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**Citation:** Stead, N. 2019. Double Distance. *Cultural Studies Review*, 25:2, 217-218. <https://doi.org/10.5130/csr.v25i2.6902>

ISSN 1837-8692 | Published by UTS ePRESS | <https://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/csrj>

CULTURE REVIEW

## Double Distance

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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5130/csr.v25i2.6902>

**Article history:** Accepted 1/11/2019; Published 22/11/2019

Once I was in Brighton in the UK—at the edge of another island, looking over a different sea, literally at a distance from my home and the context in which I live and work. And in this state of being removed, or at a remove, of being literally *dislocated*, I had certain things on my mind—distance, of course, and its effects on thought and knowledge and perspective, but also seagulls, and the use of ambient sound in cinema.

My reason for being in the UK was to speak at a conference on ‘Feminist methods for a decolonised pedagogy’ in architecture. There was some irony in this: being myself a resident of a not-so-decolonised former colony, myself descended from British settlers and hence a party to and beneficiary of the dispossession of Australia’s Indigenous people, and here having travelled ‘back’ to consider questions of decolonisation within the colonial power itself. The distant, it seemed, had been invited back.

But the thing that pre-occupied me more was the ambience of the place: it’s Royal Pavilion, it’s Georgian terraces, its steep and pebbly strand (I hesitate to call it a beach), the somewhat desperate jollity of one of its piers and the strange skeletal ruin of the other. But above all I was preoccupied with the loud and pervasive call of seagulls—the constant high, keening yelp of a large bird which I have come to know as the European Herring Gull.

This bird is very familiar to Europeans. Common throughout the shores of the continent, they are known as aggressive scavengers. With a wingspan of more than 5 feet, they are described as being ‘like flying dogs, with the appetites of rats’. There are stories of a gull pecking a chihuahua to death in Devon, a pet tortoise being ‘eaten like a crab’ in Liskeard, pensioners attacked and bloodied, food snatched from the hands of babes.

But while these stories might be well known to British and European folk, the bird is not known in Australia. It is much bigger and sounds quite different to our own, gentler Silver Gull. The Herring Gull is thus partly known to Australians by the extensive use of its call for atmospheric effect in European cinema. The scene is familiar: some filmic protagonist ends their journey at a cold and windy European beach, alone except for the lonely cry of

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the Herring Gulls, the desolation of the scene matched only by the existential crisis of our progenitor. The cry of this gull thus enters into the popular imagination as a kind of auditory trope, powerfully synonymous with darkly melancholic endings, maudlin self-reflection, and godless intimations of mortality.

As we know, there is no such thing as an incidental or accidental noise in high-end cinematic sound design. Bird sounds have a particular place in this constructed landscape—the scream of the red-tailed hawk plays a similarly central role in cinematic representations of the desert—any desert—conveying similar connotations of wildness, freedom and loneliness. In film, everything is calibrated for a specific and calculated ambient effect, where the narrative and the mood are precisely intertwined.

Imagine the effect, then, for a stranger from a strange land, walking into Brighton, into an environment surrounded by this call, which seems not only portentous but also *deliberate* – not only that the whistling winds of existential doubt are coming just for you, but also that this whole scene has been literally orchestrated, that the landscape surrounding you is constructed for effect, that you have wandered into a kind of intelligent design of affective, cinematic urban ambience: doubly dislocated, doubly distant.

So, distance looks back from whence? And to where? My moment on the sea wall in Brighton is a reminder that distance listens back, feels back, and remembers back. The colony returns to the coloniser and the past returns in the present. The cinematic looks back to the actual, the lived experience looks back to the imaginary, the subject looks back to the object of research. Distance looks back, at distance looking back, at distance looking back.