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AMBIENT AND MULTILAYERED SOUND DESIGN OF CHAOS AND PARANOIA IN *SOUTHLAND TALES* (2006)

Abstract: The article elaborates on sound design in American science-fiction film *Southland Tales* (2006) directed by Richard Kelly. *Southland Tales*' soundtrack may be considered inventive as it influences the tone of the film to a large extent and, thus, functions as a narrative device. I argue that it employs multilayered and ambient sounds so as to express the chaotic and complex atmosphere of the post-Bush American society. The analysis focuses on the characteristics of sound design in *Southland Tales*, namely the use of ambient music and multiplicity of sound layers. Next, it demonstrates in what ways the sound design in *Southland Tales* allows for interpreting the film as a satire. Moreover, the essay draws critical attention to the voiceover as a device which contributes to the emotionless and paranoid atmosphere of the film which would not be so emphasized if it were not for the sound.

Key words: soundtrack, cinematic sound design, film sound design, *Southland Tales*, Richard Kelly

Introduction – *Southland Tales* - Indie but Pop

Southland Tales is the second feature film directed by Richard Kelly, who is best known for *Donnie Darko* – a cult indie movie that combines psychological drama with science fiction elements. Similarly to *Darko*, *Southland Tales* is a movie that is difficult to classify in terms of its genre (Hoberman, 2006; 239) as it is an “ambitious fusion of comedy, drama, dystopian science fiction, and music” (Deming, n.d.). It features an array of Hollywood actors that are playing “a subversive version of themselves and their celebrity image” (Riesman, 2013, n.p.). But the fact that Dwayne Johnson as an amnesiac Hollywood actor and Sarah Michelle Gellar as a porn star are here “cast against type” (Shaviro, 2010; 67) is only one of the factors that seem to frustrate the expectations of the audience concerning this movie. An

incomprehensible stream of sounds and images expressing the post-9/11 atmosphere of surveillance, *Southland Tales* may be regarded as “post cinematic” in both form and content (Shaviro, 2007). In addition, *Southland Tales* is abundant in allusions to the Book of Revelation, Robert Frost, T.S. Eliot, Philip K. Dick, *Mulholland Drive*, Elton John’s “Levon,” and more with no apparent reason (Cook-Wilson, 2015; n.p.). Despite its intertextuality and promising cast, this convoluted, delirious, and, to some extent, experimental movie was a flop at box office and received almost entirely negative reviews. For instance, Orndorf describes it as a “mess, gonzo, unsettling, semi-coherent, barnstorming” but at the same time states that it is “near-masterpiece,” “a dense movie, labyrinthine, pain-stakingly plotted” (Orndorf, 2007; n.p.). Interestingly, Reeves on his blog *Scriptshadow* writes about ten screenwriting mistakes to avoid in reference to *Southland Tales* since, according to him, this film is “a disaster pretty much on every level” (Reeves, 2013; n.p.). Nevertheless, some of the characteristics regarded by Reeves as flaws – badness, different versions of the movie or intertextuality – are the features that can elevate this film to a cult status.¹

When *Southland Tales* is discussed not as a potential Hollywood blockbuster but rather a transmedia project,² the film can be considered unique and experimental. Hoberman even called it “a visionary film about the end of times” (“Code Unknown”, 2006; n.p.). *Southland Tales* is innovative in terms of its incoherence but observant viewers will notice that such a convoluted plot is employed not without reason.

This innovation applies to the film’s sound as well. It plays a significant role not necessarily in the construction of the plot – it has a supporting function in the storytelling, which is not an unusual practice – but it is able to modulate the overtones of the film and how it can be interpreted. As the cast in *Southland Tales* is playing a “subverted deconstruction of their celebrity persona on some level,” then, there might be some “deconstruction of what soundtrack is and how it can be tackled, maybe this soundtrack is something completely different that can be expected of a soundtrack” (Riesman 2013, n.p.).

Aim and structure of the essay

In this article I am going to describe the use of sound design in *Southland Tales* as a narrative device which has the potential of influencing the whole

¹ The authors of Cultographies, a website devoted to cult film, distinguish several elements of cult movies with regard to film’s anatomy, consumption, political economy, and cultural status. Cult films are said to “transgress common notions of good and bad taste, and they challenge genre conventions and coherent storytelling” (Cultographies.com) and this is exactly what Reeves condemns and what *Southland Tales* does.

² There appeared three comic books before the release of the movie. In addition, similarly to *Donnie Darko*, an interactive website was launched as a part of promotional campaign.

perception of the film. In other words, I am interested in investigating the ways in which soundtrack “becomes up-front central, and weaves together and makes coherent what otherwise might appear to be an utterly random stream of images” (Shaviro, 2007, n.p.). What I aim to establish here is that the chaotic and almost incomprehensible sound in *Southland Tales* does not play the expected supporting role in the film but, quite the contrary, it is able to reflect how today’s world is constructed. This function of sound goes beyond interpreting film sound only as in relation to the film plot. Thus, sound represents not only the atmosphere emerging from *Southland Tales* plot but also the disorganized and uncontrollable reality in which there are numerous sources of information and media outlets. To explain this, I will describe *Southland Tales* as “multiple” in terms of sound layers, levels of interpretation, and types of media in which it appears. Secondly, the article focuses on how sound in *Southland Tales* reflects the atmosphere of state surveillance and allows for interpreting the film as a satire. Thirdly, I will describe the voiceover as one of the most important sound layers in this film that contributes to the overall impression concerning film’s sound. Next, I will elaborate on the ambient character of sound in *Southland Tales* as a quality that changes the overtone of the film. Finally, the essay provides analyses of three selected scenes from the film: the opening sequence with the toy-soldier with the multiple layers of sound, the scene with American National Anthem, and Pilot’s Abilene’s drug hallucination presented by means of post-cinematic, music video aesthetics.

Convoluting film plot reflected in the soundtrack

To those who are not familiar with three graphic novels released before the film, *Southland Tales* begins in media res. The audience see a prologue which is a fragment of a family video footage presenting the celebrations of the Independence Day, 2005, in a Texas neighborhood. At some point a sound of a nuclear explosion is heard and the mushroom cloud is visible from the distance. Then, there is a television news footage summarizing last three years. The World War III has already started. Due to the blockade of the Strait of Hormuz, the USA is seeking alternative fuel sources. The German company run by Baron Von Westphalen (Wallace Shawn) offers a solution to the problem of oil and gas shortages in the form of fluid karma. The side effect of acquiring this fuel is the fact that it changes the motion of Earth which turns out to have disastrous effects. In addition, fluid karma used as a liquid is a drug that causes hallucinations. It is tested on American soldiers in Iraq, who after a dose of it, become telepathic and can see into the past and the future. Meanwhile, U.S. residents are under constant surveillance as the Republican government has launched the monitoring facility called USIDent. A group of left-wing activists calling themselves Neo-Marxists is the only opposition that boycotts the Republican

institutions of public control. The plot in *Southland Tales* revolves around three main characters: Boxer Santaros a.k.a. The Rock – an action film star with a bout of amnesia married to a daughter of a Republican senator; Krysta Kapowski a.k.a. Krysta NOW – a porn star having an affair with Santaros (she is an aspiring business woman and has her own reality show, pop music single “Teen Horniness Is Not a Crime,” and an energy drink); and Ronald Taverner (Seann William Scott), a police officer struggling to track down his own identity. Pilot Abilene (Justin Timberlake), a mutilated war veteran is the narrator and helps the audience navigate the convoluted story. He refers to T.S. Eliot’s “Hollow Men” but in an inverted version: “This is the way the world ends/This is the way the world ends/This is the way the world ends/Not with a whimper, but with a bang” since *Southland Tales* is a story about the end of the world. *Southland Tales* is a science fiction dramedy which, by introducing such elements as time travel and fluid karma, reflects the delirious atmosphere of the Bush-era America.

Features defining sound design in *Southland Tales*

What characterizes *Southland Tales* is its multiplicity in terms of levels of interpretation, sound layers, and types of media through which the story is conveyed. Firstly, it is a film that is multileveled in terms of meaning which is reflected in the movie’s sound. It features multiple sound levels where sound does not correspond to what is seen on the screen. For instance, the viewer may see an image but hear a sound which is connected to it but belongs to the past or future, or some other place – there are temporal and spatial relations between sounds in “real” time. Usually in film there are no more than three layers of sound that appear concurrently and when they do appear, they usually all belong to the same idea of “now” – there may be a dialog, some sort of a Foley sound, and non-diegetic music but they all refer to that particular scene in terms of spatial and temporal relations. In *Southland Tales* there are multiple layers of sound that interfere with one another and may create their own temporal and spatial planes.

Secondly, *Southland Tales* is multilayered not only in terms of meaning but predominantly with regard to the sound production. In the movie multiple sound layers are not necessarily cohesive but they are coexistent. *Southland Tales* features digitally processed, multitrack sound. The diegetic sounds of television footage clash with non-diegetic tracks composed by Moby. The complexity of multiple sound layers enhances the narrative but in an unconventional way. The use of multiplicity in terms of sound layers creates a special multimedia effect where more than one thing happens concurrently, for instance, on a television screen. Most viewers may not notice the simultaneity of such layers as ambient tracks by Moby, the voiceover,

dialogs, environment noise, television footage, radio broadcasts, sounds of nature³ but when the film is more listened to than watched, several layers may emerge at the same time. Sounds in *Southland Tales* fill all spaces that are not occupied by the story, and the other way around – the semi-coherent plot seems to be immersed in the ambient, digitally modified soundscape.

Thirdly, *Southland Tales* is both “multimedial” and “transmedial” in terms of the distribution of the story. *Tales* is told in multiple media forms: a movie, graphic novels, and interactive websites. Three different media convey the story in which there is another group of media-outlets, namely television and radio. Therefore, in the film it is all about the media and “NOW,” as brilliantly noticed by Krysta Now. Various media are shuffled here and in every media outlet, except the graphic novels, sounds cannot pass unnoticed. Thus, it seems to be impossible not to mention this omnipresent component of *Southland Tales*. Sound here contributes to the effect of state surveillance and media ubiquity since it records, broadcasts, hears, modifies,⁴ and, to some extent, is more powerful than most characters. Sound can be altered, remixed, cut out – all these functionalities can be used to convey the truth, or suppress it, or, in other words, to affect and influence the story.

Sound in *Southland Tales* is also of great significance because it allows for interpreting the film as a political satire, not only due to the character of Boxer Santaros as a pastiche of Arnold Schwarzenegger (Howard, 2007).⁵ Film sound contributes here to illustrating the issue of constant electronic surveillance since the characters are often listening to various types of sound recordings. It metaphorically echoes 9/11 attacks⁶ and Bush’s presidency. *Southland Tales* can be read as a dark satire of contemporary life. According to Kelly, the film “reflects being disturbed”: “The whole film was my long-simmering response to 9/11 and response to the anxiety of terror and the terrorist threat and trying to make a big piece of satire that would be comfort food in light of the terrorist

³ Thunders, the sound of the water in the fountain, or oceanic sounds.

⁴ Cyndi Pinziki’s voice is digitally modified.

⁵ The Rock may be viewed as a pastiche of Arnold Schwarzenegger since Boxer Santaros is an actor involved in politics that married a daughter (Mandy Moore) of a conservative senator (Holmes Osborne). The ex-governor of California is a well-known movie star who married a niece of President John F. Kennedy. Moreover, Santaros and Kapowski created the script titled “The Power” with the protagonist named Jericho Cane, which is a direct reference to *End of Days* (1999) movie where the main character is played by Schwarzenegger.

⁶ Erykah Badu (neo soul African American singer) in her song “Twinkle” appearing on “New Amerykah Part I: 4th World War” album uses comparable devices to tell a similar, sad, political story with even stronger overtone. *New Amerykah* is a concept album with sociopolitical themes which reflects post-9/11 worldview. In the track “Twinkle” there are similar synthesizer sounds and some digital glitches. Badu’s song expresses the feeling of paranoia just like *Southland Tales* does. What is worth noting, the speech used in Badu’s track is an adapted version of “I’m as mad as hell” speech from the film about television entitled *Network* (1976).

threat. That's what the film is intended to be for people" (Riesman, 2013, n.p.). Moby's ambient tracks contribute to the aforementioned effect of being restless, uneasy about the future. Since sounds appearing in the cable television news footages are multilayered and often conflicting, they create an unsettling atmosphere. Cook-Wilson in the article for *Inverse* states that "the simplest and least inaccurate way to explain this movie away is calling it a document of Bush-era paranoia. There are surveillance cameras and CCTV screens in nearly every scene" (Cook-Wilson, 2015; n.p.). This Orwellian political world emerges not only in visuals but also sounds as surveillance cameras record not only images.

Moreover, the audience can interpret the film as a satire of contemporary show business and Los Angeles celebrity lifestyle to a large extent thanks to the soundtrack. Krysta knows that in order to maintain her position in the business she needs to become some sort of Paris Hilton and record a song with a silly music video. In today's show business, the lack of talent no longer stops an individual from becoming a music star. The voice can be digitally enhanced to such an extent that everyone can be a singer. In the single "Teen Horniness Is Not a Crime" Krysta sounds like one of the Britney Spears-like, bubble gum pop stars who gained celebrity status without any musical talent.

The significance of the voiceover

One of the most important elements in *Southland Tales* soundtrack is the voiceover that serves functions different from those in traditional Hollywood. Voiceover narration is defined by Kozloff as "oral statements, conveying any portion of a narrative, spoken by an unseen speaker situated in a space and time other than that simultaneously being presented by the images on the screen" (5). There are different types of voiceover narration where a distinction between the third person and first person narration is the most common, yet it is not as precise as Genette's distinction into "heterodiegetic" and "homodiegetic" voiceovers (Kozloff, 1989; 6). Traditionally, the first-person commentary sound is more personal and emotional as opposed to the objective, omniscient third-person narration. First-person narration creates the effect of storytelling, similar to the one present in literature. Whereas omniscient and omnipresent third person narration offers wider possibilities in terms of conveying the story, it is used less often than homo-diegetic voiceover (Kozloff, 1989; 72).

The voiceover is one of those sound layers that appears relatively often in *Southland Tales* soundtrack. Pilot Abilene, apart from being an on-screen character, is an off-screen first-person narrator who provides the audience with backstory information and readings from the Book of Revelation as well as the poetry of Robert Frost and T.S. Eliot, and evokes various characters' states of minds (Shaviro, 2010; 82) from an offshore gun turret. The narrator's voice is

rather flat and impassionate which makes it different from a typical first person narrator or “God-like” (Kozloff, 1989; 82), hetero-diegetic voiceover. Abilene’s narration seems to play on this binary distinction. In addition, what makes *Southland Tales* an unusual film in terms of its voiceover use is the fact that even though the film is a satire, there is no noticeable irony in Pilot’s voice.

The use of Book of Revelation as a part of the voiceover adds new meanings to both the Apocalypse of John and the film. The fact that the biblical prophecy presents kaleidoscopic imagery, the meaning of which is difficult to decipher, makes it similar to the storytelling in *Southland Tales* as the film shows a myriad of references and symbols that overflow the narrative. The impassionate tone of Timberlake’s readings suggests that the end of the world is precisely “at hand,” or even it is happening right now. It allows for interpreting the apocalypse in modern contexts as the reality presented in the film is not much different from today’s world. Pilot Abilene’s storytelling may thus be interpreted as the voice of the prophet⁷ who is observant and knows more than other characters, yet he is a part of their world.

The voiceover in *Southland Tales* does not necessarily lead the viewer through the film and explain the narrative.⁸ This voice here has a certain atmospheric value in a sense that it deepens the feeling of paranoia emerging from the narrative. Moreover, “while the electronic music modulates our mood, the voiceover makes connections between layers and levels of imagery that otherwise could not emerge” (Shaviro 2007). The voiceover is used not because it seems to be more convenient to describe certain elements of the narrative using words than to show them on the screen. In the case of *Southland Tales*, the voiceover narration replaces what actually cannot be shown by means of the visuals. In other words, 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 (Shaviro 2007).

It is worth noting that during the party on the Mega Zeppelin a new type of the voiceover appears, playing the role of a host. The TV commercial-like voice creates a bond cementing the overtone of the film. In contrast to Pilot Abilene’s emotionless voice, this voiceover is very enthusiastic while saying the lines like “Have a nice apocalypse” and “Ladies and gentlemen, this is the way the world ends,” which, again, creates a paranoid and delirious atmosphere but in a different way. At the same time, this incongruity between what is said and how it is delivered contributes to the satirical aspect of *Southland Tales*.

⁷ As opposed to omniscient and omnipresent God who looks at the end of the world from above.

⁸ It provides background information helping the audience navigate the story only at the beginning of the film.

The ambient noise as an inherent part of sound design

Another interesting feature of sound in *Southland Tales* is its ambient character. It was composed by Moby, an American DJ and producer, and has a distinctive ambient pulse. The electronically-generated music constitutes the majority of the soundtrack. It is sub-audible but permeates the entire film giving it a special kind of California, dreamlike vibe. Even though Moby's synthetic tracks fit so well in the narrative, only two out of five ("3 Steps" and "Tiny Elephants") were composed for the purpose of the film. The most remarkable piece from the soundtrack is the iconic "Memory Gospel" which appears during the Zeppelin party and comes from "Play – The B Sides" album released in 2004.⁹

According to Monger, "Moby is a master of minimalist melodic atmosphere, which is ultimately the glue that bonds this disparate collection of music" (Monger, n.d.; n.p.). Sounds in *Southland Tales* construct the specific tone of the film and create this special aura which is unsettling, ambient, and slow. There are no rapid, unexpected sounds. The soundtrack features hypnotic and repetitive but at the same time nostalgic sounds. The effect of such soundtrack is that it creates ambivalent reception as the film is concurrently relatively funny, as for the characters and their utterances, and sad in terms of music and the general overtone. Moreover, it seems that if Moby's tracks were excluded from the soundtrack, the pessimistic message of the film would not be so emphasized.

The way Moby modulates sound using synthesizers can be compared to Vangelis's approach to the sound of the future in *Blade Runner* (1982). Both producers aim at capturing the elusive atmosphere of futuristic Los Angeles by means of synth solos. Sounds are not only stretching over the surface of the narrative but, predominantly, fill the spaces that cannot be covered by dialogs, the voiceover, or visuals. Kelly in the interview for *Motherboard* motivates the choice of "this sort of melancholy, ambient score" as the way of creating "the heartbeat underneath this absurdity" (Riesman 2013, n.p.).

⁹ Album "Play" was released in 1998 and re-released in 2004 with the additional CD called "Play – B Sides." It was also released separately in a slightly changed version and it is where "Memory Gospel" appears. What is interesting, "Play" is the first album from which each song was used for commercial purposes (films, television shows and advertisements). Moreover, it is considered the most used-for-soundtrack album ever with over 600 different clips, commercials etc. Paradoxically, even though Moby's music is not present in music charts very often, his ambient and paradoxically noncommercial/non-mainstream sounds surround masses. The fact that Moby's albums, despite their non-mainstream appeal, are used very commercially, adds to the interpretation of *Southland Tales*. The film is about the ubiquity of media and its impact on the masses. This effect is achieved by means of music – people may not know the title of any of Moby's songs but might have encountered BMW, Nokia, or Intel ads in which Moby's music was present. Characters from *Southland Tales* are surrounded by sounds coming from various sources, some of which can actually be processed and made use of but most predominantly they contribute to the general soundscape, or rather soft noise) in the film.

As mentioned before, the presence of multiple sound layers is one of the characteristic features of *Southland Tales* sound, which is an unusual practice in Hollywood cinema. The most remarkable example of this multiplicity in terms of sound is the fragment starting after the explosion of a nuclear bomb up until the scene in which Krysta Now lies on a bed with Santaros. In this sequence several layers of sound are stretching over the soundtrack. In the beginning, in the news footage both television and radio sounds appear. They are overlapping, conflicting, and come from different directions, which may be viewed as an attempt to reflect the atmosphere of chaos among Americans who are overwhelmed by the information overload. The narrator introduces the audience into the story by providing political and social context. The manner in which the newscast delivered is entertaining for the viewers¹⁰ as it employs both visual and aural stimuli.¹¹ As noticed by Shaviro (2010), “the compositional logic of *Southland Tales* is paratactic and additive” (70). In this sonic kaleidoscope presented by Kelly one can hear a Spanish news report, the sound of a marching band, fragments from films, the voiceover, and numerous sound effects – all these are used to “mirror the fractured narrative world” (Cook-Wilson, 2015; n.p.).

The recurrent sounds from the battlefields are these elements of the soundtrack in the opening sequence that cannot go unnoticed. They appear alongside with split screens and represent US Army’s war operations in four countries: Iran, Syria, Afghanistan, and North Korea. Multiple windows show different images but they are all connected to the battlefield. “Multiplication and fragmentation of visual sources” (Shaviro, 2010; 79) is employed along with the multiple channels of sound distribution. For instance, the audience hears the sound of the helicopter coming from the left side, which corresponds to its image in the bottom left corner, and the sound of a bomb explosion on the right. Sounds are distributed unevenly not only in terms of their localization but also volume. They are overlaying one another, yet it is possible to determine their source. The stereophonic sound creates an illusion of multi-directional audible perspective that represents the WW3 in a more “real” way as it takes place concurrently on a number of fronts. On the other hand, this sonic environment is “more real than real” as no one is able to hear the sounds coming from four different spatial planes at the same time. As apparently noticed by Kelly, television offers such an opportunity. Although easily detectible, all sounds merge into one war soundscape that could have never taken place.

¹⁰ Thus, the term “infotainment” may be used in reference to how multimedia feed is employed in the movie.

¹¹ For instance, the image of elephants mating correlates with the sound they make as well as the soft harp sound alongside with the image representing Congress structure. It is supposed to show that the Republicans gained majority in both Houses of Congress since the elephant is a symbol of the Republican Party (Nix).

Sound effects used in this fragment most likely were not recorded for the purpose of *Southland Tales* film but they come from a library of samples and underwent numerous modifications. Those “war sounds,” as they may be categorized, are no longer “real” in such a way that they do not correspond with the exact image they are supposed to represent. They only simulate sounds of the war. That is why the concept of “simulacrum” coined by Baudrillard can be used in reference to *Southland Tales*’ sound, where the distinction between reality and representation vanishes. Moreover, the French philosopher in his book *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* claimed that the conflict did not take place as it was created by media and public opinion . Similarly, in *Southland Tales* it is media that present the images of “war on terror” to the audience.

The stylistic sound textures of the opening scene

Yet another important element of the soundtrack in the opening sequence is the sound accompanying the image of a G.I. Joe toy crawling on the Venice Beach boardwalk. First of all, the audience can hear the mechanic sound that the toy makes while crawling and shooting. This is accompanied by some sort of a sonic flashback from a news report from the past about the critically wounded Private Abilene. Immediately after the recording, the voice of Pilot Abilene (Justin Timberlake) reading the Book of Revelation appears. Finally, the viewers can see the character reading while sitting on an offshore gun turret. Abilene’s soft and low voice is contrasted with the sound of the turret changing its position. Shortly after Timberlake finishes reading, the audience hears his voice again – this time in the role of the narrator of the story. He repeats the inverted version of T.S. Eliot’s poem: “This is the way the world ends/This is the way the world ends/This is the way the world ends/Not with a whimper, but with a bang.” At the same time the viewers see the main character, Boxer Santaros, and, again, they hear the sound of three different news broadcasts coming one after another. In the background one can hear a man’s voice saying the words: “Some empires were built in times of war, others were built in times of peace.” All these sound layers are immersed in the atmospheric ambient music.

Finally, the sound excerpt from *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955) accompanying the narration about the porn star, Krysta NOW is one of the most memorable fragments appearing in this opening sequence. At the beginning of the passage, the audience hears the voiceover and the sound from the film by Aldrich but what they see is the tattoo of Jesus Christ on Boxer Santaros’s back. The fact that the sound of a woman breathing heavily from *Kiss Me Deadly* is presented alongside with the image of Christ and the voiceover saying that “someone has gotten under the skin” of Santaros creates a bizarre effect. The audience is directed to the source of the sound but, again, it is a sound from a movie watched by a porn star, Krysta

NOW. The voiceover is saying that Santaros and Krysta created a screenplay for a movie and, as the sound of a breathing woman remains audible, the audience may think that it is a porn film. This interesting play on sounds and images shows the power of those two inseparable elements in every film. Sound deprived of vision may evoke completely different connotations than intended. It turns out that it is sound that influences the perception of the film to a great extent since the audience think of a porn movie, not horror or noir genre, when seeing the porn star smoking a cigarette accompanied by the sound of woman's deep breath.

The stylistic texture of the soundtrack in the opening sequence discussed above is not only multilayered, and as a result – sonically dense, but also elliptic. Ellipsis is a term used most often in reference to omitting some elements of the film plot or the special type of image editing but in *Southland Tales* it can be applied to the film's sound design. Sounds do not appear one after another in any fluent way but, in some way, jump from one place to the other both in time and space.

“Star Spangled Banner” in a science fiction film

Another fragment in which sound plays a significant role is the scene where American National Anthem is performed by a famous Latina singer, Rebekah del Rio¹² during the Zeppelin party. According to Stewart, Rio's version “seems like it might be better suited to a television series or some other more leisurely narrative medium” as it is “tonally inconsistent, bouncing carelessly between puzzlingly broad comedy and straight-faced earnestness, is no help in trying to parse its message and meaning” (“*Southland Tales*”). Rio provides solos in a string arrangement and her vision of the anthem is spooky and compelling. As “Star Spangled Banner” is rhythmically unpredictable, it allows for multiple interpretations and sonic alterations. Unlike the majority of national anthems, it is not so repetitive. That is why, del Rio had the ideal setting to demonstrate her vision of this composition. Rio's rendition of the “Star Spangled Banner” is authentic, patriotic, sad, and very serious in its weirdness. The anthem at the end of *Southland Tales* is the antithesis of the whole comedy aspect of the film. The anthem scene makes the audience realize how deep and serious actually this movie is. Rio's extremely patriotic version the anthem is something more than a national symbol especially in the light of 9/11 attacks or protests against Bush's immigration reforms from 2006. The first two lines of the anthem are sung in Spanish, which makes the audience relate Rio's performance on Zeppelin to the

¹² What is interesting, Rebekah del Rio is the same actress who performed the Spanish song “Llorando” in Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*. Howard (2007) argues that “the scene plays a similar role to the way Lynch used her in *Mulholland Drive*, where her Spanish cover of Roy Orbison's “Crying” also served as an emotional backbone to the film's climax” that blurs the line between “reality” and fiction within a feature film.

character of Martin Kefauver (Lou Taylor Pucci), a Latino hip-hop gangster afraid of going to war. The fact that the finale of Rio's performance is contrasted with the parallel scene of Martin's SUV ripping the ATM machine from the wall is not coincidental. This juxtaposition enables to notice the link between the characters of Rio and Martin as they share an identity of Latinos living in the United States in the Bush era. The connection between Rio and Martin, and their "Latin-ness" would not be so evident if it were not for the music. The anthem is a symbol relevant also to immigrants who want to feel safe in their country and do not support American "war on terror." Even though Americans are a multicultural nation with people of multiple identities, the anthem is a component that bounds them together and creates mutual identity even just for a while. Rio's non-schematic rendering of the anthem is extremely relevant to the interpretation of the whole film as it makes *Southland Tales* something more than just a satire about Hollywood life. Rio as a Latina woman singing the American National Anthem represents the contemporary U.S. citizen.

Music video embedded in the film

The third scene that is worth commenting upon in reference to the image-sound correlations is Pilot's Abilene's drug hallucinations presented in the form of a psychedelic music video. The scene with Private Abilene where he does the lip sync to "All These Things That I've Done" by the Killers very much resembles a music video in which the artists are "performing" without singing – they synchronize the movement of their lips to the lyrics of the song. In this particular fragment, Timberlake is wearing dog tags on his white, blood-stained T-shirt and is surrounded by a group of pin-up Monroe-like, attractive women. He is drinking beer and walks through the "Fire" Arcade. The scene resembles one-shot music videos, where the singer is directly addressing the audience,¹³ rather than a feature film where actors usually ignore the presence of the video camera. The fact that in Timberlake's hallucinatory vision there appear dancers wearing latex, nurse costumes can be compared to the frequent lack of realism in music videos. Also the use of theatrical, dry ice smoke on the ground and soap bubbles in the air contribute to this tacky, unreal effect. What emphasizes this drug-induced fantasy is the fact that near the end of the passage the dreamlike dance continues, whereas "the song fades from the soundtrack, to be replaced by Moby's low, ambient drone" (Shaviro, 2010; 84).

The fact that Kelly plays on the distinction between the-singer-lip-syncing and the-singer-singing makes viewers rethink how not only music videos but also motion pictures in general are made. In addition, seeing the character who is

¹³ At some point he even shows the audience his middle finger.

a singer (Justin Timberlake) and is not singing with his own voice breaks the viewers' sense of safe realism which is usually expected from a movie, even in the case of science fiction movies where this non-realism is accepted but from different elements of the film. In other words,

[t]he performance acts as a short music video as Timberlake directly addresses the audience through the personal song/performance, adhering to Andrew Goodwin's assertion that music video uses "double identity" with the singer simultaneously acting as "both the character in the song and the storyteller...This performance adds the third element of Timberlake's own music star persona. Although the music video aesthetic acknowledges Timberlake's pop stardom, the song and performance are in stark opposition to his music star image. (Wright, 2012)

Lip sync as something to avoid in music industry, albeit it is recently very popular in the form of lip sync battles, is emphasized in this scene. The disparity between the voice of the artist, known from outside-the-film, and what is heard on screen is unsettling but interesting for the viewers. "The disjunction between spatial presence and temporal anteriority reveals the artifice of representation and shatters the posited "unity" of the life event" (Wurtzel, 1992; 93). Here, the audience do not experience a live event but the impression is similar. The unity of performance is violated. Playing with audience's "comfort zones" and the feeling of unity seems to be one of the goals of both the director and the soundtrack producer. "The co-presence of the live and the recorded contribute to a potential crisis in our notion of a real that exists prior to representation" (Wurtzel, 1992; 94). This crisis occurs, for instance, when Timberlake stops lip syncing for a few seconds, even though the song with vocals proceeds.

Conclusion

Sound in *Southland Tales* goes far beyond its traditional functions since it adds new value of the film and allows for interpreting the film in broader contexts. It enhances the narrative in a different way than it is usually expected from a film sound. In *Southland Tales* the soundscape acts as an inseparable part of the narrative. It creates an invisible foundation that usually passes unnoticed. Sound in *Southland Tales* denies its non-presence, rejects the classical supportive function of sound and its subordination to the dominant code of the visual. By means of absurdity and lack of sense achieved via nostalgic, atonal, ambient and multilayered sound, *Southland Tales* tells a story about humanity, media, and politics more accurately than any other film before. Sounds add to this compilation of nonsense which actually makes sense and resonates long after they cease to exist.

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