensional space and a three-dimensional one paradoxically coexist. What most interests me here of the idea of the cinema as heterotopia, however, is that which makes it similar to a Persian garden or carpet, as described by Foucault; that is to say, the fact that it brings together different and even contradictory spaces in a way that makes it look like a microcosm.

The microcosmic feature of the cinema is intensely emphasized in *Lift*, because of its above-described unity of space. In this sense, Isaacs's lift can be said to be a heterotopia for it contains the representatives of multiple cultures, places, ethnic groups, ages, genders and religions, thus becoming a microcosmic rendition of London, of postcolonial Europe and of the global suburbs. In the lift, we encounter all sorts: those who were born in England and those who come from faraway places; first and second generation residents; short-time economic migrants and people who permanently relocated; old and young; atheists and religious; healthy and ill; single and married; drunk and abstemious; workers and old-age pensioners. The sheer complexity of the human and social composition of the tower building is also made evident in the dialogues, for instance when two of the elderly residents discuss how few white people now remain in the building. A sense of the uneasy cohabitation of ethnic groups and of an evolution of the urban environment that is read in pejorative terms is on occasion suggested by long-time residents – like Lilli, who says that, when she first moved to the block twenty-six years before, she found it was paradise, and then proceeds to complain about the current degeneration. Once we even see Lilli

preventing a Southeast-Asian man from stepping onto the elevator, a scene which, in spite her gesture was ostensibly done in jest, again emphasizes the lift as limen, and suggests the long-term white resident's desire to protect her space from the invasion of the ethnic Other.

Utopianly We Dwell

This microcosmic rendition of the urban West, and of London and East London in particular, points at themes of forced cohabitation, of the increased heterogeneity of the social fabric, of religious divides, and of contrasting cultural values and conceptions of life, which are consistent with much literature on postcolonial Europe, and which presuppose other related and controversial features of contemporary urban living in the West – including racism, prejudice, social conflict, fear, violence and segregation. However, while gesturing towards these themes, Isaacs's film is not contented to simply repeat and reconfirm them; quite the opposite, it somewhat subverts them, leading to a counter-reading of London.

This lift, in fact, is not just an actual place in East London, filmed by Isaacs's nonfictional camera as a piece of the broader urban reality it directly represents and reflects. It is also, and primarily, a filmic and a discursive space, something that Isaacs clearly highlights; it is not by chance, indeed, that the title of the film and the space it represents are one and the same, as if the director wanted to emphasize the constructedness of the space and point at the complexity of the relationship between nonfiction cinema and reality. I have already discussed some of the ways in which Isaacs constructs the space filmically, through framing and post-production intervention on both the visual and the sound tracks; now, I want to return to my prior

discussion of the filmmaker's presence in the lift, and how it affects the film as a discursive space.

Here, Soja is most useful with his reading of Thirdspaces as both real and imagined spaces, as spaces of a recombinatorial and radically open critical practice based on a binary-defying strategy of 'thirding-as-Othering'. I want to see Soja's Thirdspace in combination with Foucault's idea not only of heterotopia as a counter-site, but also of a critical science that he names 'heterotopology', and describes as a 'sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live' (24). These ideas go in the direction of a merger of real, critical and representational spaces; a merger that, I argue, takes place exemplarily in Isaacs's *Lift*.

To say that elevators are heterotopic spaces means to see them as simultaneously real and imagined sites, which both represent and invert the site that contains them, i.e. the building – because this is precisely the function of heterotopias according to Foucault (22). As already mentioned, if the relationship of the building to the city is based on the binaries private/social, familial/public, static/dynamic, the lift collapses these divisions and proposes an other, third space, which is all these things simultaneously. It is of interest that high-rise buildings were made possible precisely by the invention of the elevator; thus, the elevator is intrinsic to the tower block, makes it possible, represents it and, even, epitomizes it. While in the United Kingdom some former council high-rise buildings are becoming popular again, especially with young professionals, for the views they offer and their desirable location, in general and since the post-war era tower buildings have tended to be perceived as undesirable low-cost housing. Indeed, they are associated with, and encapsulate, a certain form of working-class living and social housing, characterized by unappealing features such as decay and design faults, overcrowding, security

issues, criminality, dereliction of common areas, urban blight, isolation, alienation, alcoholism, drug abuse and drug dealing, and a missing sense of community. Lifts themselves are part and parcel of this image; as Anne Power writes with reference to the post-war era, in fact, '[a]part from frequent break-downs, communal lifts were a source of fear for people travelling alone' (Power 1987: 143) – as well as often being unappealingly defaced and malodorous environments.

Yet, while these ideas are clearly gestured towards and put in circulation by Isaacs in *Lift*, they are at the same time inverted and contested by the film. The film's strategy could be usefully described through Soja's formula of 'thirding-as-Othering'. Instead of only admitting two positions, in fact, the space of the lift is always opened to an Other. As in *Calais: The Last Border* Isaacs adopted the strategy of pluralising the term 'migrant' across different individuals – as noted by Dasgupta (2008: 190) – here he pluralizes the Other, and does not allow for the emergence of fixed binaries. Isaacs triangulates subjects, including himself, thus constantly shifting and questioning what may appear like fixed positions. By firmly placing himself in situ, then, he also includes the spectator in such triangulations, firstly because the position of the camera directly implies the presence of the spectator and his or her point of view; and secondly because, as I have shown earlier, the fourth wall is often shattered, so that spectator and social actor may exchange gazes. In this way, Isaacs produces a contestation and renegotiation of socio-geographical boundaries and cultural identities. The filmic lift, thus, may be described as a Thirdspace, where the dichotomies and polarities of race, age and gender are recombined in a way that defeats the 'either/or' binary, and that opens to 'both' and to 'and also'.

As such, Isaacs's *Lift* is a polyphonic and dialogical space. In it, the residents meet the filmmaker, and meet each other, and increasingly open up to dialogue and

exchange. Via the construction of such an intense, concentrated space through the use of camera angles, framing and montage, and by functioning as an othering reagent, who stimulates the communication and sharing of comments, memories, dreams and stories, Isaacs creates a space that resembles Foucault's Persian garden or carpet. In the universalising heterotopia of the Persian garden or carpet, in fact, all the different parts of the world are brought together in a way that is ultimately harmonious, and are able to coexist, rather than contesting or effacing one another. The picture of the tower block that emerges is, indeed, a positive one; the place looks populated by people and stories, and we come away from it with the strong sense of having met a community – a diverse, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-faithful community. Thus, the film ultimately puts forward a utopian reading of the tower block, of London, and of the common European home.

This utopianism, as in the best tradition of both documentary and essayistic cinema, aims not only to represent a reality, but also to make it fully relevant to the spectator. Indeed, Isaacs's film asks us, the spectators, to look into the heterotopic filmic mirror and see ourselves where we are not, in a 'sort of counteraction on the position that [we] occupy' (Foucault 1986: 24). As passengers in the lift, travelling up and down while being immobile, the spectators are required to take on their position in a triangulation of the social space that also includes, as I have argued, the camera/filmmaker and the social actor, and that constantly opens up to an Other. Looking back at us, all these Others interpellate and reposition us. One needs to remember that, in *Lift*, the spectator is physically in the place of the mirror that is to be found at the bottom of the lift. Thus, to continue and conclude this spatial reading of spectatorship in *Lift* via the description of Foucault's mirror:

Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am (Foucault 1986: 24).

The ultimate question that Isaacs's film asks us, the spectators, is, indeed, about where we are; and, above all, about how we dwell in the city.

The Anxiety of Our Era

In the passage from 'Of other spaces' that opens this essay, Foucault talks about space as the anxiety of our era. Utopias, of course, cannot exist without their reversal – dystopias – of which they can't but evoke the ghost. Shot in 2001, the film stands in stark contrast to the dystopian image of the New York Twin Towers in flames. In light of the London riots of ten years later, then, one might even ask whether Isaacs's utopianism in *Lift* was simply preposterous.

As a heterotopia, Isaacs's *Lift* has the curious function of inverting and contradicting the set of relations that it reflects; by doing so, nonetheless, it also attracts attention to them. Quite as a mirror, it throws back at us a reversed but faithful image of society; it simultaneously shows possibilities and realities. The same political edge of Foucault's heterotopology and of Soja's Thirdspace is actualized in *Lift* as a postcolonial critique of the common European home, here epitomized by its most cosmopolitan, populous and multi-ethnic metropolis. Such critique comes into being in an inverted mirror image; but also finds expression more directly. The concept of the anxiety about space that characterizes our era, in fact, is not at all

absent from *Lift*. I already mentioned that the film opens with our birth to the space of the film, implied by the baby's cry and the organic metaphor of the shaft. More precisely, the space of the film is contained between that birth and a death: that of a fly trapped inside the elevator's cabin, an image that closes the film. Without wanting to stretch the metaphor immoderately, the fly may be likened to the spectator – the invisible voyeur, the fly on the wall who was trapped in the lift for the duration of the film. Together with the sense of that entrapment, and with sequences that convey the unease of some of the passengers when forced to share the lift's restricted space, anxiety is also woven into the film by recurrent, disquieting sounds and noises, like the screeching of the cabin travelling through the shaft, the wind howling around the building, the barks of distant dogs, muffled sounds and indistinguishable voices. A series of shots taken in the silence and stillness of the night, then, emphasizes the desolation, squalor and even fear of finding oneself alone in the lift.

Foucault describes the heterotopia of the Persian garden as a sacred space 'that was supposed to bring together inside its rectangle four parts representing the four parts of the world, with a space still more sacred than the others that were like an umbilicus, the navel of the world at its center (the basin and water fountain were there)' (Foucault 1986: 25). Coming right in the middle of its run time, the film's navel is a sequence in which Isaacs remains trapped in the lift as a consequence of a breakdown; the scene is immediately followed by one in which an irritated female passenger challenges Isaacs rather aggressively, questioning him about his reasons for standing in the lift all day and for making the film. Thus, the navel of *Lift*, instead of being the space that is most sacred than the others, contradicts the positive impression of a harmonious mixed community conveyed on balance by the film, and significantly replaces the Persian garden's fountain with images of isolation, anxiety and

aggression. The dystopian image flashes at these times; yet, what remains truly unique in respect of *Lift* is that the eloquence of its critique of the European home ultimately creates a utopian filmic space, which is given to us to view and contemplate, and which makes it impossible for us to hold a fixed position.

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[1] In my use of the expression, some of its historical specificity (on which see, for instance, Malcolm 1989) will unavoidably be attenuated.

[2] *Lift* was distributed by Second Run DVD in 2009 in an edition that also includes *Travellers* and *Calais: The Last Border*.

[3] In fact, the montage also combines two different lifts: which explains why the lift's control panel may be found alternatively on the right- or on the left-hand side of the cabin.

[4] While here I make claims based on universal features of the space of the elevator, it is opportune to remember that lifts can also be part of and contribute to a hierarchization of spaces according to class and power structures – for instance, in apartment buildings with penthouses and hotels with upper floors for elite patrons; in buildings with dedicated lifts for workers and staff, which are separated from the lifts used by owners and guests; as well as in the differentiation in status between buildings with and buildings without elevators.