

The Beach
By Alex Garland

While reading *The Beach*, the emotion I felt most frequently was anger. Not because the book was bad—quite the opposite. I felt angry because this book is really good, and it seems to have been collectively forgotten by the literary world despite critical acclaim and commercial success upon its release in 1996. I only became aware of it myself after the release of the hit film *Ex Machina* in 2015, which was written and directed by Alex Garland. Before his directorial debut, he worked as a screenwriter for movies such as *Never Let Me Go*, *Sunshine*, and *28 Days Later*. And before *that*, he was a novelist, with three books to his name: *The Coma*, *The Tesseract*, and *The Beach*.

Trying to describe *The Beach* is a nightmare. The premise? A young man travels to Thailand, where he hears rumors of a secluded and mysterious beach inhabited by a select group of people who have almost completely cut themselves off from the outside world—and, of course, he immediately sets out to find them. But if you want to know the plot of *The Beach*, you're asking the wrong question. Almost nothing actually happens in this novel, and what does happen is virtually irrelevant. You should be asking about the mood, the tone, the setting, the structure, and the pop culture references.

The word that comes to mind is “hypnotic.” I deliberately read *The Beach* at a slow pace, because it simply didn't *feel* like anything else I'd encountered before; I wanted to soak in Garland's prose and hallucinatory world. There are certainly pop culture parallels—*Lord of the Flies* is an obvious reference point, and the characters explicitly invoke the sweat-sticky dream of *Apocalypse Now*. But if those aren't horror stories, they're at least *horrifying* stories, and I'm not entirely convinced that *The Beach* is meant to be horrifying (although it certainly slides in that direction during certain scenes).

The Beach is both fascinating and frustrating in that it is exceptionally difficult to pin down its central theme. Is it a critique of anti-civilization fantasies, or perhaps an assertion that no society is immune to entropy? Is it tongue-in-cheek, a riff on the way pop culture shapes, sculpts, and ultimately distorts the way we see the world? Or, perhaps, it's merely the story of a generation lost in limbo, to whom the Vietnam War is not a scar but an exotic fantasy, and to whom the internet and the Information Age is still just light leaking over the horizon before a sunrise. How do you find purpose in a world on the cusp of change? Who are you?

Garland plays with that collective fantasy we all have (or, I assume we do—maybe I'm the only one) of cutting ties with friends and family and striking out into the unknown, of traveling the world with hardly any possessions to our name and going where the figurative current takes us. He also plays with the Western mindset of perceiving the East not as its own place with its own people who deserve respect, but as a place where you go to become Cultured™, so you can brag to all your acquaintances about how worldly you are. But *The Beach* is not a mockery of Westerners, nor is it antagonistic to the reader. It's an impressively subtle bit of satire that never undermines the holism of the book.

It wasn't until I watched Danny Boyle's film adaptation of *The Beach* that I fully understood the magnitude of Garland's balancing act in the novel; he funambulates between seriousness and satire, realism and hyperbole, clarity and delusion with such exactitude that the illusion is never broken, the hypnotic spell never undone (the movie, on the other hand, topples over into the story's satirical and hyperbolic qualities, and the themes of the novel are blown so cartoonishly out-of-proportion that they lose any semblance of legitimate meaning—there are

few things are I disagree with more than the phrase “the book is always better,” but it’s true in this case). *The Beach* is a slippery, confounding work, a haunting piece of fiction which I have difficulty articulating why I like so much, so much that I’m angry more people haven’t read it. You’re missing out! Please read it, because I’d rather not be angry anymore.

Review by Aaron Larson