

4 Southland Tales

Southland Tales (2007) is the second film by Richard Kelly, whose previous work was the cult hit *Donnie Darko* (2001). *Southland Tales* shares with its predecessor a general air of apocalyptic unease, and a plot that circles around the idea of time travel. In both films, “time is out of joint”; linear, progressive temporality has somehow come undone.⁴³ But *Southland Tales* is a much more wide-ranging and ambitious movie than *Donnie Darko*; and it features a large ensemble cast, instead of being focused upon a single protagonist. The eponymous hero of *Donnie Darko* sacrifices himself in order to save the world. By accepting his own death, he abolishes an alternative timeline in which his teenage alienation redounds into disaster for everyone around him. Donnie’s sacrifice offers us what Gilles Deleuze describes as the cinema’s greatest gift: the restoration of our “belief in this world” (Deleuze 1989, 188). *Southland Tales*, however, is set entirely within a catastrophic alternative timeline. There is no way back to suburban normalcy. The End Times are near, as the film makes clear with its frequent quotes from the Book of Revelation. And the drama of sacrifice and redemption in *Southland Tales* points, not towards a restoration of “this world,” but towards its nihilistic purgation and transcendence. We are swept headlong, through the raptures of media immersion, into an entropic terminal state – and perhaps also beyond it, out the other side.

Southland Tales begins with home video footage of a family Independence Day celebration. The date is July 4, 2005. The footage, filled with random cuts and amateurish swish pans, shows folks, both old and young, just enjoying themselves. But then there’s a roar and a flash, followed by a rumbling and a jittering and the sight of a mushroom cloud in the distance. Terrorists have detonated two atomic bombs in Texas. This is the

bifurcation point, the rupture in continuity, the moment when the “straight line” of time becomes a “labyrinth” (Deleuze 1989, 131). We have left the world we know, and entered an alternative timeline: one that diverges irreparably from our own. The homeliness of the film’s opening moments will never return. History has been derailed – it has gone mad – and there is no putting it back on track. Cut to computer graphics, voiceover narration, and the hallucinatory mediascape of *Southland Tales*.

The bulk of the movie takes place in Southern California (the “Southland”), three years after this initial attack, in the days leading up to the frenzied Independence Day celebration of July 4, 2008. The “war on terror” has blossomed into a full-fledged World War III. American troops are fighting, not just in Iraq and Afghanistan, but in Syria, Iran, and North Korea as well. The draft has been reinstated; martial law has been declared in some areas. Throughout the United States, police surveillance is ubiquitous, and there is no interstate travel without a visa. All Internet communication is monitored by a government spy facility called US-IDent. The police are authorized to shoot on sight anyone suspected of terrorism. The Republican Party is firmly in control of the country. Electoral politics has been reduced to its essence: television advertising. International oil supplies have been cut off, and the sinister Treer corporation holds a monopoly on America’s alternative energy resources. The only opposition to this state of affairs comes from a comically inept, confused, and internally fragmented “neo-Marxist” underground.

Southland Tales is, evidently, deeply concerned with the post-9/11 American security state. The conceit of an alternative timeline allows Kelly to explore, in exacerbated and hyperbolic fashion, our actual current condition of ubiquitous surveillance, restricted civil liberties, and permanent warfare. This regime of control was instituted by the second Bush administration, in the wake of the World Trade Center attacks; it largely remains in

effect today.⁴⁴ *Southland Tales* could be described, to a certain extent, as a dark satire in the tradition of Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*. It pushes the logic of the security state to absurdist extremes. In the world of the film, there is no right to privacy, and almost no private space. Phonecalls are routinely wiretapped, recorded, and traced. All public activity is captured on video; even the toilets are watched by surveillance cameras. A recurrent image in the film shows the creepy Homeland Security czar Nana Rae Frost (played by Miranda Richardson, channeling Angela Lansbury's performance in *The Manchurian Candidate*), sitting in her command chair at US-IDent headquarters, monitoring the video feeds on multiple screens that cover a large curving wall in front of her. In the world of *Southland Tales*, if you step out of line, or arouse distrust, you are likely to have your home invaded by an armed and masked SWAT team, or to be picked off on the beach by a government sniper. But most people remain oblivious to all these intrusions; they continue to drink, party, and otherwise enjoy themselves on the Venice Beach boardwalk, just as if nothing were amiss.

However, despite these currents of satire, *Southland Tales* is finally best described as a science fiction film. Its overall tone is earnest and urgent, even visionary – more than it is sarcastic or comic. *Southland Tales*, like most science fiction, is not about literally predicting the future. Rather, it is about capturing and depicting the latent *futurity* that already haunts us in the present. At one point in the film, the porn actress Krysta Now (Sarah Michelle Gellar) excitedly remarks that “scientists are saying the future is going to be far more futuristic than they originally predicted.” The reason this comment is ludicrous is that “futuristic” is not an objective category, but an anticipatory inflection of the present. *Southland Tales* is indeed futuristic, in that it shows us an otherness, an elsewhere and elsewhen, that is inextricably woven into the texture of the here and now. We usually think of hauntings as traces from the past; but the future

also haunts us with its hints of hope and danger, and its promises or threats of transformation. Especially in times of great social and technological change, we *feel* the imminence of the future in the form of gaps and leaps in temporal progression, and shifts in the horizon of what is thinkable. Of course it is impossible to *know* what changes the future will bring; but the signs of this impossibility – the intimations of instability, the shifts of perspective, and the incipient breaks in continuity – are themselves altogether real. They are part of the conjuncture, part of what shapes the present. If the past *persists* in the present, then futurity *insists* in the present, defamiliarizing what we take for granted. Science fiction highlights this sense of futurity, making it visible and audible. *Southland Tales* is an ironically cinematic *remediation* of the post-cinematic mediasphere that we actually live in. The film's alternative timeline is defined precisely by its *divergence* from the world we know.⁴⁵

Southland Tales is more about what I am calling the post-cinematic media regime in general, than it is about the national security apparatus in particular. Terrorism and the “war on terror” are parts of this new media regime, but they are not its basis, nor even its primary focus. At most, they are *catalysts*: they intensify and speed up the emergence of new media forms, and of their corresponding new modes of subjectivity. Surveillance is only one aspect of a broader process; Nana Rae Frost is not the only one monitoring multiple screens, and trying to pay attention all at once to a plethora of media feeds. In fact, all of the characters in the film are doing this, more or less; and so are most of us in the audience. *Southland Tales* surveys and maps – and mirrors back to us in fictive form – the excessive, overgrown post-cinematic mediasphere. The film bathes us in an incessant flow of images and sounds; it foregrounds the multimedia feed that we take so much for granted, and ponders what it feels like to live our lives within it. Video surveillance cameras are ubiquitous, of course, in the world of the film as well as in the

world that we inhabit; but so are many other sorts of recording, broadcasting, and communications devices. Social space is filled to bursting with handheld videocams, mobile phones, portable screens, 24-hour cable news channels, YouTube clips, MySpace pages, automated response systems, and celebrity-tracking paparazzi. Images and sounds are continually being looped for endless replay, or composited together into new configurations. In *Southland Tales*, traditionally 'cinematic' sequences are intermixed with a sensory-overload barrage of lo-fi video footage, Internet and cable-TV news feeds, commercials, and simulated CGI environments. These often appear in windows within windows, so that the movie screen itself comes to resemble a video or computer screen.

Despite the emphasis upon surveillance and security, the mediascape explored by *Southland Tales* is not in the least bit hidden or secretive. It is rather a vast, open performance space, carnivalesque, participatory, and overtly self-reflexive. Not only do we see multiple, heterogeneous screens within the movie screen; we also see the characters in the movie appearing on these screens, creating content for them, and watching them – often all at the same time. If the government isn't recording your actions with hidden cameras, then perhaps someone else is, for purposes of blackmail. But more likely, you are making and distributing videos of yourself, in a quest for publicity and profit. In any case, your mediated image is what defines you. If you aren't already an actor or a celebrity – as most of the characters in *Southland Tales* are – then you probably have a business plan to become one. Every character in the movie seems to be frantically engaged in exhibitionistic display, outlandish performance, and ardent networking for the purpose of self-promotion. The world of *Southland Tales* has become what Jamais Cascio, inverting Foucault, calls the *Participatory Panopticon*: "this constant surveillance is done by the citizens themselves, and is done by choice. It's not imposed on us by a malevolent bureaucracy or

faceless corporations. The participatory panopticon will be the emergent result of myriad independent rational decisions, a bottom-up version of the constantly watched society" (Cascio 2005). The reign of universal transparency, with its incessant circulation of sounds and images, and its "participatory" media ecology in which everyone keeps tabs on everyone else, does not need to be imposed from above. Rather, in the post-cinematic media regime, it "emerges," or "self-organizes," spontaneously from below. The greatest success of what Michel Foucault calls *governmentality* comes about, not when a certain type of behavior is forcibly imposed upon people, but when people can be "incentivized" to impose this behavior willingly upon one another, and upon themselves.

Southland Tales does not exempt itself from the frenzied media economy that it depicts. The movie is itself a post-cinematic, transmedia object. Tom Abba describes it as an "extended narrative," in which the story is spread across several media (Abba 2009, 60). Most notably, Richard Kelly published a three-part comic book, or graphic novel, that gives the movie's premises and backstory (Kelly and Weldele 2007). Many of the plot twists, convolutions, and digressions in *Southland Tales* can only be understood by reading the comic first. This is why the movie's titles divide it into Parts IV, V, and VI; Parts I, II, and III are found in the comic. In addition, when *Southland Tales* was first released, a number of the film's (fictional) characters had websites on MySpace; the movie's (equally fictional) Treer Corporation had its own website as well. There was also a certain amount of spillover between the characters in the movie, and the pop culture celebrities who played them. Sarah Michelle Gellar actually recorded, under her own name, the song "Teen Horniness Is Not A Crime" – which in the film is written and performed (with an accompanying music video) by her character Krysta Now. The song is included on the movie's soundtrack album, and is available for download from the iTunes Music Store.

Of course, this sort of spread among multiple platforms is not unique to *Southland Tales*. It is an increasingly common media strategy today. As Richard Grusin notes, film today is turning into a *distributed medium*: "the film is not confined to the form of its theatrical exhibition but is distributed across other media as well." For instance, "the production, design, and distribution of DVD versions of feature films are part of the original contractual (and thus artistic) intention of these films." Grusin adds that this sort of remediation "marks a fundamental change in the aesthetic status of the cinematic artifact" (Grusin 2007). His point is that the aesthetic experience of a film today may reside just as much in watching the DVD extras, or in exploring the associated websites, as it does in watching the film itself. For that matter, the media experience may well reside in children's playing with toys that are modeled after figures from an animated film, and given away as part of a cross-platform promotional strategy. The aesthetics of distributed media cannot be separated from their marketing. For its part, *Southland Tales* not only supplements itself with a variety of intertextual materials in other media, but also folds the practice of multimedia distribution and dispersion into the narrative of the film itself. Most notably, Krysta Now seeks to leverage her semi-celebrity as a porn starlet not only by recording songs and making a music video, but also by starring in her own talk-show-cum-reality-television series, and by selling her own energy drink.

What this means is that, although *Southland Tales* is very much a *movie*, it is also profoundly post-cinematic in both form and content. I say that it remains a movie, in the sense that it is big and spectacular, and that it was clearly intended to be viewed in a movie theater, on an enormous screen.⁴⁶ However, its audiovisual flow is entirely post-cinematic, and of a piece with the video-based and digital media that play such a role within it. The compositional logic of *Southland Tales* is paratactic and additive, having little to do with conventional film syntax. The

film is filled with inserts; it overlays, juxtaposes, and restlessly moves between multiple images and sound sources. But it does not provide us with any hierarchical organization of all these elements. Many of the film's most arresting images just pop up, without any discernible motivation or point of view. For instance, around the five-minute mark, shortly after a title reading, "Los Angeles," there is a shot of a G. I. Joe doll, advancing on knees and elbows along a wet sidewalk, then firing a rifle. It is nighttime. We see the toy in sharp focus and in close-up, while behind it the full extent of the boulevard, lined by palm trees, stretches out-of-focus into the deep background. The sounds emitted by the toy are accompanied, on the soundtrack, by Moby's soothing ambient music, and by a voiceover newscast reporting that celebrity-turned-soldier Pilot Abilene (Justin Timberlake) has been wounded in Fallujah by friendly fire. The film never returns to this toy figure; it has no function in the narrative. Of course, the film is filled with references to soldiers, and to wounded veterans like Pilot Abilene; but is that enough to motivate the appearance of the toy? The image of G. I. Joe is just *there*. It grabs our attention because it is anomalous and unexpected; it is evocative in a way that we cannot quite pin down. The film bequeaths us this moment, and then moves on to something else. G. I. Joe is just one figure in the movie's ceaseless flow.⁴⁷

Kelly's repetitive *compositing* of images and sounds is almost the polar opposite of Eisensteinian montage. For Eisenstein, "montage is conflict" (Eisenstein 1949, 38). Contradictory images interact precisely by clashing with one another; out of this clash, a higher order image – or even a concept, which no single, isolated image could possibly express – is generated dialectically. In this way, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. "From the collision of two given factors *arises* a concept," Eisenstein says (37); "from the superimposition of two elements of the same dimension always arises a new, higher dimension" (49). As

Deleuze summarizes the process, Eisensteinian montage features an ascending "organic spiral" composed of dialectical leaps (Deleuze 1986, 33); "the image must, effectively, change its power, pass to a higher power" (35). From this point of view, Eisenstein explicitly and scornfully rejects any "understanding of montage as a *linkage* of pieces" (Eisenstein 1949, 37), or "as a means of description by placing single shots one after the other like building blocks" (48), or like "bricks, arranged in series" (37).

However, Kelly's images and sounds do not interact dialectically. They really do seem to be linked together merely in the manner of bricks or building blocks. At best, the connections among shots, or among elements within a shot, are only allusive and indirect. Early in the film, for instance, as a voiceover newscast informs us that the Republicans have captured supermajorities in both Houses of Congress, a video clip embedded in the screen shows a pair of elephants fucking. Presumably this is a snarky reference to the elephant as a symbol of the Republican Party. In any case, the clip shares space on the screen with a number of computer graphics; these include corporate logos for the newscasts's sponsors, Panasonic, Bud Light, and Hustler. (This is a brilliant list, including as it does three crucial commodities that are bought and sold in the age of affective labor: electronics, intoxicants, and sex). At a much later point in the movie, the Baron von Westphalen (Wallace Shawn), head of the ubiquitous Treer Corporation, shows a commercial for his new gas-free automobile, the Saltair. The ad is a CGI sequence that shows one of these cars approaching, mounting, and sexually thrusting into another one. (A phallic appendage extrudes out of the first car, and penetrates the exhaust pipe of the second). This evidently literalizes, and thereby satirizes, the sexual subtext that permeates so much automobile advertising. In addition, the humping automobiles recall the humping elephants; but we are not given any rationale for this connection. All these correspondences and connections form something like

an affective constellation; but they are too dispersed, and too indefinite and arbitrary, to work in the focused and organized way that Eisensteinian montage theory demands. Rather, these links are *weak ties*, such as we are accustomed to find on the Internet.⁴⁸

The film critic Jim Emerson has a sense of what's at stake here, in his disapproving review of *Southland Tales* (originally entitled "Is It Even a Movie? "); "There's an obvious channel-surfing aesthetic to mimic 'information overload,' but nothing's on, anyway. One shot could just as easily be followed by any other shot – they aren't cut together with any verve or intelligence, so the effect is flat and linear... What's missing is resonance – a quality that's hard to define" (Emerson 2007).⁴⁹ Emerson dislikes the film because, as he accurately observes, it is not edited according to any traditional cinematic logic. Not only does *Southland Tales* not follow the method of dialectical montage; it also doesn't follow Hollywood continuity rules for organizing a narrative in such a way as to maximize narrative flow and impact.⁵⁰ Emerson is acutely aware of what's going on in *Southland Tales*; it's just that what he objects to is not a bug but a feature. The looseness or arbitrariness of its montage is in fact the very *point* of the movie. Kelly's shots refuse to coalesce into any sort of higher, synthetic unity. They never make the leap from affect to concept, or from their flatness to "a higher power," or to "a new, higher dimension." This is because the images and sounds of *Southland Tales* do not even *clash* in the first place. Rather, they coexist in their very distance from one another, their "impossibility."⁵¹

In other words, Kelly's images and sounds are wildly disparate, and yet they all exist on the same plane. They do not fit together in any rational way; they are so miscellaneous, and so scattered, that they do not even conflict with one another. At the same time, none of these images or sounds is privileged over any other; no image source or sound source is treated as more

authentic than any other. In particular, there is no hierarchy of representations; the images on a screen are just as real, and just as efficacious, as the objects from which those images are supposedly derived. In the terms used by Deleuze and Guattari, the film refuses any "supplementary dimension," and operates only "with the number of dimensions one already has available" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 6). In this way, *Southland Tales* exhibits an entirely *flat ontology*.⁵² This is what accounts for the fact that, on the one hand, the editing of the film seems "flat and linear" (as Emerson complains); while at the same time narrative sequences proliferate deliriously, bifurcate, and fold back upon one another, in a manner that is anything but "linear." In *Southland Tales*, chains of cause and effect both multiply and break down entirely, in defiance of traditional narrative logic. Nothing in the film makes sense in terms of linear causality, or in terms of action grounded in character, or even in terms of dialectical contrast. The onward flow of the film, as it zigzags towards catastrophe, is rather a matter of juxtaposition, dreamlike free association, and the proliferation of self-referential feedback loops.

For example, consider an almost impossibly convoluted narrative sequence in the first half of the movie. It concerns a pair of hip, "underground" performance artists, Dion (Wood Harris) and Dream (Amy Poehler). He is black, and she is white. They are a couple in real life, and collaborators in all their performances. They disguise themselves with facial prosthetics so that they will not be recognized. In this disguise, they pretend to be a viciously arguing newlywed couple. Their plan is to simulate a scenario in which they are murdered by a racist cop. Another collaborator, pretending to be the cop, will break in on them, as if responding to a domestic violence call. He will shoot them with blanks, and they will pretend to be hit, while a hidden accomplice presses a button in order to make fake blood spurt out. All this will be recorded on video, and released to the media and on the Net as

something that really happened. It's an agit-prop political action, being staged in order to discredit USIDent, and to blackmail some leading Republican politicians.

The fake racist cop is Ronald Taverner (Seann William Scott), who is impersonating his identical twin brother Roland Taverner (also played by Scott). Roland actually is a police officer, who has been kidnapped and is being held prisoner by the neo-Marxists. Ronald is accompanied by the amnesiac actor Boxer Santaros (Dwayne Johnson). Boxer has written a screenplay in which he plays the role of a psychotic police officer; he wants to accompany an actual officer on his rounds, in order to research the role. Boxer takes along a video camera, with which he records everything that happens; Dion and Dream's plan is for the fake double murder to be recorded on this camera. As Ronald and Boxer drive along, Ronald tries to get into character, by making a racist comment, on camera, to Boxer (who, like the actor playing him, is black). However, when Boxer responds with confusion and disbelief, Ronald backs off and says that he was only joking.

The whole fake-murder scenario goes awry, however, when a second supposed racist cop, Bart Bookman (Jon Lovitz), barges in on the scene of Dion and Dream's argument. At first, Dion and Dream continue screaming at one another, using their brilliant "improv" skills; but then, in fear of Bookman's threats, they break character and reveal themselves as the notorious performance artists they really are. Bookman doesn't care; he fires real bullets and kills them. As they fall, the hidden accomplice still pushes the special-effects button at the sound of gunfire, in order to spill the prearranged prosthetic blood. Ronald and Boxer flee the scene in a panic. In a subsequent scene, we learn that Bookman is also an impersonator rather than an actual cop; he's yet another neo-Marxist agent. He has killed Dion and Dream, and confiscated the video camera that recorded the double murder, in service to yet another confused agenda

that also seems to involve both political activism and blackmail for cash. In further developments, however, the videotape of the incident is itself mistaken for a different video, and stolen to further yet another political-intervention-cum-blackmail scheme.

The Dion-and-Dream subplot is only one small portion of *Southland Tales*; nearly everything else in the movie could be unpacked in similarly obsessive detail. My point in recounting the episode at such length is simply to give a sense of how dense and overstuffed the movie is. *Southland Tales* is filled with conspiracies and counter-conspiracies, with character impersonations and character doublings, with staged events and spontaneous events and reenactments of all these events, and with multiple digital recordings and simulations. And each of these can be interpreted in numerous, often contradictory ways. The film teases us, for instance, with the possibility of an allegorical reading. Thus, Dion and Dream may be identified with the Two Witnesses who play an important role in the Book of Revelation (11:3ff), and in subsequent Christian eschatological thought.⁵³ Finally, however, we are compelled to take the film's incidents and characters as *literally* as possible. Jim Emerson is once again accurate – albeit for the wrong reasons, and with a negative judgment that I do not share – when he complains that “the whole thing is so literal that everything has a banal explanation” (Emerson 2007). For the film's sheer density of incidents and references baffles our efforts to “translate” what we see and hear into something more abstract, more metaphorically palatable and easily manageable. The obsessive details of the movie are piled on, and left for fans to untangle and argue over, in a manner that is usually found only in long, multi-episode television and comic book serials. Kelly compresses several TV seasons' worth of episodes and plot twists into 145 minutes. *Southland Tales* may be long for a movie; but regarded as an implicit television series, it is almost brutally compressed and foreshortened.

If Kelly's juxtapositions of images and sounds do not fit into any tradition of cinematic montage, this is because they are organized according to the vastly different logic of digital compositing. The historical shift from montage to compositing – which occurred in Hollywood during the 1990s – is explored in great detail by Lev Manovich (2001, 136-160). Even if, “most often, the composited sequence simulates a traditional film shot” (137), nonetheless the fundamental assumptions of digital compositing are opposed to those of the analog cinema. The final output of electronic simulation may resemble the final output of mechanical reproduction, but these are generated in entirely different ways.⁵⁴ According to Manovich, “digital compositing exemplifies a more general operation of computer culture – assembling together a number of elements to create a singular seamless object” (139). This means that the cutting-and-pasting of elements that are synchronically available in a database replaces the suturing of shots that unfold diachronically. “Where old media relied on montage, new media substitutes the aesthetics of continuity. A film cut is replaced by a digital morph or digital composite” (143). In contrast to the complexly hypotactic organization of twentieth-century modernist media forms, digital multimedia production “follows the principle of simple addition. Elements in different media are placed next to each other without any attempt to establish contrast, complementarity, or dissonance between them” (143). In short, “montage aims to create visual, stylistic, semantic, and emotional dissonance between different elements. In contrast, compositing aims to blend them into a seamless whole, a single gestalt” (144).

Digital compositing implies a continuity and equality among its elements. The assembled images and sounds all belong to a single “smooth space” – as opposed to the hierarchically organized “striated space” of montage (to use Deleuze and Guattari's distinction – 1987, 474-500). However, this does not

mean that the result of compositing is always "seamless," in the way that my previous quote from Manovich suggested. Manovich himself concedes that, when "hybrid spaces" are created, "television normally relates these spaces semantically but not visually." When we see a newscaster with a video clip behind her, for instance, the two spaces are visually "disjointed, as they share neither the same scale nor the same perspective. If classical cinematic montage creates the illusion of a coherent space and hides its work, electronic montage openly presents the viewer with an apparent visual clash of different spaces" (Manovich 2001, 150).

This suggests that the combination of moving images is governed by two pairs of oppositions, or unfolds along two axes. On the one hand, the mimetic, hypotactic, and striated space of cinematic montage may be opposed to the simulacral, paratactic, and smooth space of digital compositing. On the other hand, the effects aimed at by these procedures may range from the seamless unity of the multiple elements to their more or less explicit disjunction. On the side of analog cinema, both the standardized causal logic of the Hollywood continuity system and the Bazinian long-take style, with its "ambiguity" and "uncertainty" (Bazin 2004, 36) may be contrasted with Eisenstein's aggressive montage. On the side of digital simulation, the "perceptual realism" aimed at by films like *Jurassic Park* and *Forrest Gump* may be contrasted with the hypermediated juxtaposition of incompatible elements in a film like *Southland Tales*. Classical Hollywood films, and more recent blockbusters by the likes of Spielberg and Zemeckis, both create illusions of continuous action – albeit by very different means. *Potemkin* and *Southland Tales*, on the other hand, both foreground the heterogeneity of their construction – although Eisenstein's dialectical contradictions work very differently than Kelly's impossibilities.⁵⁵

One problem with Manovich's account of digital editing is

that it is focused almost entirely on visual images. It ignores the role of sound in digital media. But *Southland Tales*, like so many post-cinematic works, is weighted more to the sonic than to the optical. It assumes a world that, as McLuhan says, is "audile-tactile," and no longer centered on the eye (McLuhan 1994, 45). With digital media, we find ourselves "back in acoustic space" (McLuhan and Fiore 1967, 63). Digital compositing involves sounds as well as images; it even reduces the difference between them, since both sensory modalities are processed through the same digital code. But also, the very multiplication and fragmentation of visual sources leads to a certain destitution of the eye, and a consequent shift of emphasis towards the ear. Cartesian perspectival space gives way to "a discontinuous and resonant mosaic of dynamic figure/ground relationships" (McLuhan and McLuhan 1988, 40). *Southland Tales* repeatedly emulates the computer screen or cable television news screen, in which multiple windows compete for attention. In such conditions, my eyes no longer 'know' where to look. The media experiencer can no longer be figured as a "spectator," standing apart from and overlooking a homogeneous visual field. Rather, he or she must parse multiple, windowed image sources as rhythmic patterns and as information fields. "In this electric age we see ourselves being translated more and more into the form of information"; perceptual impressions are "translated into information systems" (McLuhan 1994, 57). These systems, with what Manovich calls their "database logic," composed as "collections of individual items, with every item possessing the same significance as any other" (Manovich 2001, 218), cannot be ordered by vision alone. This is why their very presentation demands the foregrounding of the other senses, most notably hearing.

Michel Chion, the great theoretician of film sound, is equally sensitive to the role of "sound on screen" in post-cinematic media (1994). In traditional analog cinema, the images are

primary. The coherence of a film comes mostly from its *mise en scène*, cinematography, and editing. The soundtrack serves as a support for the images, giving them emotional resonance and a guarantee of (seeming) naturalism. That is to say, sound provides what Chion calls "*added value*"; it "enriches a given image" in such a way as to give the false impression that "this information or expression 'naturally' comes from what is seen, and is already contained in the image itself" (Chion 1994, 5). Film sound is therefore a *supplement* (in Derrida's sense of the term): it subliminally supports the primacy of an image that nonetheless would not mean or feel the same without it.

But all this changes in post-cinematic media like television and video. Sound now operates overtly instead of covertly. Instead of sound providing "added value" to the image, now a visual element is "nothing more than an *extra image*," working "to illustrate or rather decorate" whatever is spoken on the soundtrack (Chion 1994, 158). In this way, "television is illustrated radio"; for "sound, mainly the sound of speech, is always foremost in television. Never offscreen, sound is always *there*, in its place, and does not need the image to be identified" (157). In television news especially, spoken commentary weaves together and makes coherent what otherwise would seem to be an utterly random stream of images. For televisual images have no intrinsic logic of their own; they are only strung together through the guidance provided by the sound. This does not necessarily mean that images will tend to disappear; more often, it leads to their mad proliferation. When images are governed only by speech, a regulatory principle entirely external to them, they are no longer constrained by any intrinsic logic. This allows them to multiply without limit.

Music video operates according to a related, but slightly different, logic. Chion says that, because music videos are anchored in pre-existing songs, they feature "a joyous rhetoric of images" (Chion 1994, 166). Music video paradoxically "liberates

the eye. Never is television as visual as during some moments in music videos, even when the image is conspicuously attaching itself to some music that was sufficient in itself" (166). Images are freed precisely because they are entirely superfluous. They do not provide any added value to a song that is already self-sufficient. But they also do not have to advance a narrative, since the music video "does not involve dramatic time" (166). Instead, "the music video's image is fully liberated from the linearity normally imposed by sound" (167). The visual track is wedded to the soundtrack in that it establishes certain "points of synchronization, where the image matches the production of sound in some way." But "the rest of the time," outside of these synchronization points, the image track ignores the sound and "goes its separate way" (167).

Chion notes that "cinophiles especially attack music videos as eye-assaulting; they dislike the stroboscopic effect of the rapid editing." However, this is only "because they are judging the editing according to cinematic criteria" that are no longer valid (Chion 1994, 167). In fact, "the rapid succession of shots creates a sense of visual polyphony and even of simultaneity" (166), despite the fact that we only see one image at a time. Chion, writing in 1990, notes that the literal simultaneity of multiple images on a single screen, or of frames within the frame, tends to be rare in film – and even in video, where it is technically easier to accomplish (166). But of course, this situation has changed in the last twenty years. *Southland Tales* has no trouble with multiple frames or windows, and images within images, because these have become so familiar a feature of our contemporary media environment.

Southland Tales uses sound precisely in the ways that Chion describes as characteristic of post-cinematic media. In the film, just as in television news, speech guides us through an otherwise incomprehensible labyrinth of proliferating images. The voiceover narration provided by Pilot Abilene (Justin

Timberlake) is "always *there*, in its place," even when Abilene himself is offscreen, or when the voice is not issuing from his demented onscreen image. Abilene's commentary is tonally flat and detached;⁵⁶ it includes backstory information, evocations of various characters' states of mind, and readings from the Book of Revelation. This neutral, all-encompassing voice accounts for, and thereby makes possible, the "apparent visual clash of different spaces" evoked by Manovich – a clash which cannot be resolved on the visual level alone. In traditional Hollywood film, the offscreen voice often acquires a transcendent or God-like authority.⁵⁷ In contrast, the flat voice of the television newscaster suggests a bare accumulation of facts, which cannot be made subject to any transcendent judgment. Justin Timberlake's voiceover in *Southland Tales* is similarly blank and dispassionate. It reduces the film's images to the status of data, or pieces of information, that can be combined in innumerable ways, without concern for the traditional constraints of film syntax. Everything in *Southland Tales* is spoken in the same way, "said in a single and same sense" (Deleuze 1994, 42); and this Deleuzian *univocity* is the indifferent background that allows differences and impossibilities to emerge.

Stylistically, Kelly's images tend towards a televisual flatness. They usually feature conventional character positioning: either centered two-shots, or shot/reverse-shot setups. But this deliberate visual blandness is what allows for the stacking of images within images, as well as for the frequent irruption of bizarre tableaux and hallucinatory visual displacements. I have already mentioned the car commercial, and the G.I. Joe doll on the Venice Beach boardwalk. But there's also the freakish entourage of the Baron von Westphalen; and the dazzling three-minute-long sequence shot that weaves through the crowd celebrating Independence Day aboard the Baron's "mega-zeppelin"; and the vision of Pilot Abilene turning round in his gun turret, with his disfigured face, his maniacal grin, and an

insane glint to his eye; and the scene in which Ronald Taverner gestures in front of a mirror that only returns his reflection with a delay of several seconds. All these are possible only because, as Chion says, in a televisual mode "the image [i]s something extra" (Chion 1994, 159). The overfullness of *Southland Tales'* soundtrack – which includes, in addition to Abilene's voiceover, a scattering of CNN-style news reports, and Moby's brooding, ambient musical score – allows for the unmooring of the film's images, a scattering of the weightless detritus of more than a century of moving pictures.

With its tendency to congeal action into self-contained set pieces, *Southland Tales* also frequently approaches the condition of music video. At certain points in the film, the already fractured narrative comes to a complete halt. "Dramatic time" is suspended, giving way to an "audiovisual passage" whose temporality is dictated by a pop song that dominates the soundtrack.⁵⁸ Indeed, the most memorable sequence in the film is precisely such a passage. The sequence features Pilot Abilene – which is to say, Justin Timberlake – dancing and lip-synching to the Killers' hit song from 2005, "All These Things I've Done." There is no fast cutting, but the cinematography is entirely subordinated to the rhythms of the song. Within the diegesis, the scene is motivated as Abilene's drug-induced hallucination, the result of injecting himself with a powerful psychedelic called Fluid Karma. But really, it breaks out of the diegesis altogether, and addresses the film's audience directly. The sequence is a delirious, but utterly cold and abstract, sexual fantasia; it is best regarded, perhaps, as a post-cinematic, videocentric revision of Busby Berkeley's big production numbers from Warner Brothers musicals of the 1930s. The scene is utterly extraneous as narrative, but it works as a kind of affective focal point, bringing to a head the feelings of displacement and distraught confusion that have drifted throughout the film, and touched nearly all the characters. In an interview, Kelly even calls the sequence "the

heart and soul of the film" (Peranson 2007).

In this sequence, Abilene/Timberlake stumbles about in a game arcade, as dry ice smoke swirls from the floor. He is wearing a blood-stained T-shirt. He exhibits a ravaged beauty: the symmetry and perfect sculpting of his features is disrupted by the scar lines that traverse one side of his face, traces of his injury in Fallujah from friendly fire. As he progresses through the arcade, he flips the dog tags around his neck while lip-synching the repeated line: "I've got soul, but I'm not a soldier." But the lip-synching is not maintained consistently; at times, he stops doing it, even as the song continues. Abilene/Timberlake drinks beer, and pours it over his head like a frat-boy party dude. He moves forward, staring into the camera, except when he seems too befuddled to focus his attention anywhere. At one point, he gives the camera (and us) the finger, and then smirks as he passes out of the frame. All the while, Abilene/Timberlake is surrounded by a bevy of Busby Berkeley-esque nearly-identical women wearing platinum-blond, curly wigs and skimpy nurses' uniforms. They are "sexy" in a tawdry and tacky way, with the fake smiles we expect to see on TV. They gyrate and kick their legs, as Abilene/Timberlake entertains their attentions briefly, and then pushes them out of the way. The dance continues, with dreamlike motions, even as the song fades from the soundtrack, to be replaced by Moby's low, ambient drone.

The sequence as a whole is dominated by Justin Timberlake's charismatic presence. You can't forget the celebrity behind the character he plays. This is all the more so, in that the rock grandiloquence of The Killers is so distant from the r&b-inflected pop of Timberlake's own musical recordings. This discordance only draws our attention still more acutely to Timberlake as a media construct, or celebrity persona. For here, as in so many places in American popular culture today, Timberlake displays a charisma that seems incompatible with – and yet that somehow arises seamlessly out of – his bland-as-white-bread, blue-eyed-

soul presence. Justin Timberlake seems to be a "man without qualities," hyperbolically bland and ordinary; and yet this everydayness generates a powerful aura. He radiates a smothering sexual heat, especially when he appears in music videos by female r&b singers (Rihanna, Ciara, and even Madonna).⁵⁹ In *Southland Tales*, this sexual energy is turned inside-out, or diverted into a solipsistic dementia. But it retains the odd, haunting sense of something not-quite-there: as if it were not reduced, but rather intensified, by the process of being hollowed out, turned into an empty shell of itself. It's not for nothing that Pilot Abilene incessantly quotes, in addition to the Book of Revelation, the final lines of T. S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men" – only inverted so that "the world ends/ Not with a whimper but a bang."

In any case, Pilot Abilene's music video hallucination is at once utterly depraved, and yet also oddly impersonal. It is flat, self-contained, and without resonance, as if it were being performed in a special chamber designed to muffle and absorb anything that might exceed the literal, or that might lead us to connotations beyond the obvious. The scene is nearly unspeakably ridiculous, at the same time that it is creepily menacing, and yet also exhilarating. When you shoot Fluid Karma, Abilene says just before injecting himself, "you talk to God without even seeing Him. You hear His voice, and you see His disciples. They appear like angels under a sea of black umbrellas. Angels who can see through time." In other words, speech is severed from vision. You hear what you are unable to see; and what you see (the fake-porno nurses as angels) is the always-inadequate representation, or messenger, of a divine futurity that you can never quite apprehend. For Richard Kelly, as for Philip K. Dick, if you let the forces of the cosmos stream through you, then you will find yourself channeling chintzy advertising specials and reality shows. Watching Timberlake strut and lip-sync among the fake-porno nurses, it's almost as if

time had stopped for the duration of the song, looping back upon itself in order to intensify, by a sort of positive feedback, the film's overall sense of apocalyptic imminence: of something catastrophic not so much happening, as always being about to happen. Justin Timberlake dramatizes the state of teetering on a precipice without actually falling over; or better, of falling over but never finishing falling over, never quite hitting the ground.

What I have been saying about the Justin Timberlake music video scene applies, in large, to the movie as a whole. *Southland Tales* is overloaded to the point of hallucination; yet at the same time it depicts a culture drained of vitality, and on the brink of death. The movie exuberantly envisions the entropic dissipation of all energy, and the implosion of social and media networks into a flat, claustrophobic, degree-zero banality. This end-point looms continually before us, but it is never quite reached. It is as if the film were always holding something back; or as if it were running repeatedly through a holding pattern, like an airplane circling the airport without landing. Timberlake/Abilene repeatedly tells us that we are watching the end of the world. But this end is continually being deferred. Even in the last moments of the film, when we finally get the "bang" that we have been promised all along, it is unclear what (if anything) has actually been accomplished. It may be the Apocalypse foretold by the Book of Revelation, or it may be just another media show. We usually say in such cases that "time will tell"; but in the world of *Southland Tales*, there is precisely no time left to tell.

Indeed, time has been depleted in the world of *Southland Tales*, just like every other natural resource. The psychedelic drug Fluid Karma allows you to travel or "bleed" through time. But this drug is just a byproduct of the new energy source, also called Fluid Karma, that has freed America from its dependence on oil. Fluid Karma is produced by the Baron von Westphalen and his Treer Corporation; they manufacture it by capturing the motion of the ocean tides, a seemingly limitless source of energy. But of

course, there is no such thing as a "perpetual motion machine" (which is how the Baron describes Fluid Karma). The extraction of the ocean's energy results in a kind of tidal drag that slows down the rotation of the earth. This leads in turn to a gradual running-down of time itself, and a rift in the spacetime continuum. The leaking-away of time – its asymptotic approach to an end that it never fully attains – is both a major theme of *Southland Tales*, and the principle behind its formal organization of sounds and images.

Deleuze describes modernist cinema as an art of the *time-image*. Post-World-War-II art cinema offers us an image of "time itself, 'a little time in its pure state'" (Deleuze 1989, 17). In the modernist cinema's direct image of time, sheer duration is affirmed in its own right, and liberated from any subordination to narrative. But *Southland Tales*, as a post-cinematic work, is about the exhaustion of this image of time – or perhaps I should say, the exhaustion of temporality itself. This is evidenced by the way that digital media do not seem able to "communicate duration" – as David Rodowick complains, quoting Babette Mangolte (Rodowick 2007, 163). Just as the movement-image gave way to the time-image, so now the time-image gives way to a new sort of audiovisual or multimedia image: one lacking "the sense of time as *la durée*" (Rodowick 2007, 171).⁶⁰ What Rodowick sees as sheer loss, however – a reduction to "the 'real time' of a continuous present" (171) – needs to be regarded in an affirmative sense as well. If we have lost a certain humanist pathos of lived duration, in return we have gained the sheer profusion and density of 'real-time' innovation and invention. Post-cinematic works like *Southland Tales*, with their imploded temporality, "don't bother to be concerned about the way they combine devices that might be opposed in the abstract" (Chion 1994, 167). Few works go further than *Southland Tales* in exploring the potentialities, both for good and for ill, of the new media regime that is now emerging before our eyes and ears.

The hypermediated reconfiguration of time and space that *Southland Tales* offers us is a creative response, not just to the demands of new digital technologies, but also to the social and cultural conditions of what Mark Fisher calls *capitalist realism* (Fisher 2009). As Fisher puts it, echoing both Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, today "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism"(2). Even as we shudder with apocalyptic premonitions, we are haunted by "the widespread sense, not only that capitalism is the only viable political and economic system, but that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it." In such a world, the future is no longer open. We have an inescapable sense that "the future harbours only reiteration and re-permutation. Could it be that there are no breaks, no 'shocks of the new' to come?" (Fisher 2009, 3). For all processes, and all relations, have been captured in the form of saleable commodities. This is the real meaning of Hegel's and Kojève's "end of history" (Fukuyama 1993). Capitalism not only "subsumes and consumes all of previous history" (Fisher 2009, 4); it preemptively appropriates and commodifies all futurity as well. The world can end, but it cannot change; or better, the only change it can know is the "capitalistic fashion-novelty" derided by Ernst Bloch: "sheer aimless infinity and incessant changeability; – where everything ought to be constantly new, everything remains just as it was... a merely endless, contentless zigzag" (Bloch 1995, 201, 140). In the world of capitalist realism, duration implodes; it shrinks down to a dimensionless, infinitesimal point. Time is emptied out, or whittled away. The task for a critical art today is not to mourn this loss, but to discover what possibilities the new situation offers.

Southland Tales accomplishes such a task through its manic multiplication of new-media strategies. Every characteristic of the post-cinematic media regime, under the conditions of capitalist realism, is accelerated to the breaking point. We see this

in Richard Kelly's experiments with narrative and cinematic form; but also in the film's treatment of subjectivity, and in the way it uses celebrities. Most of the actors in *Southland Tales* are pop culture icons of one sort or another. Some of them are best known for their roles in previous films, while many of them made their name in other media. In every case, however, their acting in *Southland Tales* cuts sharply against their familiar personas. I have already mentioned the odd, pivotal role that Justin Timberlake plays in the film. But there's also Dwayne Johnson (a.k.a. The Rock), whose Boxer Santaros is a befuddled amnesiac; Johnson shows a vulnerability, and a continual fearfulness, utterly at odds with his past roles as a professional wrestler, and as an action hero. Sarah Michelle Gellar will never escape her identification as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*; but nothing could be more un-Buffy-like than her hilarious performance here as the perky, upbeat, humorless, self-promoting, and incorrigibly naive porn starlet Krysta Now. And Seann William Scott, who radiates existential anguish in his role as the doubles Ronald and Roland Taverner, is best known for his performance as the irrepressibly crass Stifler in the *American Pie* movies. In all these cases, the violent contrast between the character in the diegesis, and the well-known persona of the celebrity who is playing that character, leads to a kind of cognitive dissonance.

For instance, Dwayne Johnson's character, Boxer Santaros, is amnesiac and literally beside himself; we ultimately learn that this amnesia is a consequence of space/time displacement, together with the murder of his "other" self. Boxer is a rich and famous Hollywood star with Republican Party connections (much as Dwayne Johnson himself is in "real life"); he is even married to Madeleine Frost (played by Mandy Moore in yet another bit of celebrity counter-casting), the bitchy, fashion-victim daughter of a key Republican Senator. But Boxer doesn't remember anything of his past life. This means that, although everyone else in the world of the film recognizes him, he does

not recognize himself. Amnesia takes away his knowledge of his own stardom; but it also turns him into even more of an actor, since anything he does makes him feel like he is playing a fictional character. His only possible mode of being is therefore to play it by ear, straining to imagine himself into whatever role he finds himself having been cast for. No wonder Boxer keeps slipping into the role of a character in an apocalyptic screenplay that he is supposed to have written – though he doesn't remember writing it either, but only reading it.

Dwayne Johnson gives a brilliant performance as this sort of a performer. You can see him trying on the various roles, being touched by fear and anxiety and surprise, and above all by a sort of bemused puzzlement – but always braving it out and trying to act in the way the situation demands. Is it possible to be a Method actor, inhabiting your role, when you don't have any personal memories to call upon in order to think yourself into that role? Is it possible to be a Method actor, drawing upon personal memories in order to inhabit the role of somebody without any such personal memories? Boxer Santaros' hyperperformative, or improvisational, simulation of interiority is the only model of subjectivity that *Southland Tales* gives us. The "split subject" of an earlier Hollywood era (the particularity of the diegetic character, doubled by the unchanging, recognizable persona of the star who played that character) opens up into a potentially endless hall of mirrors. Boxer Santaros is an extreme version of the *flexible personality* demanded by what Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (2007) call "the new spirit of capitalism." On the one hand, such a personality must be capable of participating, with total energy and enthusiasm, in whatever project engages him at the moment. On the other hand, he must also have "the ability to disengage from a project in order to be *available*" for a new one. "Even at the peak of engagement, enthusiasm, involvement in a project," the flexible personality must be "prepared for change and capable of new investments" (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007, 112). Who

could meet these schizophrenic demands better than an amnesiac actor?

But there's more to Boxer Santaros, and to the other characters in *Southland Tales*, than just this radical lability. Boxer, and Pilot Abilene, and Ronald and Roland Taverner, and even Krysta Now, also possess what I can only call a powerful and moving *sincerity*. Such an attribute might seem entirely out of place, in a "postmodern" world, with no depths, where everything is reduced to the status of a one-dimensional caricature, and where "personality" is entirely a matter of self-promotion and of continual adaptation to changing circumstances. But sincerity is precisely *not* a question of depth, or of authenticity, or of some fundamental inner quality of being.⁶¹ Sincerity merely implies a certain *consistency* in the way that a being acts and presents itself, without presupposing anything about the basis of this consistency. Graham Harman defines sincerity as the way that "a thing always just is what it is" (Harman 2005, 143).⁶²

In this sense, we must say that Boxer Santaros is altogether sincere. What is being expressed sincerely, throughout *Southland Tales*, is precisely the diffuseness and discomfort of this character, together with its difference from the usual screen persona of Dwayne Johnson, together with the difference between that usual persona and the actual, empirical person who Dwayne Johnson is. None of these uncertainties and differences are smoothed over, and none of them are posed as "contradictions" to be dialectically resolved. Instead, they are just *presented*, and transformed into spectacle, in their full messiness and intractability. In the midst of his multimedia barrage, Kelly also "fill[s] the screen," as Amy Taubin rightly puts it, "with tenderness, longing, [and] despair" (Taubin 2007). Boxer Santaros never figures out who he truly is; but the pathos is overwhelming when, towards the end of the film, he gets up to dance on a big disco floor, and is joined both by his girlfriend Krysta Now and by Madeleine Frost, the wife he has forgotten.

In purely narrative terms, the moment is absurd. But after two hours in which their characters have argued, plotted with and against one another, and generally gone around in circles, this final conjunction of Dwayne Johnson, Sarah Michelle Gellar, and Mandy Moore has a force of conviction that makes it almost sublime.

Southland Tales doesn't offer us a way out from the nightmare of "capitalist realism," or the neoliberal "end of history." But in its crazy ambition, its full engagement with contemporary media, and its terrible sincerity, it is one of those rare works that dares to be "as radical as reality itself." In its demented fabulation, it reflects upon our actual situation, while at the same time inserting itself within that situation, rather than taking a pretended distance from it. Kelly's "science fiction" is scientifically and technologically unsound, and could best be described as delirious – but that is precisely why it is directly relevant to a world in which "the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion" (Haraway 1991, 149).

5 Gamer

Mark Neveldine and Brian Taylor's *Gamer* (2009) is brilliant in the way that only a sleazy exploitation movie could be. It is fast, cheap and out of control – the product of directors who cheerfully describe themselves as "pretty A.D.D." (Quigley 2009). Neveldine/Taylor's earlier *Crank* films already pushed the motifs of the action genre beyond all boundaries of taste and plausibility. But *Gamer* ups the ante considerably, in terms of both choreographed violence and conceptual edge. It's an audacious movie; and one that, in the service of this audacity, isn't afraid to risk seeming ridiculous or stupid. *Gamer* may well be, as Jeanette Catsoulis of *The New York Times* rather snarkily put it, "a futuristic vomitorium of bosoms and bullets" (Catsoulis 2009). But this description needs to be read as praise rather than opprobrium. For *Gamer* is one of those rare films that truly dares to be "as radical as reality itself." Precisely because of its exaggerations and funhouse distortions, it says more about the world we actually live in today than nearly any other recent American film that I have seen. *Gamer* remains a few steps ahead of any possible critical reflection that one might try to apply to it – including, of course, my own.

In terms of genre, *Gamer* is an action/exploitation feature. But it is also a science fiction film. *Gamer* is set in the near future, "some years from this exact moment" (as an opening title tells us), in a world whose technology is extrapolated from our own. In this way, *Gamer* explores the incipient futurity – or, at the very least, the incessant pressure of technological change – that is so big a part of our experience today. Capturing this experience in the medium of film is inherently problematic. Of course, film has long since been displaced by newer media – television, video, and a whole panoply of computer-based forms – as the "cultural dominant" of our society.⁶³ But in recent years, with the rapid growth of digitization and of networking, we seem to have