DIRTY SAND

Beach Culture in Film Noir

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**"Come to Los Angeles! The sun shines bright,
the beaches are wide and inviting… It's paradise on earth!
Ha! That's what they tell ya anyway…"**

—Sid Hutchins, *HUSH-HUSH* magazine, October 1952

Developers started building hotels along the California shoreline in the 1880s, and within a generation beach culture was a robust business. With the rise of Hollywood, movies began exporting images of that culture around the world, and by the 1920s, the opulent resort hotels and sunny sands of Southern California had become a fixture in the popular imagination. As mass culture grew over the next 40 years, so did the image of California beaches as a kind of proto-hippie utopia. By the 1960s, the promise of sandy leisure and sensual indulgence implicit in all those pictures of half-naked suntanned teenagers splashing around in the Pacific had reached its fever pitch.

California was the place to be. Of course, like everything else in the 60s, by the end of the decade beach culture had taken a dark turn. One could argue that the day the Beach Boys started hanging out with Charles Manson, the beach would never be the same.

As is almost always the case when talking about the turmoil of the '60s, however, one can find the roots of discord reaching back much further. The images Hollywood produced of beach culture weren't always lovingly sunny, and, unsurprisingly, some of the most interesting—and, in some cases, downright subversive—images of California beaches are found in the noir films of the '40s and '50s. These films create an interesting link from the creation of the California myth in the '20s and '30s to its eventual souring in the '60s. In the stories and images supplied by these films, the dedicated purpose of the beach (fun in the sun) is inverted, and the Malibu milieu becomes a place of alienation and violence.

"Just take me down to the beach"

In noir, beach houses are often isolated. In 1954's *Loophole*, for instance, disgraced bank teller Mike Donovan (Barry Sullivan) follows the gang that has framed him for a robbery to Malibu's Westward Beach, where they are holed up in a beach house that seems stranded out at the end of the world. There are no joyful revelers in sight, just a desperate man confronting the thieves who have ruined his life.

The same Westward beach house from *Loophole* was used as the location of the actual end of the world in Robert Aldrich's *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955). Private eye Mike Hammer (Ralph Meeker) tracks a missing box of radioactive material to the cottage of murderous Dr. Soberin (Albert Dekker), only to discover that the doctor

Sand Storms: at left, Robert Mitchum and Jane Greer in an oceanside clinch from *Out of the Past*; at right, Dana Andrews wants to see if Linda Darnell will play beach ball in *Fallen Angel*

has been killed by the unstable Lily Carver (Gaby Rodgers), who wants to look inside the box. Before he can stop her, Carver shoots Hammer in the gut. He's able to get away just in time with the help of his secretary Velda (Maxine Cooper) while Carver, an atomic Pandora, opens the box and is engulfed in hellfire. As the cottage explodes, Hammer and Velda stagger down the desolate beach, their shadows stretching out before them in the glow of apocalypse.

Of course, this being noir, the isolation of the beach is often romantic; think of Mitchum and Greer sealing their obsession with a kiss on the beaches of Mexico in *Out of the Past* (1947). Sometimes, however, such romantic isolation turns dark. In *Fallen Angel* (1945), Eric Stanton (Dana Andrews) takes hash-house waitress Stella (Linda Darnell) under the boardwalk. It's a romantic spot with the waves slowly lapping in the distance, but as Stella talks earnestly of settling down, Stanton makes a cheap pass. When he doesn't take no for an answer, pressing himself on her literally as well as figuratively, Stella finally has to slap him to make him realize she's sincerely not interested in a sandy quickie. The filmmakers (led by director Otto Preminger) created a romantic tableau only to turn it sordid and sour with the pall of sexual violence.

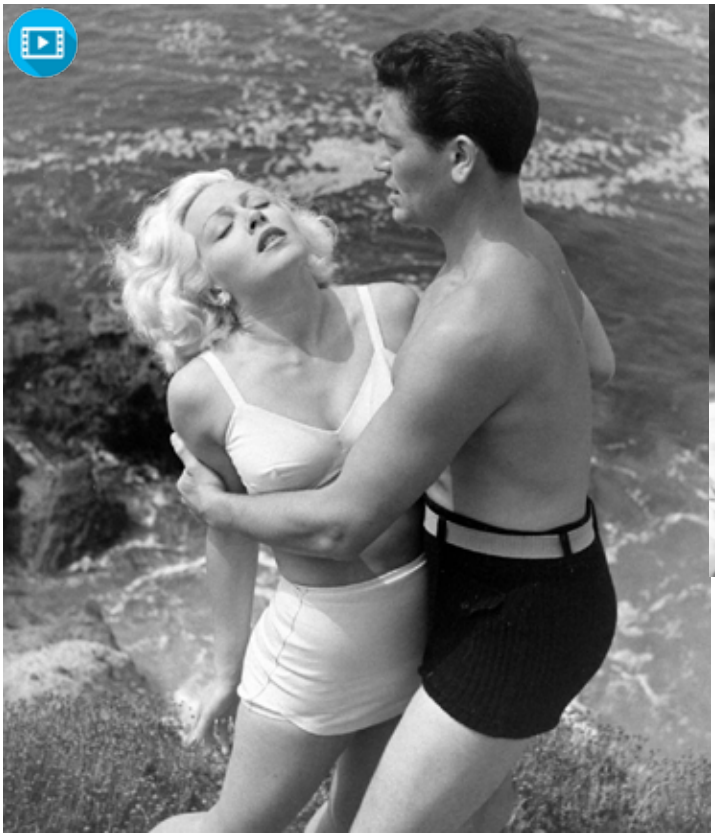
One of the most interesting uses of the inverted romantic beach locale is in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946), directed by Tay Garnett. While most of the grit in author James M. Cain's original novel has been MGM'd out of this adaptation, the beach scenes strike an interesting chord. Illicit lovers Frank Chambers (John Garfield) and Cora Smith (Lana Turner) have their first kiss after a nighttime splash at Laguna Beach. The film comes back around to the same spot after the lovers have killed Cora's husband and barely escaped imprisonment. Their crimes have left them bitter and suspicious, but Cora devises a plan that will reunite them:

Just take me down to the beach. We've been so happy there. Let's be happy again, just once more. And then I promise everything will be settled one way or another before we come back.

They go down to the beach and Cora suggests they swim out as far as they can. When they do, she tells Frank she can't go on, that he can either leave her or save her. He saves her, proving his love, but then the lovers' car crashes on the way home. Cora is killed, and Frank is sentenced to die for her murder.

One of the most interesting uses of the inverted romantic beach locale is in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* . . . Always at night, always isolated, the beach is, once again, dark and deserted. . . Between the rocks and lethal waves are the turbulent emotions of these two dangerous and foolish people.

The beach is the place where their illicit affair begins to take shape and where it renews itself. Always at night, always isolated, the beach is, once again, dark and deserted. In the establishing shots, cinematographer Sidney Wagner photographs Frank and Cora as shadowy isolated figures among rocky outcroppings. Between the rocks and lethal waves are the turbulent emotions of these two dangerous and foolish people. The late-night beach party scene in Nicholas Ray's *In a Lonely Place* (1950) uses the setting to tap violent emotions in a different way. Police detective Brub Nicolai (Frank Lovejoy) is investigating his old army buddy Dix Steele (Humphrey Bogart) for the murder of a young woman. Joined by Steele's girlfriend Laurel Gray (Gloria Grahame) and Brub's wife Sylvia (Jeff Donnell), they attempt to have a normal evening together, a respite from the tension of the investigation. The scene is interesting for the way it brings the juxtaposition of Brub and Dix into sharper focus. Good-natured Brub is in swim trunks, jogging in from a dip in the



Left: Lana Turner and John Garfield sink, swim, and sink again in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*; right: Humphrey Bogart and Gloria Grahame momentarily relax by the shore in *In a Lonely Place*

ocean, playfully joking with his wife. Dix, on the other hand, is wearing a turtleneck, sport coat, and shoes, complaining about the beach ("Acres and acres of sand, and all of it in your food") and acidly mocking Laurel as a typically greedy and uneducated "Hollywood dame." When Sylvia, overly comfortable in the balmy conviviality of the moment, slips up and reveals that Brub and his superior officer, Captain Lochner, secretly questioned Laurel the day before, Dix flies into a fury. He storms off, with Laurel running after him, and immediately gets into a nearly lethal brawl with another man. This is the turning point of the film, the moment when Laurel realizes that Dix is indeed capable of real violence. Maybe normal people can let down their guard and have a relaxing night at the beach, but Dix Steele can't. Behind his guard is only darkness and rage.

California Dreamin'

John Berry's *Tension* (1949) is surely one of the most subversive portrayals of California ever committed to film. Warren Quimby (Richard Basehart) is an ex-serviceman who manages a pharmacy in Culver City. While he mixes pills overnight (working 12-hour shifts five nights a week, the narration tells us), his good-for-nothing wife Claire (Audrey Totter) runs around with flashy dirtbags like Barney Deager (Lloyd Gough). When Claire decides to finally leave Warren, escaping with Deager to a beach house in Malibu, the jilted husband hatches a plan to murder his rival.

Warren first drives to Malibu to talk Claire into returning home. He finds Claire and Deager sunbathing on the sand. Audrey Totter (in a deliciously wicked performance) plays this moment in an intriguing way. Lying on a towel with her boyfriend when her husband shows up, she's scowling at the sand, wiping it off her hands, subtly annoyed. It's almost funny, in a way. She's already bored with the beach.

The confrontation between Warren and Deager is a reenactment of Charles Atlas bodybuilding ads: the little guy getting sand kicked in his face by a bully. (The filmmakers do an admirable job of making the scene work despite Basehart clearly being in better shape than Gough.) By the end, Warren is curled in a fetal position. He finally pulls himself up, stumbles through the sand to his car, and drives home with the ocean crashing along the shore behind him.

Once he maps out a plan to murder Deager (more in revenge for his beating than for Deager's stealing Claire), Warren returns to the beach with his friend Freddie (Tom D'Andrea) and goes through the motions of clearing the air, shaking hands with his rival, and declaring a truce. Thus, the beach, site of his public humiliation, becomes the centerpiece of his alibi. Later, he will return to the beach house at night to kill Deager. Brilliantly shot by cinematographer Harry Stradling Sr., the beach is now an almost spectral place with dark waves slapping the eerily deserted sand.

As would be expected from a film produced at MGM, *Tension* contrives a happy ending, but the overall portrait of California that it creates is deeply subversive. The Quimby marriage implodes despite all the promises of the Golden State as a postwar middle-class paradise. The pharmacy and soda counter—so central in Hollywood lore as the place where a pretty girl could be discovered and whisked off to fame and fortune—is portrayed as a 60-hour-a-week cage for Warren and an all-night pick-up stand for Claire. When he tries to interest her in a new house, she's contemptuous of the idea of moving to the safe and secure suburbs. All that leaves are California's world-famous beaches, but they're presented here as nothing more than an arena of humiliation and subterfuge, a place for layabouts, adulterers, and would-be murderers.

"You don't have much time to get out in the sun, do you?"

The best of the beach noirs made in the 1950s was undoubtedly director Richard Quine's brilliant *Drive a Crooked Road* (1954). The film stars Mickey Rooney as Eddie Shannon, a lonely mechanic who is tapped by a gang of thieves to be wheelman for a bank heist. After seeing Eddie moonlighting as an amateur race-car driver, the gang's leader Steve Norris (Kevin McCarthy) enlists his girlfriend Barbara (Dianne Foster) to seduce the little man and pull him into

Left: Audrey Totter and Richard Basehart bring their rocky marriage to the sandy shore in *Tension*; right: Mickey Rooney is the victim of Dianne Foster's seaside seduction in *Drive A Crooked Road*

the scheme. The plan works because even though Eddie is initially horrified at the idea of being part of a bank job, he's already desperately in love with Barbara. And love, rather than money, will lead to doom for everyone involved.

The beach setting here isn't incidental to the plot, it's an integral part of the story. The beach house the Norris gang is renting for the summer is the center of most of the important action, and the sunny milieu of the first half is a perfect counterpoint for the darkness of the film's second half. More importantly, the beach serves as the catalyst for some of the story's most significant revelations of character.

For example, Barbara first seduces Eddie by inviting him to the beach. "I go to the beach every chance I get. Just above Malibu… It's nice. Never too crowded." Looking him over, she observes, "You don't have much time to get out in the sun, do you?"

Eddie admits that he doesn't, but the next chance he gets he drives to the beach. The camera follows him as he cruises along the shore, families playing in the sand and surf. When he finds Barbara, she's lounging on a blanket with Norris. In their swimsuits, they're both impossibly tan and fit.

Eddie on the other hand is fully dressed. After Norris leaves to go for a run, Barbara asks Eddie, "Did you bring your trunks?"

"No," Eddie says, embarrassed, "I just came the way I am."

"Well, why don't you take off your shirt, anyway. The sun feels wonderful."

Eddie does as instructed, and soon, to his surprise, he and Barbara are having a nice time sitting in the sun and talking. When she begins to press him about why he showed up at the beach, trying to get him to admit that he likes her, he becomes embarrassed and retreats into silence.

"Better put your shirt back on," she tells him. "You're getting sunburned."

It's been a pleasant afternoon sharing a blanket with a beautiful girl, but as he's leaving Eddie breaks into a run, eager to escape the physical and emotional exposure of the beach.

Later, Barbara takes Eddie to a party at Steve's beach house and introduces him to a wide circle of friends. "Eddie," Steve tells him, "you have no idea how many friends you can make at the

A leering Zachary Scott makes waves with a pensive Joan Crawford in this oceanside scene from *Mildred Pierce*

beach." And, indeed, this promise of friendship is another part of the seduction of the lonely little guy.

As everything starts to go wrong, Quine and his cinematographer, Charles Lawton Jr., make the most of the setting. The sun goes down and the shadows come out. The sand becomes an impediment. At the end of the film, Norris chases Barbara across the beach and their steps are labored, a physical weight having descended on everything. And there's no more perfect image to capture the feeling of the beach noir than a bloodied Mickey Rooney staggering through the sand with a gun in his hand as waves crash on the soundtrack. The final shots of the film, with a dead body face down in the surf as the survivors cry and the cops close in, complete the transformation of the beach as a place of openness and light into the scene of a crime.

The End of the Beach Noir

The beach continued to pop up in noirs like *The Long Goodbye* (1973), *Chinatown* (1974), *Tequila Sunrise* (1988), and, more recently in *Drive* (2011) and *Inherent Vice* (2014). And, of course, the beach features prominently in the ultimate spoof of noir, 1998's *The Big Lebowski*. In a real sense, however, the '60s effectively ended the beach noir by undermining its central unstated theme: repression.

For a prime example of this theme consider the use of the beach in *Mildred Pierce* (1945). Newly single mother Mildred (Joan Crawford) is coaxed out to the beach and into a bathing suit (and later, we take it, into bed) by rakish playboy Monte Beragon (Zachary Scott). After they spend the weekend cavorting at his private oceanfront cottage, Mildred discovers that her youngest daughter has taken ill and has been dying the whole time, shrouding her sensual beach getaway in shame. "Where were you?" she's asked indignantly. Although Mildred has no reason to feel guilty, the guilt will nevertheless hang over her for the rest of the movie. A mother should be with her children, the film seems to say, not off having sex on the beach.

Poor Mildred is not alone in her shame. Consider for a moment how often the protagonist in a beach noir is overdressed and out of place. While everyone else in sight is comfortable with their bodies being on display, guys like Eddie Shannon and Warren Quimby are repressed, constricted. (One of the few scenes of noir protagonists on the beach in swimsuits comes in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, where their unclothing makes the same point, as if the film is chiding them, "You should have left your clothes on.")

The reason the beach was so often a place of danger and betrayal in the noir era was because it implied sex. And sex in these films threatens the protagonists, threatens them with exposure. To be exposed as a sexual being is to risk emasculation (like Eddie or Warren) or shame (like Mildred). In the '60s, open displays of sexuality would become more commonplace. In the beach noirs of the '40s and '50s, however, the repression of the era was in a constant tension with the sex and sensuality that was always just below the surface. ■