

RETRIEVAL

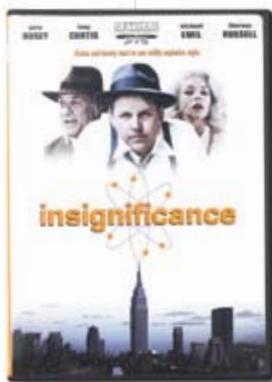
INSIGNIFICANCE

Directed by Nicolas Roeg
Original release date: 1985

In the 1970s director Nicolas Roeg was a rightly confident stand-out of British cinema, often spied hanging out with the likes of Mick Jagger and Art Garfunkel. Having earned his stripes working on classics such as *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Fahrenheit 451*, Roeg's breakout came with his lauded directorial efforts on the visual masterpieces *Don't Look Now* and *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (starring David Bowie as a water-starved alien). But Roeg's talents are on display to more dramatic (and kooky) effect in his lesser-known 1985 film *Insignificance*.

Though a Cannes Festival winner for technique, the film's first draw is its outlandish premise. Marilyn Monroe steals into Albert Einstein's hotel room one night after filming the iconic white-dress-atop-subway-grate scene, and attempts to seduce him through a frenetic demonstration of special relativity. Joe DiMaggio and Senator Joseph McCarthy show up, ruining Einstein's evening and Monroe then attempts to bed McCarthy to save Einstein from his Communist headhunts. The four characters—post-war archetypes of beauty, brains, prowess, and power—deftly project their identities, but never identify themselves by name.

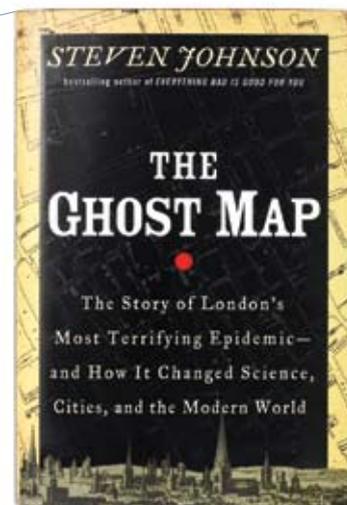
Roeg has often expounded on space, time, and physics in interviews, an interest manifested in the exuberance of the film's references, from probability theory to cosmology (*Insignificance* even inspired the 1986 *Big Audio Dynamite* hit "E=mc²"). And *Insignificance* actually gets the physics right—in general, if not completely. (There's a calculation error in time dilation.) The film's greatest take away is perhaps the line it draws between the pursuit of knowledge and the abuse of its power. Senator McCarthy sums it up nicely: "There are no shadows in the pristine world of theory, no stains of Armageddon where E=mc², even if mc² equals one fuck of a big bang." —Joshua Roebke



The Ghost Map

By Steven Johnson (Riverhead Books)

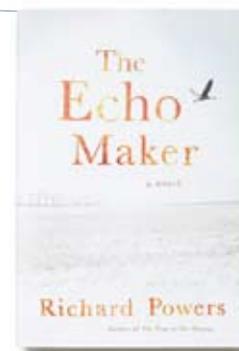
In early September 1854, cholera tore down London's Broad Street, killing more than 10 percent of its inhabitants in less than two weeks. As many fled the neighborhood in fear, Dr. John Snow ventured out into the streets, tracking down survivors and building a strong case for a revolutionary new model of disease. Steven Johnson, author of *Everything Bad Is Good for You*, takes a fresh look at this famous story and makes a case for the ways in which it fundamentally changed not only science, but the world.



The Echo Maker

By Richard Powers (Farrar, Straus and Giroux)

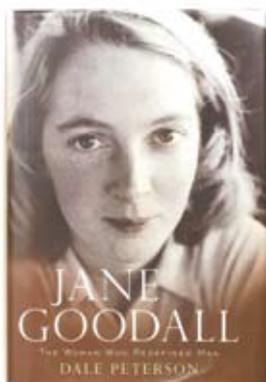
Much-lauded novelist Richard Powers once again takes us deep within the brain. Against a stereoscopic backdrop of small-town-American disintegration and migrating sand-hill-crane populations, a young man is suddenly stricken with Capgras syndrome, and believes his loved ones to be impostors. With rare dramatic force, Powers narrates the inner lives of those who cope with the mysteries of the human mind.



Thank You for Smoking

Directed by Jason Reitman (Fox Searchlight Pictures)

Fictional tobacco lobbyist Nick Naylor is everything we love to hate—a purveyor of corporate-sponsored junk science who uses fancy rhetoric and a winning smile to fight for the unrestricted sale of cigarettes. This whip-smart social satire, now on DVD, forces us to laugh at the current state of political discourse and misuse of scientific research. Certainly if we didn't laugh, we'd have to cry.



Jane Goodall

By Dale Peterson (Houghton Mifflin)

After Jane Goodall first witnessed chimps using tools to eat termites, Louis Leakey sent her a telegram: "Now we must redefine tool, redefine man, or accept chimpanzees as human." This thorough and elegant biography traces the unlikely rise of Goodall—before going to Africa, she was a secretary with no scientific background—and places her revolutionary discoveries in context.

IN-A-WORD

Joseph LeDoux on *A Scanner Darkly*, Richard Linklater's adaptation of the Philip K. Dick novel:

"CEREBRAL"

LeDoux is a professor at New York University's Center for Neural Science. His most recent book is *Synaptic Self: How Our Brains Become Who We Are*.