

Blu-Ray Review: Criterion Releases ‘Insignificance,’ ‘The Makioka Sisters’

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on July 2, 2011 - 7:00pm

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CHICAGO – The Criterion Collection is one of the greatest gifts to pure cinema buffs ever perpetuated. Founded in 1984, their mission is to sell “important classic and contemporary films,” and they do just that with there latest Blu-ray releases, Nicolas Roeg’s “Insignificance” and Kon Ichikawa’s “The Makioka Sisters.”

It is an interesting pair of films indeed, made within two years of each other. Ichikawa was near the end of a long and fruitful career, the Sisters film represented a late career comeback. Roeg was on his sixth film with his outsider status intact, Insignificance has the happenstance of catching a couple of movie stars near their influential end (Tony Curtis, Will Sampson), and a couple near the beginning (Gary Busey, Theresa Russell).

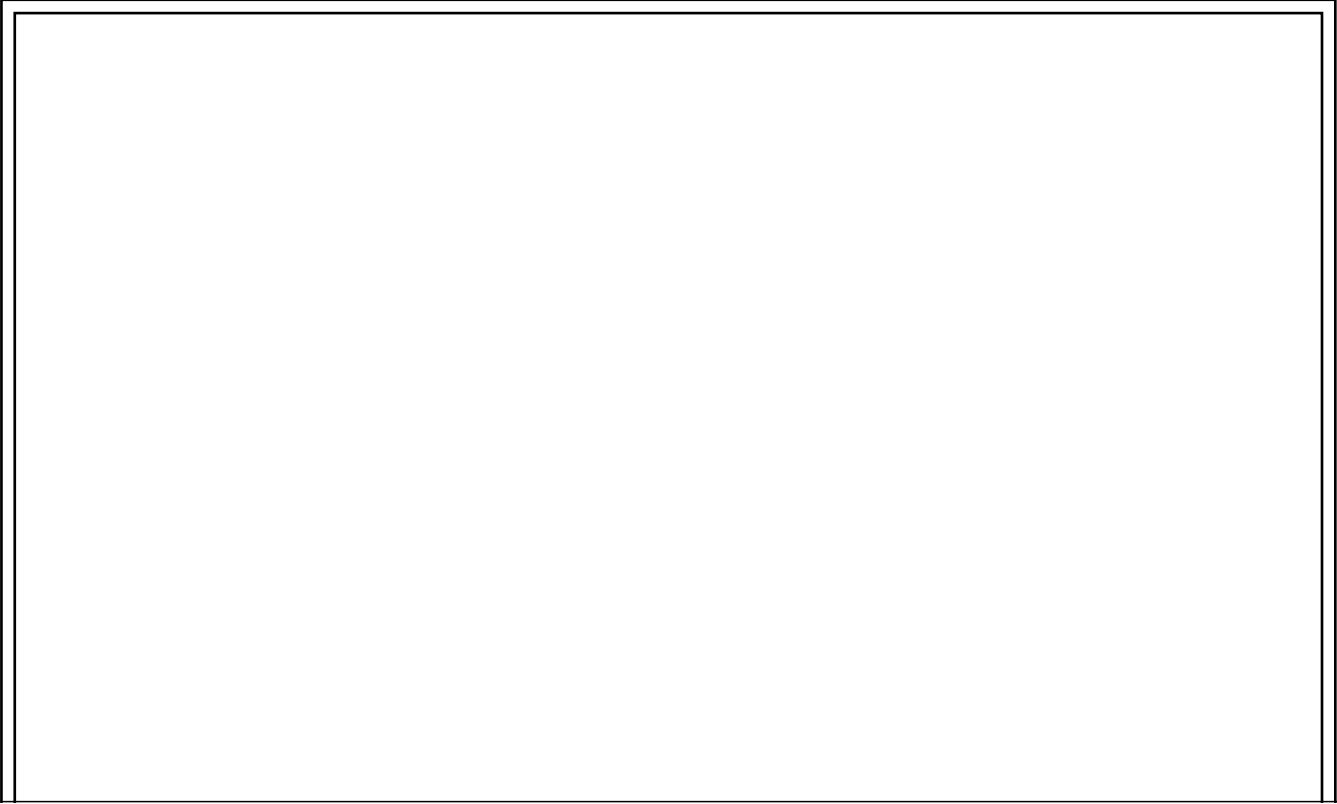
“Insignificance” (1985)

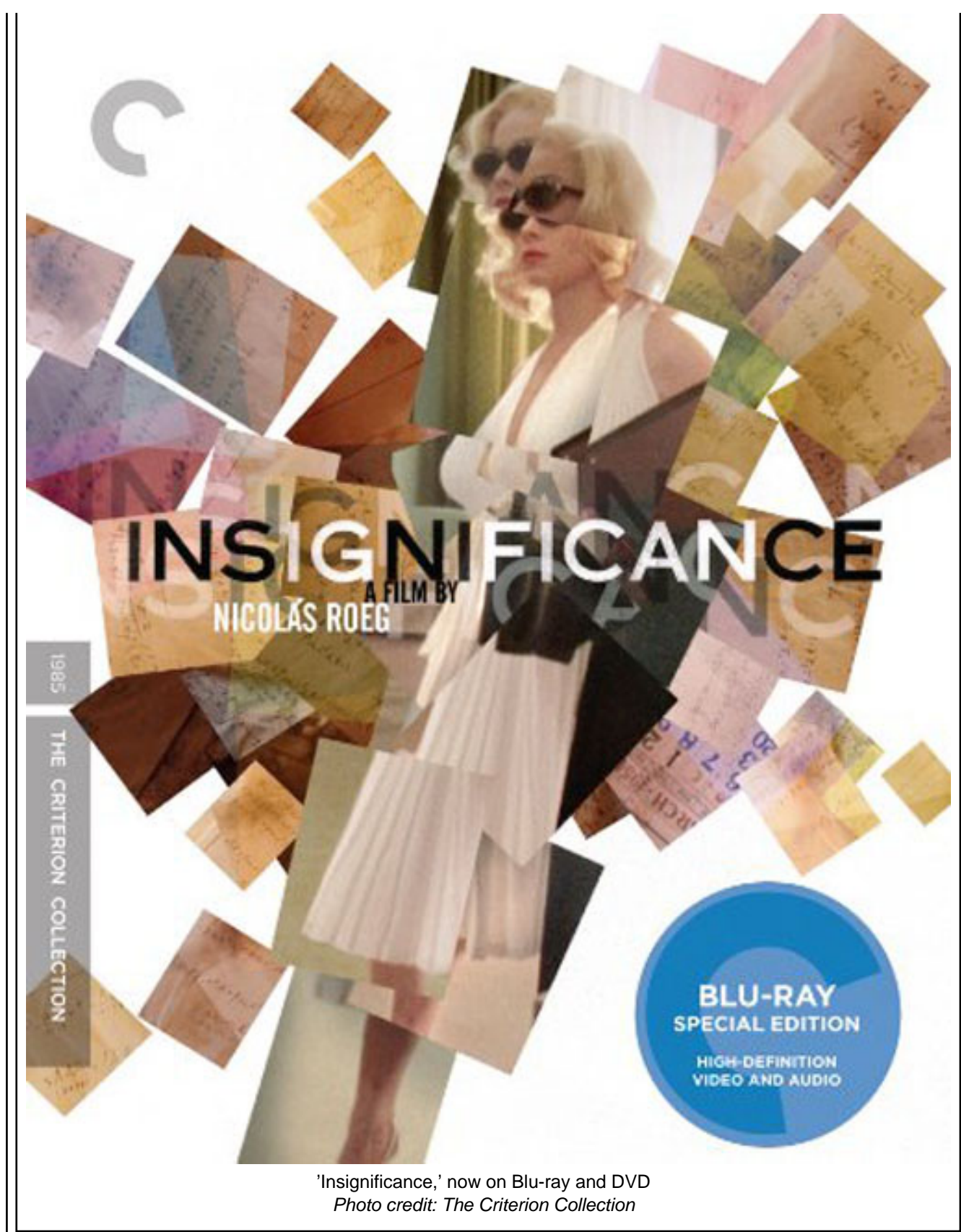
As brilliant a metaphor as ever been made about American celebrity obsession, Insignificance capped an amazing period for director Nicolas Roeg that began with “Walkabout” (1971). Framed in his characteristic quick cut and time shifting style, Insignificance presents the sin and the sinners in full 1950s glory, when the enemy was, as usual, ourselves.



The film focuses on four seminal representational figures from the mid-1950s, The Actress (Theresa Russell), The Professor (Michael Emil), The Senator (Tony Curtis) and The Ballplayer (Gary Busey), who bear an uncanny resemblance to Marilyn Monroe, Albert Einstein, Senator Joseph McCarthy and Joe DiMaggio. On a hot New York City night, The Actress is wrapping a scene on a public city street, similar to Monroe’s subway dress fly-up in “The Seven Year Itch.” The Ballplayer, her husband, watches and fumes from the sidelines.

Meanwhile, in a hotel across town, The Senator is threatening The Professor, whose life has had several encounters with “anti-American” activities. These threats causes the brilliant Prof to ponder his theories, one of which was the genesis for the nuclear bomb. The Actress is heading for the same hotel, she wants to seduce The Professor. In her way she is about to bring together the four elements that make up the ultimate confrontation, full of insignificance.





This is an impossible movie to logically describe, it is best experienced and absorbed. Theresa Russell has the role of her life channeling Monroe, creating a tribute and a full bodied character at the same time. Is she as yummy as Monroe as well? Yes. In a HollywoodChicago interview, [Russell said](#), [18] "Behind closed doors Marilyn was an invention of herself outside that persona, but inside she could be who she wanted to be, so that's how I chose to interpret it."

The other performers were also at the top of their games. It is really The Professor's story, and Michael Emil plays him with such a sweet perplexity it nearly breaks your heart. Gary Busey, before he was "Gary Busey," shows a vulnerable side to The Ballplayer, constantly opening packs of baseball cards, looking for his lost image. The great [Tony Curtis also commented](#) [19] on The Senator in a HollywoodChicago.com interview. "I had to become a good detective, because in searching that out I was able to find out what The Senator was like. And he was one mean motherf*cker."

Obviously the "Insignificance" of it all resides in the vagrancy of celebrity worship, wasting your time for the sake of others. In the stunning wrap-up to the sorrow within the film, that waste has consequences.

EXTRAS: Interviews with Nicolas Roeg and Producer Jeremy Thomas, and a short documentary on the making of Insignificance shot on the set. As in all Criterion Collection Blu-ray releases, a booklet with essays about the film.



"The Makioka Sisters" (1983)

Kon Ichikawa is not as well known as some of the other Japanese film masters (Kurosawa, Ozu), but he is very influential and recognized in his native land. Known in his early career as a superb adapter of Japanese literary works, collaborating with his wife Natto Wada, who wrote the screenplays. Her death ironically came when Ichikawa was producing The Makioka Sisters.



Blu-Ray Rating: **5.0/5.0**

This film is an adaptation of a popular serial novel in Japan, often compared to "Gone With the Wind." It is set in the 1930s, with the Japanese

war machine gearing up toward its destiny in World War II. Four sisters, grown and with both parents gone, try to work out the problems and situations with the two youngest siblings. Yukiko (Sayuri Yoshinaga) is the third oldest and the more traditional sister, still wearing kimonos and still seeking an arranged marriage. Taeko (Yuko Kotegawa) is more western in her garb and non-traditional in her choice of men, but she cannot marry until Yukiko is wed.

The circumstances of the younger sisters effects all the family dynamic. Oldest sister Tsuruko (Keiko Kishi) is being pressured by her husband to move to Toyko, and Sachiko (Yoshiko Sakuma), who is allowing the youngest sisters to live with her and her husband, suspects a little too much closeness between her partner and Yukiko. How this all plays out will determine how the family faces the future.



The film is quite beautiful, divided in story time over a year and the four seasons. The springtime blossoms begin the journey, with the sisters walking together as the saturated color of the production design is a magical scene. Contrast this with the winter, where the coldness of that season frames the resolutions. It expands the family within the natural world, along with the reports of Japanese advancements in the early days of the war.

The acting is exquisite, much freer than the usual portrayals of the traditional Japanese persona. The look of the film makes it feel that it could have been made at any point in the last fifty years, the fact that it was made in the early 1980s is indicated in the risks the actors take in fleshing out their popular literary characters. Particularly good is Koji Ishizaka, as Sachiko's husband, who communicates both longing and common sense in dealing with the sisters.

The wonderful thing about foreign language films is that it also exposes the foreign culture to the viewer. The importance in experiencing that other culture, especially in art, is that in that different approach to humanity, we learn more about ourselves. The Makioka Sisters and their family are fascinating teachers.

EXTRAS: Criterion Collection booklet, original theatrical trailer and a new subtitle translation.

"Insignificance" and the "The Makioka Sisters" was released by the Criterion Collection on Blu-ray and DVD June 14th. Insignificance features Tony Curtis, Theresa Russell, Gary Busey, Michael Emil and Will Sampson, written by Terry Johnson and directed by Nicolas Roeg. Rated "R." The Makioka Sisters features Keiko Kishi, Yoshiko Sakuma, Sayuri Yoshinaga, Yuko Kotegawa and Koji Ishizaka. Written by Shinya Hidaka and Kon Ichikawa, directed by Kon Ichikawa. Not Rated. For the full HollywoodChicago.com interview with Tony Curtis, [click here](#). [19]

For Theresa Russell, [click here.](#) [18]



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