

Steven Shaviro “*Southland Tales*”

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Richard Kelly’s *Southland Tales* is an amazing movie, and I will try to do it justice in what follows, although all I can do for the moment is spew out a series of speculations and observations, in a random, and no doubt contradictory as well as repetitive, order. But I think that this is not only a brilliant film, but an extraordinarily important one, in that it is one of those rare works that is “as radical as reality itself,” and that reflects upon our real situation while at the same time inserting itself within that situation, rather than taking a pretended distance from it. The film is a demented fabulation, but in such a way that it can best be described as hyperreal. Its “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 that has increasingly come to be “indistinguishable from science fiction.” *Southland Tales* makes nearly all other contemporary movies seem inadequate, outdated, and guilty of fleeing our actual social world in search of nostalgic consolations. I cannot help suspect that the radicality of *Southland Tales* is the reason why the film has received such a savagely negative response from most reviewers, and has been such a disastrous flop at the box office. (Several of the film critics I most respect, including Amy Taubin, J. Hoberman, and Manohla Dargis, have praised the movie; but most have regarded it as unspeakably awful, an unmitigated disaster. As for general audiences, the film has only made something like \$160,000 in box office gross, nearly a month after its initial release).

Southland Tales is all about the flow of images, the multimedia feed. Although it is very much a *movie*, in the way that it is big and spectacular and meant to be viewed on an enormous screen, it is also deeply *post-cinematic*, both in terms of contents and of form. *Southland Tales* takes place in an alternative universe to our own: one in which atomic bombs detonated by terrorists in Texas in 2005 have led us into World War III, reconfiguring both the political landscape and the development of internet and alternative-fuel technologies. Nonetheless, the movie is recognizably contemporary, in that it is set firmly in a world of handheld video cameras, and You Tube, and 24-hour cable news channels, and ubiquitous surveillance cameras, and celebrity-tracking paparazzi.

Southland Tales’s visual flow is also that of these post-cinematic media that play such a role within it. Properly cinematic images are intermixed with a barrage of home video footage, internet and cable-TV news feeds, commercials, simulated CGI environments, and especially sequences in which the film’s characters are watching all of the above on multiple computer windows or screens. The compositional logic of *Southland Tales* is paratactic and additive, having little to do with conventional film syntax. Indeed, Kelly’s disjunctive flow is almost the polar opposite of Eisensteinian montage. Eisenstein wanted his contradictory images to interact, dialectically or alchemically, in order to produce by their clash a higher order image/concept, a whole greater than the sum of its parts. But Kelly’s discordant images refuse thus to come together; they don’t even clash, but co-exist in their distance from one another, their “impossibility” (to use a word that Deleuze adapts from Leibniz). In *Southland Tales*,

chains of cause and effect both multiply and break down entirely, in defiance of linear or narrative logic; everything in the film is a matter, neither of causality, nor of action grounded in character, nor even of dialectical contrast; but rather of juxtaposition, “free” association, and the proliferation of multiple levels of self-referential feedback loops.

For instance: a pair of hip, “underground” performance artists, a black man and a white woman, who are a couple in “real life” and in their performances, disguise themselves in facial prosthetics so that they will not be recognized. In this disguise, they pretend to be an arguing married couple, in order to simulate a scenario in which they will be murdered by a racist cop. There are doing this apparently for a political cause; but it also seems that they are interested in blackmail for financial advantage (seed money to feed back into their “art”). The racist cop who is supposed to seem to murder them, after responding to a domestic violence call, is himself being impersonated by his twin brother, and accompanied by an actor trying to research his own forthcoming role as a cop by slipping into character on the (ostensibly) real cop’s rounds, as well as by hauling around a video camera with which he records everything that happens. The fake racist cop is supposed to fire blanks, and the performance artists will pretend to be hit, while a hidden accomplice presses a button in order to make fake blood spurt out. But the whole scenario is detoured when a second cop barges in on the scene and fires real bullets, so that the performing couple (who have already, in their desperation not to be really killed, gone out of character and revealed themselves as the notorious performers they are) are actually killed — though, as they fall, the hidden accomplice still pushes the special-effects button at the sound of gunfire, in order to make the prosthetic blood spill out. In a subsequent scene, the second, killer cop is revealed also to be an impersonator rather than an actual cop, who has performed the killing, and confiscated the video camera that recorded it, in service to yet another confused agenda that also seems to involve both political activism and blackmail for cash...

I’ve described at such cumbersome length a scene that only takes up a few minutes of *Southland Tales*’s two-and-a-quarter-hour running time, simply to give a sense of how twisted and multi-leveled the film is. These convolutions of content go along with the sensory-overload barrage of multiple media images that fill the screen, or often multiple screens within the screen. I haven’t even mentioned the fact that everything that happens in the film is under surveillance, so that most of what we see on screen is viewed in progress, or a second time, by the evil Republican homeland-security czar (played by Miranda Richardson, channeling Angela Lansbury’s performance in *The Manchurian Candidate*), who monitors multiple screens from her command center at the heart of US-Ident, a “think tank” turned spy facility that (in the interest of “national security”) tracks everything that streams across the Internet.

The great theoretician of film sound Michel Chion notes that, while in cinema the sound subliminally supports the primacy of the image, in video the sound becomes up-front central, and weaves together and makes coherent what otherwise might appear to be an utterly random stream of images. In cinema the images are primary, the coherence of the film coming mostly from mise en scene and cinematography and montage, and the soundtrack really serves as a support for the images, by giving them emotional resonance and a guarantee of (seeming) naturalism. Video, to the contrary, is more like “illustrated radio,” according to Chion: the sound is primary (whether it be the voice in a news report, or the music in a music video), and the images have no intrinsic logic of their own, but are only strung

together through the guidance provided by the sound. This does not necessarily mean that images tend to disappear; it more likely means that there is a proliferation of images, due to the fact that they are no longer constrained by an imagistic logic, but instead opened up by the fact that a logic external to them, based instead in the sonic, is the only regulating principle. (Chion's formulation should be compared with Marshall McLuhan's claim that television and computer-based media are audio-tactile, rather than predominantly visual).

In any case, this is yet another sense in which *Southland Tales* is resolutely post-cinematic. Its use of sound is much closer to that of television and music video than it is to that of anything recognizable in the history of cinema. We are guided through the labyrinth of the movie's proliferating images almost exclusively by Justin Timberlake's voiceover narration (together with other forms of narration, like those from various CNN-style news reports) and Moby's musical score. While the electronic music modulates our mood, the voiceover makes connections between layers and levels of imagery that otherwise could not emerge. Stylistically, Kelly's images tend toward televisual flatness, and conventional character positioning (either two-shots or shot/reverse-shot setups). He does, however, throw in more heavily stylized cinematography every once in a while (I recall an extraordinary long take, towards the end of the film, in the mega-zeppelin, as the camera weaves through the partying crowds, following first one character, then another, without a cut). But the emphasis is never on strictly optical tableaux: there is always too much of a welter of too-flat images, which need the soundtrack to be unscrambled.

This is not a matter of "telling instead of showing" (the accusation that is usually made against the use of voiceover in more traditional Hollywood films, e.g. in the films of Billy Wilder), but rather of voice enunciating what literally *cannot* be shown, because it exceeds the limits of the visual. I am thinking here of Jameson's dictum that postmodern capitalist society cannot be imaged or represented; this does not mean that it cannot be known, or "mapped," but that such a mapping itself exceeds what can be imaged or represented or "visualized." And I am also thinking of Deleuze's notion is to make us sense and feel that which literally cannot be sensed or felt, but which remains implicit in whatever it is that we *do* sense or feel, and which therefore cannot be registered in any other way, but *can only be* sensed or felt. For both Jameson and Deleuze, and despite their radically different orientations (since Jameson is focused on cognition, and Deleuze on affect), what's needed is a certain rupture or disparity: in the case of any medium involving images in motion, this means both disjunction among the images, and discordance between the images and the sounds (words and speech, music, noise) that underly them.

In *Southland Tales*, as in the network society we live in, the world is entirely composed of images: bodies are not only registered on video as images, but are themselves images; and images are themselves entirely real, because they are what, to a large extent, compose the material substance of the real. But this means that everything is flat or two-dimensional, everything is laid out in a configuration that is essentially spatial and simultaneous, even if not conforming to any literal geography. Sound is what energizes this configuration; it provides the temporality (both the existential duration, and the principle of ordering) for this labyrinthine array of images; it thereby realizes the actual connections between images that, on the image track itself, are merely latent or virtual.

This means that Kelly is one of the very few contemporary directors — alongside David Lynch, David Fincher, and really I am not sure who else — who is actually rethinking what film might mean, and what sense it might make, in our post-cinematic, videocentric and thoroughly digitized age. We can profitably contrast *Southland Tales* with Lynch's *Inland Empire*: these films are complementary to one another. Lynch's film is shot on digital video, and constructed in such a way that it is no longer a movie any longer, but some newer media form. It is intimate and interior in a way that traditional movies (because they are public and collective and operate on a grand scale) are incapable of, and that therefore can only be attained by fracturing and fragmenting cinematic codes, and by rejecting 35mm film for digital video. But the deep logic of *Inland Empire* is still a cinematic one, precisely because it refers back to the cinematic codes that it deconstructs. *Inland Empire* is based on the enigma of images, all the more so in that Lynch's digital camera flattens out and makes more glaring the images whose subtleties he used to capture on film. Lynch's sound design provides an exquisite support for these deconstructed images, but the images still come first. *Southland Tales*, to the contrary, no longer recognizes cinematic logic at all, not even in order to deconstruct it. This is because it is no longer based on cinema's image-centric logic at all — despite the fact that, as a media object, it is still (in contrast to *Inland Empire*) a movie. The two works thus explore the same contested territory, but from opposite perspectives, moving in opposite directions. I am not saying that *Southland Tales* is as great an accomplishment as *Inland Empire*, but nothing I have seen recently, aside from Lynch's work, comes close to matching it.

As for the content of *Southland Tales* — since it is anything but a formal exercise — this has as much to do with the auras of the actors making up the cast, as it does with what the characters played by these actors actually do on screen. Everybody in the film is a pop culture icon of one sort or another. The main characters are played by such actors as Dwayne Johnson (The Rock, of both wrestling and action-picture fame); Sarah Michelle Gellar (Buffy); Seann William Scott (from *American Pie*). The minor roles are played by the likes of Wallace Shawn (as a mad-scientist dwarf), and Mandy Moore (as a fashion-victim Republican Senator's daughter). All the minor roles are acted by people whom I can recognize, even if I cannot actually place them without the help of the IMDB. (Thus, Christopher Lambert — *Highlander* — plays a brutal and crazed cynic who sells heavy weaponry from inside an ice cream truck usually parked in Venice Beach). But nearly all these actors are cast against type, playing roles that largely contradict the characterizations for which they are best known. Thus, the Rock is denied action-hero status, as he spends most of the film as an amnesiac Hollywood actor, lost in various varieties of fear and befuddlement. Sarah Michelle Gellar is hilarious as a humorless porn actress with her own business plan, that includes a talk show (sort of an X-rated version of *The View*), a pop record (“Teenage Horniness is Not a Crime”), and an energy drink.

Special mention must go, of course, to Justin Timberlake, who narrates the film with omniscient voiceovers — even though at the same time he is a character within the film, who could not possibly know most of the things that his voiceover confides to us. His character is an Iraqi-war vet, Pilot Abilene, who was wounded (and facially disfigured) by “friendly fire” (shot, in fact, by the Seann William Scott character). He spends most of the movie sitting in a sniper's post over Venice Beach, seated at the controls of a long-range machine gun with telephoto lens, which he occasionally uses to pick off people on the beach, when the film's narrative demands it. The rest of the time, he both deals and takes Fluid

Karma, an illicit psychedelic drug, manufactured by the mad scientist's company and used in Army trials on unwitting soldiers. Fluid Karma is injected by a syringe into the neck, and it is supposed to promote both telepathy and transcendent visions.

Probably the high point of the film is when we actually get to see one of these visions. The sequence is a sort of music video, in which Timberlake/Abilene, under the drug's influence, dances and lip-synchs to the Killers' "All These Things I've Done," stumbling about in a blood-stained T-shirt, flipping his dog tags to the repeated line "I've got soul, but I'm not a soldier," and drinking beer and pouring it over his head like a frat-boy party dude — all the while surrounded by a bevy of Busby Berkeley-esque nearly-identical women wearing skimpy nurses' uniforms as they gyrate and kick their legs. Timberlake, here as everywhere else in American pop culture today, displays a charisma that seems incompatible with, and yet that somehow arises seamlessly out of, his bland-as-white-bread, blue-eyed-soul persona. His Killers-inspired hallucination is at once utterly depraved, and yet also oddly impersonal, as well as being 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. Let the forces of the cosmos stream through you, and you will find yourself channeling chintzy advertising specials and reality shows. Which is not to say that such material is devoid of impact. 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. Teetering on a precipice without actually falling over; or better, falling over but never finishing falling over, never quite hitting the ground.

What I have just been trying to say about the Timberlake music video scene applies to the movie as a whole: it is utterly hallucinatory, and yet it possesses at the same time a sort of flatness, or lack of resonance, something that is extremely claustrophobic. It is as if the film were always holding something back, or running repeatedly through a holding pattern, like an airplane circling the airport but never landing. Timberlake/Abilene repeatedly tells us that we are watching the end of the world, and that this end is coming (in a reversal of T.S. Eliot), not with a whimper but with a bang. But this end is repeatedly deferred. We hear of tidal drag causing the earth's rotation to slow down, and of rifts in the spacetime continuum. But it is never clear how these apocalyptic events are manifested in the media flow that proclaims and amplifies them. Kelly strongly suggests that even nuclear holocaust, World War III, and the institution of a totalitarian police state do not much interfere with life as usual. People are still partying and drinking, filling the boutiques and cafes of Venice Beach and Santa Monica. The July 4th celebration with which the film concludes involves not only fireworks, and partying among the rich and powerful on Wallace Shawn's "mega-zeppelin," but also gun battles between "neo-Marxist" guerrillas and the police on the streets of downtown Los Angeles. But these latter only add to the general sense of carnivalesque release, of the sort that we are all too used to gawking at on TV. (And even the people who are there, in the streets, act in the full knowledge of being on TV). Even when the promised apocalyptic bang finally comes, in the last few minutes of the film, it seems weirdly anti-climactic, if only because we are all too familiar with seeing disaster footage on TV. Seann William Scott

apparently becomes the Messiah, taking over a role that should have, by right, gone to The Rock; and Justin Timberlake is his John the Baptist.

Southland Tales is both infinitely diverse and expansive, and yet at the same time oddly claustrophobic, because of the way that all of its crazy tangents, detours, irrational cuts, and meta-fictional leaps are all enclosed within the self-validating feedback loop of its multimedia bubble (the network, the Net, the communications infrastructure, what have you). This claustrophobia is what gives the film its compulsive power. The narrative is filled with conspiracies and rumors of conspiracy, with plots and schemes that go nowhere, or that implode upon the schemers and plotters themselves, and with paranoid and apocalyptic premonitions that have their effect precisely *as* premonitions, rather than on account of what they actually foresee or prophesy. In the course of his voiceover narration, Timberlake/Abilene incessantly quotes from the Book of Revelations; only in such a way that it becomes impossible to tell which are the powers of light and which the powers of darkness. The Book of Revelations is not so much a guide to the final days, as it is a funhouse-mirror roadmap of the actually existing mediasphere. Everyone in the film is under surveillance by somebody else, and is being plotted against by somebody else. The excesses of the Security State are matched by the blind, grandiloquent self-delusions of everybody who is a subject of that State, or a self-declared enemy of that State. The only characters more or less free from this grandiloquence are the disfigured Timberlake/Abilene, and the befuddled amnesiacs played by The Rock and by Scott.

Grandiloquence and amnesia, and a continual sense of performing for an audience that one desperately invokes, but that one cannot actually see are all parts of the model of subjectivity that *Southland Tales* presents to us. We are probably all familiar by now with the description of postmodern subjectivity as the experience of oddly impersonal fluxes of affect, flows that traverse me much more than they can be said to be “mine.” You can find such descriptions in Jameson, in Deleuze/Guattari, in Baudrillard, in Lyotard, and in others, dating back to the 1970s (or, perhaps, even to certain aspects of McLuhan in the 1960s). These thinkers are all vastly different, of course, in how they describe the phenomenon, and the (positive or negative) value they place upon it; but still it’s a thread that can be followed through all of them. *Southland Tales* does not expound such a theory, so much as it takes it for granted and explores its consequences. Indeed, the movie takes it as a self-evident axiom that this is the *only* form of subjectivity that one can even imagine. Within it, however, we get a whole series of fluctuations and hesitations, and back-and-forth negotiations.

For instance, the Rock’s character, Boxer Santaros, is amnesiac and literally beside himself (we ultimately learn that this amnesia is the effect of space/time displacement, together with the murder of his “other” self). Apparently he is a rich and famous Hollywood star with Republican Party connections (as The Rock himself more or less is in “real life”). But he doesn’t remember any of this, which means that, although everybody else 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 feels like a fictive role, and his only possible mode of being is to imagine himself into such a role. No wonder he 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 having read it. The Rock gives a brilliant performance as such a performer — you can see him trying on the various roles, being touched

by fear and anxiety and surprise, and above all 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 such personal memories? Boxer Santaros' performative, or improvisational, simulation of interiority is one model of subjectivity in *Southland Tales*; Pilot Abilene's odd, soft-spoken cool, and toned-down but ecstatic nihilism is another; Krysta Now (the porn starlet played by Sarah Michelle Gellar), with her business plan, her self-imposed instrumentalization of pleasure, her immediate reduction of feeling to self-conscious enactment, offers another. These are all *types*; and Kelly's attempt to typologize the sorts of "subjective expression" that are generated and enabled within the overriding multimedia flow is one main reason for the meandering length of his narrative.

I'll stop here, though I feel that I could go on indefinitely, because *Southland Tales* is so rich and convoluted, at the same time that (and precisely because) it pursues its vision of chaos and dread and media flow with such a monomaniacal intensity. Booed at Cannes in 2006, and both a critical and box-office disaster in 2007, the film obviously has not found its niche, nor found its cult, nor even made the sort of negative impact that would qualify it as a Cultural Event on the order of all the things that it narrates. I'm inclined to think that this is simply because the film is *too* prophetic: which is also to say, too real, too close to the actuality of which it is a part and which it anatomizes and mirrors, to be *receivable* at this point in time. The most alien messages are the ones that point out clearly what is staring us in the face. All the more so, in that such messages can have no sense of detachment, no critical perspective, to provide a justification for what they say. *Southland Tales* declines to exempt itself in the slightest from the overall situation that it describes; it declines even to overtly *criticize* that situation, as this would mean having to step outside it, as well as because simply presenting it, in its own compulsive mirroring and feeding back of itself, is already more than enough. Kelly's film is too weird to be taken up by a mainstream audience; but also too mainstream, too much a part of the so-called mainstream, to please viewers and critics who are looking for either visionary, experimental formalism, or an informed oppositional politics. It also explodes the very being of cinema (including experimental cinema) so slyly and casually that it unavoidably offends most cinephiles. It immerses us in the present, in the Now, relentlessly and without release. (It even makes a joke of this valuation of the Now, in the person of Gellar's character, Krysta, who takes on the last name "Now" because she is so doggedly interested in freedom and sexual gratification Now: not in the future, or tomorrow, or in ten minutes, but right Now). This immersion in the Now is what makes *Southland Tales* such a brilliantly futuristic film. (Krysta even remarks, at one point, something to the effect that futurists now think the future will be much more futuristic than they had previously believed). It is because it speaks in and to the Now that *Southland Tales* cannot be received now, but must look to the future for its reception. Combining irony and prophecy, it is at once too ironic for its meanings to be acceptable, and yet too earnest and visionary for the kind of ironic acceptance that we otherwise revel in.