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THE INLAND SEA

In 1971, author and film scholar Donald Richie published a poetic travelogue about his explorations of the islands of Japan's Inland Sea, recording his search for traces of a traditional way of life as well as his own journey of self-discovery. Twenty years later, filmmaker Lucille Carra undertook a parallel trip inspired by Richie's by-then-classic book, capturing images of hushed beauty and meeting people who still carried on the fading customs that Richie had observed. Interspersed with surprising detours—visits to a Frank Sinatra–loving monk, a leper colony, an ersatz temple of plywood and plaster—and woven together by Richie's narration as well as a score by celebrated composer Toru Takemitsu, *The Inland Sea* is an eye-opening voyage and a profound meditation on what it means to be a foreigner.

DIRECTOR-APPROVED BLU-RAY SPECIAL EDITION FEATURES

- New, restored 4K digital transfer, supervised by cinematographer Hiro Narita and approved by director Lucille Carra, with uncompressed stereo soundtrack
- New interview with Carra
- New conversation between filmmaker Paul Schrader and cultural critic Ian Buruma on author Donald Richie
- Interview with Richie from 1991
- PLUS: An essay by author Arturo Silva

BLU-RAY EDITION

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THE INLAND SEA

1991

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THE

INLAND SEA

A FILM BY
LUCILLE CARRA

INVITATION TO THE VOYAGE

BY ARTURO SILVA

THE FILM

Lucille Carra's 1991 film *The Inland Sea* is a selective adaptation of the classic 1971 travelogue/memoir of the same name by the renowned expert on all things Japanese—and for cinephiles, the man who was most profoundly instrumental in introducing Japanese cinema to Western audiences—Donald Richie, who is heard in voice-over reading passages he adapted from his book. Many of the places described in the book are revisited in the film—a scenic stop here, an encounter there—and all the while, moments of exquisite beauty mix with the everyday. "All things Japanese" was Richie's ostensible subject; his actual subject was always himself. (He denied being a humanist but did accept being called a romantic.) Being a foreigner in Japan has something of a romantic flavor to it, but for Richie it was a position of realism: never being allowed to wholly fit in, he could all the better observe the people. In Carra's film, we are invited to observe too.

A seemingly casual scene early in the film is shot from aboard a boat, in a single long shot, as it sails past a small crag of an unnamed island, at the top of which is a small Shinto shrine. As shrines go, this one is quite modest, but caught this way it becomes, for Richie's narration, an occasion to expound on certain principles of beauty ("simplicity . . . accidental . . . context"). Then, as the shot comes to an end with a downward tilt of the camera, so that all we see is flowing water, and separating himself from "travelers from the fragmented West" who are "ravished by such visions of natural wholeness," Richie declares: "I am happy because I am suddenly whole, and I know who I am. I'm a man in a boat and looking at a landscape."

Vividly different is a later visit to the gaudiest and most garish temple imaginable. Over about three dozen shots that vary widely in type (close-up, long shot, and so on) and subject matter (animals, tourists, architectural details), Richie tells us its story: a munitions manufacturer, wanting to memorialize his mother, erected for her this complex of buildings that includes copies of many of Japan's famous sites. Again, the narrator concludes with a pronunciamento—"When kitsch becomes this grand, it becomes art"—even comparing the builder, who "has created a world of his own," to "Michelangelo, Velázquez."

As dissimilar as these two scenes are, they are both part of the natural and flowing wholeness that distinguishes this remarkable film. The first is immediately preceded by shots of coffee-shop life, during which we listen to an excerpt from "Nessun dorma" (as earlier we watched a monk first chanting a sutra and then raking his garden while we listened to "Stardust," sung by Frank Sinatra—the Sinatra sutra scene, as I like to think of it). Juxtaposition for its own sake is not so much the point here as it is to say, "This, too—all of it—is Japan."

Much of this sense of wholeness is due to the varied rhythms that animate *The Inland Sea,* made possible by the superb craftsmen Carra chose to work with. These include Hiro Narita, the film's cinematographer, whose inquisitive camera pans or tilts around a subject, no matter how quotidian or sublime, until it finds the right framing, and then settles just so; or simply composes a shot perfectly—mist and receding mountains looking like, well, just what they are: Japanese landscapes. Rhythm also suffuses the film's editing, by Brian Cotnoir, who cuts Narita's shots in a variety of telling ways: the shrine scene mentioned above is successful because it is done in a single shot; the later temple scene cries out for a multiplicity of shots; there are graphic matches and graphic oppositions (see the way a Tokyo train rushing across the screen cuts to the spume of water from a boat rushing forward); some scenes, like busy travelers, follow one upon the next; others fade to black, almost Ozu-like, giving us the time to take them in. Movingly, the Hiroshima scene ends with a flash of white light.

Finally, the rhythm of the film's sound editing is also superbly thoughtful. While most viewers probably remember Richie's narration as running throughout, his voice-over actually takes up only about one-third of the soundtrack's running time. The rest consists of brief interludes from Toru Takemitsu's Debussy-reminiscent score; a handful of voice-overs by Japanese speakers; ambient sounds (from street scenes and the like); and silence. All these together create a lush aural pattern that matches the cinematography and the visual editing. The decision to shoot the film with nonsync audio allows a lovely textural counterpoint of sounds to emerge and also, in the case of the voice-overs, creates a sort of dreamy distance, both spatial and temporal, between the speaker and the image: We know they are separated, but by how far? Other images could have served the verbal text equally well. Is one calling up the other? In one instance, we hear Richie describe meeting a young woman on a beach and asking her a few questions. We hear about this while we see a young woman on a beach, but there is no actual encounter; no such scene or conversation takes place. Documentary and fiction cross freely the so-called boundary between them in these reveries of a solitary traveler.

Carra had attended film school at New York University, where she'd studied under Martin Scorsese and Len Lye, and, thanks to professor William K. Everson, been struck by the poetic use of nonsync sound in Humphrey Jennings's 1942 film *Listen to Britain.* She then worked for Toho International in New York, where she was immersed in Japanese culture and film. It was for that reason that she was approached to make *The Inland Sea,* her first film. Carra, Cotnoir, and some friends convinced Richie they were the right team for the project and visited the titular area—in Japanese, Seto Naikai, "sea within straits"—twice before filming, recreating the journey Richie describes in his book while scouting locations and working on the script. After each trip, they consulted with Richie, who otherwise had little input into the actual shooting, which they finally conducted over a three-and-a-half-week period in 1991. Richie does appear, however, at the end of the film, walking in a park and at his Tokyo apartment, as if, Carra now remarks, "you had finished a book and turned to the back cover to look at the author's picture."

The visual and thematic wholeness of the film, even at only fifty-six minutes' running time, also allows for an abundance of minute particulars, "like pieces of some giant and scattered puzzle," as Richie remarks (in another context). This adds to the dream quality of the film, as if we are dipping into the narrator's tranquil recollections, as if he is simply "following the brush" (*zuihitsu*), a Japanese literary method of gathering one's thoughts and observations into what only seems to be a random order. The film delights in details: boats, fishermen, and fish markets; ports and kids, couples and pals; a nighttime fire ceremony with loud chanting and drums, which, though all too brief, surely rivals the dance celebrating the Japanese Obon holiday in Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil.* Life is caught unawares: a nasty housewife who does not even acknowledge the existence of an old newspaper delivery woman; the beautiful smile of a young woman in a coffee shop. In one scene, Richie speaks of encountering a fifteen-year-old girl, of them discussing her future, and then of what he imagines to be the inevitable rest of her story: marriage, children, forgetting all of the possibility that once lay before her. The passage, pure description, becomes protest. As autumn approaches, Richie remarks on the autumn insects "that sang beneath my window last night and are now stretched on the underside of leaves"; this is an observation worthy of a Tang poet—or perhaps a Japanese child. It is in this sublunary world that Carra and Richie discover the Baudelairean ideal (from the poem after which this essay is titled): *luxe, calme et volupté* ("pleasure, peace, and opulence," in Richard Howard's translation).

THE FILM AND THE BOOK

The book *The Inland Sea* abounds in anecdotes and allusions, observations and meditations, as well as encounters between Richie and inhabitants of the Inland Sea region, many of them intimate and revealing. These, of course, could not be recreated in the film without falsifying its intentions. On the other hand, there are scenes in the film—one in a schoolroom, for example—that are not in the book at all. Richie himself acknowledges the new creativity at work here when he remarks that there have been "some selective framings, a bit of shooting around."

The book nears its end with two long epiphanic scenes that both feature women. The first involves a bar hostess Richie meets and whose personality attracts him (to the extent, in fact, that he almost immediately fantasizes a life with her, "running a wildly successful Hiroshima bar, the only one with an American bartender"). After a half-earnest attempt to seduce her—one of many humorous scenes in which our hero attempts to pick someone up for the night—they reach a deeper understanding, and to his amazement, all the East-West, Japanese-American barriers disappear, and they are simply coequals in a bond of mutual respect. It is at this moment that he can declare—in both the book and the film—that "I would never find them, the real Japanese, because they were always around me, and they were always real."

Then, as a sort of coda, comes ecstasy. Richie meets an elderly woman and a child, and together they simply, naturally, converse, without any expectations or prejudices regarding one another. Later in the evening, the three of them visit the otherworldly, impossibly beautiful Itsukushima shrine, illuminated by hundreds of candles and, thanks to the surging tide, seeming to float with its famous torii (gateway) in the sea. And he knows that his journey is over. Though, near the film's end, we do see Itsukushima, there is no attempt to replicate the meaning of the scene in the book. Rather, the voice-over here (as with the puzzle pieces mentioned above) provides us with a metaphor for the film itself: "One is meant to wander, turning at random along these straight and open corridors filled with the rustling of the forest, the whispering of the sea."

The book includes twenty gorgeous, starkly black-and-white photographs of the Inland Sea region by Yoichi Midorikawa, many of them almost abstract, able to be read as if they are hanging scrolls. The point is that the book's text seems to cry out for some sort of visual accompaniment. The photographs do not illustrate the book so much as complement it. The film does both. Just as the book contains at times a bittersweet nostalgia for a lost way of life—or one that perhaps never existed—so part of the film's power lies in its evanescence, the exquisite passing of its images, all of it a reflection of the appreciation for the fleetingness of the natural and beautiful that is so central to the Japanese sensibility.

One is struck by how often in the book Richie asserts his idea that "only in appearances lies the true reality" (or the variant "the ostensible is the real"), and while that theme is present in the film, Carra seems to make a conscious thematic shift to emphasize her medium's natural subject, time. This is most readily felt in the recurrence of the phrase "not yet" (or the variant "not quite yet"). The phrase recurs in the book too, but not as often as in the film. With these words, Richie appears to be acknowledging the truth of his impossible quest—that he is looking for "real" Japanese people who existed long ago and whom he hopes to find still in abundance in the Inland Sea region: "rough and lively, lusty, impatient, enthusiastic, open, loving, and hating people." (These are, by the way, the Japanese qualities he so prizes in his writing on the films of Shohei Imamura.) Richie's "not yet," then, becomes his plea of resistance—a resistance and a vacillation that can also be felt in that dreamy disjunction between the 1991 image and the 1971 text—against accepting what he sees as Japan's full-scale turn against its own nature.

The film and the book are journeys of both search and escape (as Richie acknowledges at the beginning of the former). At the end of the book, he declares simply, "I don't care if I never go home" (meaning Ohio), but the film closes with Richie *at* home, his new home of Tokyo, where he chose to stay, he said, because "Tokyo is *not* Japan." Does he contradict himself? Very well, then, he contradicts himself. One wonders, too, what Richie would think of the Inland Sea region today, awash like everywhere else in mobile phones, social media—and bridges.

THE BOOK AND THE MAN

When Donald Richie came to the Inland Sea, he also came to himself. But his was no sudden awakening. *The Inland Sea* was published in 1971, but the journey it describes occurred over many trips to the region over the previous decade. We don't know how many trips Richie made during that time, but we do know that he wrote about them in his journals. When he decided to write the book, he simply extracted those journal entries, rewrote and rearranged them, and composed the text—in his customary graceful yet unobtrusive style—as we have it. Significantly, Richie counted *The Inland Sea* among his fictional works.

The book is Richie's masterpiece. It was a distillation of his many years in Japan—he had arrived on December 31, 1946—observing the people, watching their movies. Previous to *The Inland Sea,* he had published several works dealing with Japanese cinema, including his volume on Akira Kurosawa, as well as two novels and various other books on Japan. Subsequently, he would go on to publish many more books and essays on every conceivable Japanese subject, from temples to tattoos. Among the books I count alongside *The Inland Sea* as his best are *Ozu: His Life and Films* (1974), a distinctive approach to the unique and universal director; *Zen Inklings* (1982), a miscellany of tales that attest to his abiding interest in Zen; the novel *Tokyo Nights* (1988), highly formal and hilarious; *Different People* (1987, later published as *Japanese Portraits*), sketches of various individuals (well-known and unknown); and *A Lateral View* (1987) and *Partial Views* (1995), two essay collections. Whether his topic was Godzilla or Zen gardens or ghosts, Richie was the very best Western writer on Japan. He also made films, painted, and composed music. His body of work—like that of Ozu, the filmmaker he most revered—speaks of and to us all.

After his acknowledgment that, in *The Inland Sea* "the real Japanese . . . were always real," Richie goes on to say, "I might at last decide what my own real self was, and hence create it." He achieved this self-creation in the course of the journeys and the writing that resulted in *The Inland Sea;* the works that followed would refine it. As Donald once told me, one does not travel only to discover someplace new but to discover oneself too. This is the invitation extended to all travelers, by both his book and this beautiful film.

Arturo Silva is an American writer living in Vienna. He edited The Donald Richie Reader: 50 Years of Writing on Japan *(2001). His novel,* Tokio Whip, *was published in 2016. He has written on films as diverse as* The Piano Tuner of Earthquakes, Vertigo, Gun Crazy, The Band Wagon, *and* The American Friend.