



## Film Review: *Past Lives* (2023)

*Elliott Jones*

*Past Lives* (2023) is a romantic drama written and directed by Korean-Canadian director Celine Song. This debut directorial film is a semiautobiographical work based on her childhood in Korea and an unexpected move to Canada in middle school that disrupts a would-be flourishing romantic friendship. Celine is played by the protagonist Nora (Greta Lee), formerly Na Young, who is an aspiring writer in New York City married to a Jewish-American writer named Arthur (John Magaro). As a child in Korea, Na Young met Hae Sung (Teo Yoo) in elementary school and as soon as they go on a friendly date in middle school, Na Young's family decides to emigrate to Toronto for career aspirations. Twelve years later, Na Young, now Nora, hears that Hae Sung wants to reconnect through social media. Through videocalls, they reunite and realize the profound connection and capacity for friendship they have. But over time, they have to drift their separate ways to pursue their respective careers. Another twelve years pass before Hae Sung, heartbroken and lost in life, plans a trip to New York City to hopefully reconnect with Nora once again. The latter half of the film follows this second reunion, the realization of the potential for romantic friendship, the apparent stumbling block of Nora's marriage to Arthur, and, however, one might interpret the last scene of the film, the eventual resolution.

It is as much a story of the immigrant identity as it is about romantic love and temporality. Nora, Hae Sung, and Arthur equally reflect the what-if of Nora's emigration from South Korea. They all know what would have happened—namely, that Nora and Hae Sung would have gotten married and Nora would have never met Arthur. Arthur exercises this past possibility and sees himself as a stumbling block to lovers who are obviously destined to be. This insecurity is born from his idea that Nora's Koreanness is a part of her that he can never know or understand. At one point, expressing his frustration, he tells Nora, “You dream in a language I can't understand”. The tension of this insecurity is brought to a climax when they all go out for dinner. Halfway through the conversation, Arthur is forgotten as Nora ceases to translate her conversation in Korean with Hae Sung as they engage in their own what-ifs.

Despite what might be argued as lustful imaginings or obsession with the past and would-be future, there is a profound acceptance of the temporal reality and the impossibility of the what-ifs without denying the friendship that exists between Nora and Hae Sung and the marriage between Nora and Arthur. But as Nora comments, she and Hae Sung were never in an official romantic relationship, and they always were in a state of potentiality. The film raises a question about an overlooked idea in today's culture, namely, the idea that love is not free: that romantic love just happens to us and we have no say regarding our judgment, assent, or denial of the will. This idea is baked into the notion of “soul mates”, that not only views the goal of marriage as romance, but that this romance and love is destined by an outside force.



*Past Lives* does not reject the emotive power of falling in love. It doesn't argue that love is purely a matter of rational judgment separate from our emotional responses. The important dichotomy in this film might not be between reason and emotion, but between decisions and temporality. What is upheld in this film above all else is the importance of living by our decisions— taking a leap of faith and standing by the decisions we have already made. The film upholds the importance of acceptance one's circumstances and one's choices, especially those choices regarding friendship.

It is this acceptance of the permanence of our decisions that is paired with the impermanence of time, reality, and imperfection in our lives. This is the Japanese aesthetic notion of *wabi-sabi*. *Wabi-sabi* is a standard of beauty that claims that the imperfection and impermanence of things (like nature itself) can be beautiful. This is disagreeable to the Western mind fueled by Platonic notions that that which is most beautiful is Beauty itself which as a Form is immutable and therefore eternal. Anything that is in a state of flux and therefore impermanence is ontologically inferior to something that is stable and permanent. One way to grasp this Eastern notion of beauty is empirically through eastern art that comes from and is a part of nature itself: think of bonsai, ikebana, and Zen gardens. These art forms are themselves alive and subject to the change of nature and the intentionality of the artist.

Thematically, *Past Lives* grapples with the portrayal of impermanence, imperfection, temporality in regard to romantic friendship. For Nora and Hae Sung especially, this means that if a resolution is to occur, it means an acceptance of the past, the present circumstances, and what the future will hold. Whether this acceptance occurs is what fuels the drama, and the only thing that gives them hope is a stable (yet unpredictable) power of nature known as "In-Yun" or *inyeon*. The notion of "past lives" comes from what Nora calls "In-Yun," which is a Korean idea that every circumstance in the present is caused by a previous life that we had that led to this moment. Resembling ideas of reincarnation, karma, or the idea that "everything happens for a reason", this gives order, resolution, and acceptance to Nora and Hae Sung's decisions and a hope for the future for the next life (presumably where their friendship might be actualized, romantic or not). It is this idea that explains the lack of passions of anger, lust, or an over-exertion of the will within the characters. Instead, subjecting oneself to *inyeon* involves a deep humility in spite of regret and the nostalgic and hopeful what-if.

Celine Song both creates a portrait of an artist-migrant in *Past Lives* and grapples with existential questions of the permanence of our decisions in a world in flux. Of aesthetic importance, *Past Lives* is a simple, concise, and aesthetically pleasing film both in terms of filmography and score. The aesthetically calm, structured, and flat shots create the sense of a perfecting and permanent order above the experiential reality of imperfection, impermanence, longing, and what-ifs of the characters—perhaps the structure of the filmography itself resembles the very power of *inyeon*.

