

Love, Relationships

(Past Lives 2023)

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The purpose of this material is to support the professional preparation for helping conversations in the frame of “Filmteràpiàs Filmklub” (Film-therapy - Filmclub). Its main goal is to help professionals start sensitisation, psycho-educational and self-reflective conversations with adolescents and young adults alongside the topics occurring in this film. The aim of these interactive sessions is to examine the experiences, dilemmas and expectations of the target group in connection with love, intimacy and relationships alongside the 2023 film Past Lives. Talking about the film creates an opportunity for adolescents and young adults to think about the specific age-related challenges of relationships and love, the balance between attachment and autonomy and the difficulties of intimate relationships in the age of digital technology. The aim is to help students express their own feelings and thoughts, develop greater awareness of the resources and challenges present in their relationships and develop their self-reflection and emotional competence. The processing dialogue creates an opportunity not only for improving self-awareness and social skills but also for fostering sensitisation within peers. This material offers thematic aspects and questions for conversations. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that the boundaries between these topics might be blurred, therefore it is not necessary to stick to the given structure, but to adapt it to the needs and dynamics of the group.

1. Tuning in - First Impressions and Emotional Resonance

The main purpose of the tuning in phase is to create a safe and open environment for the participants to share their experiences. After watching ‘Past Lives’ (2023) it is important to give students the chance to express their first impressions and emotions about it. Such sharing helps not only with individual reflection but also creates the basis for more in-depth discussions in the future. The purpose is not the intellectual analysis of the film but to make inner, subjective experiences explicit. It is personal maturity that allows the development of authentic conversations. This phase is particularly important because adolescents’ and young adults’ abilities to recognise and regulate their emotions are still developing. Recognising, identifying and verbalising emotions can be a huge step towards the development of self-awareness. The participants can experience that their emotions are valid and that there are similar and also different reactions to the same situation. This contributes to the development of empathy and strengthens the group cohesion, since personal sharing often leads to realisations and mutual understanding among the participants. It is beneficial to work with open, non-judgmental questions that do not require deep analysis but create an opportunity for everyone to join in the conversation at their own pace. The method of free association can also be used, for instance, participants can be requested to express the atmosphere of the film with one word, movement or colour. These are simple but meaningful entry points. It is particularly important that the feelings and thoughts expressed there are received by the group facilitator with understanding and acknowledgment, as they provide the emotional foundation for further processing.

Conversation Starter Questions

- What feelings did the film leave you with? Which scenes affected you the most?
- If you had to describe the atmosphere or message of the film with one word, what would it be?
- What memory, life situation or emotion came to your mind while watching the film?

2. Characters and Plot - Processing the Film Experience, Seeking Points of Identification

This phase of the processing focuses on the characters and the narratives. The aim is not only to interpret the events but to map out the deeper psychological processes underlying the decisions, relationships and dilemmas of the characters. The characters of 'Past Lives' are extremely nuanced and complex. They are simultaneously likeable, vulnerable and profoundly human. The film shows perfectly what difficulties arise when life paths, personal desires and available possibilities do not align perfectly. The main characteristic of adolescence and young adulthood is identity exploration and the increased significance of peer and romantic relationship experiences. A film that has no "good" or "bad" character, only different aspects, decisions and desires creates an opportunity for the participants to take the perspectives of others from a safe distance. While analysing the decisions of the characters, the students can reflect on their own dilemmas without being exposed to the risks of direct self-disclosure. Through verbalising a character's feelings and situation, students often express their own emotions and experiences. In addition, connecting with the story naturally brings up themes like confrontation with loss, adaptation to change and the question of "what if". These are all questions that are highly significant for personal development, decision making and autonomy at this stage of life. In this phase the group leader's role as facilitator is crucial. The aim is not to find an universal truth, but to encourage participants to articulate their own perspectives freely and reflectively. It is important for all the answers to be validated since the story is rich precisely because it can be interpreted in multiple ways.

Activities:

- Statue Game: in small groups the students create a living statue of the relationship of the three main characters (posture, distance and facial expressions).

- Telling the story from a character's point of view: there are three small groups, each group gets a character (Nora, Hae Sung, Arthur) and they tell the story from their point of view. At the end they compare how the perspectives differ.
- Inner Monologue: the participants get a situation from the film and verbalise the character's inner monologue (what could they feel or think in that moment).

Conversation Starter Questions:

- What traits would you use to describe each character?
- Was there a character you could identify with? Why?
- Was there anyone who you could not identify with at all? Why?
- The characters in the film could have chosen multiple different paths. What factors do you think affected their decisions?
- What would you have done differently in the place of Nora, Hae Sung or Arthur?
- The question of "what if" appears in the film. What is your opinion about this?
- Do you think it makes it easier or more difficult to move on?
- In what way was Nora's relationship with Hae Sung and Arthur different? How is it possible that both of them were important?
- What do you think remains unspoken between the characters?
- What feelings arose in you at the end of the film? Why?
- What differences can you observe between the film's portrayal of relationships and those commonly presented in the media?

3. The Unique Aspects of Romantic Relationships during Adolescence and Young Adulthood

Adolescence and young adulthood are particularly important in terms of romantic relationships. At this stage of life, young people gradually discover their own needs, learn to establish a balance between intimacy and autonomy, practice expressing their feelings and resolving conflicts. Romantic relationships not only mean emotional experiences but also are the most important settings for forming identity and developing social skills. This is why it is extremely important and useful for adolescents and young adults to talk about the characteristics and challenges of this particular developmental stage in terms of romantic relationship behaviours. The aim of these interactive sessions is to help young people reflect on the fundamental human need for love and attachment, and clarify those subjective and interpersonal factors that

identify the way love is expressed. The dialogue supports the development of self-awareness and contributes to strengthening emotional and relational competences. It also helps young people form their romantic relationships with greater awareness and responsibility. It is important to make the participants aware of their age-related challenges. For adolescents, for instance, peer expectations represent a bigger pressure, while young adults are struggling with finding the balance between commitment and autonomy. It can also be beneficial to draw attention to the changes in relationships over time, since love and attachment are not at all static experiences, but rather evolve with age, experiences and life circumstances. During the conversations the characteristics of a healthy and supportive relationship are addressed. Being aware of these helps young people identify constructive and toxic relational patterns and prevent the development of abusive or unequal relationships. Themes such as jealousy, trust or the difficulty of ending a relationship are extremely important because young people are often not equipped with the appropriate communication and emotion regulation skills to resolve conflicts. The awareness of early experiences, family and social factors and the impact of patterns portrayed in the media creates an opportunity for young people to recognise that their own relationships are not independent of past experiences and cultural environments. It also helps them create new, healthier patterns.

Conversation Starter Questions

- Why do people want to find a partner?
- How do you think it is different to be in a relationship now than 20-30 years ago?
- Do you think relationships at a young age are different from adult relationships? If yes, how?
- How old do you think someone usually is when they experience their first meaningful romantic relationship? What makes them feel it is the one?
- What makes a good relationship?
- How do you think love and relationships change throughout time?
- What are the characteristics of a constructive and supportive relationship and how do you know if it is not one?
- What is the healthy balance between “us” and “me” in a relationship like?
- How can jealousy and insecurity be dealt with in a healthy way?
- What effect can the end of a relationship have on self-confidence and future relationships?

- Which is more difficult: to admit that you like someone or to admit that the relationship does not work anymore?
- How do early experiences of relationships affect the attitude towards future relationships?
- What factors influence how we think about romantic relationships?

4. Love in the Digital World

The digital world fundamentally changed the possibilities of forming and maintaining a relationship. Online space is embedded in the everyday lives of adolescents and young adults, creating new forms of interaction, from dating to communication and relationship maintenance. This digital space however not only offers new opportunities but also creates new risks and challenges. Being online all the time, the over idealised selves presented in social media, the digital jealousy and the controlling behaviour are all phenomena that fundamentally affects the relationship experiences and emotional security of young people. The online space can bring people closer together, create intimacy and encourage them to connect, however at the same time it can intensify insecurities, vulnerabilities and anxiety. For this reason it is extremely useful to think about these topics together. During the conversations the participants have an opportunity to acknowledge their own experiences, to reflect on the new risks and resources, and to build strategies that help them in developing and maintaining safer and healthier relationship patterns in the digital era.

Conversation Starter Questions

- How do you think it is different to meet people online and in real life?
- Why would online dating be more attractive for some people than real life experience?
- In the film the main characters are maintaining their relationship online for a long time. How real and long-lasting can a relationship be if it is maintained mostly online?
- How does the dynamic of a relationship change when the partners are constantly available for each other?
- In what way does social media affect the trust and jealousy in a relationship? What do you think “online loyalty” means?
- What is your opinion about stalking (eg.: checking on the partner’s profile and online activity)? Is it healthy curiosity or harmful control?

- Do you think it is easier or harder to express our affection online than in real life?
- What potential risks do you see in seeking a partner online (eg.: fake profiles, idealised self-representation, overcontrol)? How can it be recognised?
- What is your opinion: does social media bring people closer together or rather creates tension?

5. Closing Round

This round helps with integration and closes the emotionally demanding process. It plays a key role in both the safety of the students and the follow-up. The discussed themes can be emotionally moving for the participants, especially if they are personally affected. That is why it is crucial to take enough time for reflection and create an opportunity for them to share their thoughts and experience about the session. They should be given time to articulate the lessons they learned, to connect to their feelings in order to close the session successfully. This closure supports psychological integration and emotional security. The moderator must inform the participants about further possibilities to get help if it is needed (school psychologist, trusted adult, etc).

Conversation Starter Questions:

- What was the most memorable thing you heard today?
- What feelings arouse during the day?
- What is it that you take with you from today's session?

LOVE PAST LIVES (2023)

I. Introduction

Past Lives is director Celine Song's debut film that has gained considerable recognition from both critics and audiences. The film came as something of a surprise since producing a romantic melodrama in the 2020s can be considered a risky business. The notion that every story has already been told - a claim frequently made about narrative itself - has by now become a cliché. When the genre is discussed, however, many feel that the word cliché is no longer sufficient; instead, it functions as a veiled insult meant to highlight the sentimental nature of the content and the corniness of the narrative. Melodrama, like many genres with a rich corpus, emerged during, which means that over the past century it has already exhausted many of its narrative possibilities. It has indeed traversed the full trajectory of major genres: originally detached from an adjectival modifier, the adjective subsequently became nominalized; from this nominalized form a film type emerged, which eventually developed into a term with negative connotations.

In its classical phase, the genre seemed to have exhausted everything that could be said about the world and human nature. During the modern period it shifted towards experimentation and the blending of different genres. Postmodern revision then pushed this process even further, stripping the genre of its traditional identity and ultimately returning, only to place it - almost ironically - into the hands of the all-consuming soap opera industry. There it became increasingly trivialised by the slogans of assembly-line aesthetics and superficial storytelling. At that point, only the romantic comedy, emerging as a popular new form, managed to restore the former glory of the genre. From there, the romantic melodrama found its way back in the cinema for more exploitation. Although many of these films proved forgettable, continuing to erode its prestige.

However, the turn of the millennium brought a shift in perspective within the film industry as well. The previously marginalised romantic melodrama began to be revisited by a number of filmmakers who deliberately avoided its conventional rules and formulas, producing works that have since become impossible to ignore. A notable example is *In the Mood For Love* by Wong Kar Wai (2000), which in many respects resembles *Past Lives*. Another significant example is *Lost In Translation* by Sofia Coppola (2003), as well as the painfully intimate *Blue Valentine* by Derek Cianfrance (2010), the *Marriage Story* (2005), and *The Squid and the Whale* by Noah Baumbach or *Closer* by Mike Nichols (2004). The *Before Trilogy* by Linklater (*Before Sunrise*, 1995; *Before Sunrise*, 2004; *Before Midnight*, 2013) stands as a cinematic benchmark among the 21st-century romantic films. Although they are genre-blending works, one might also include the melodrama-influenced trilogy of Alejandro Gonzales Iñárritu - *Amores Perros* (2000), *21 Grams* (2003), *Babel* (2006) - which is structurally and aesthetically grounded in melodramatic traditions. These "love films" are largely connected to the realist and minimalist tendencies of melodrama, yet they employ the genre critically and reinterpret its central pillars. They often eliminate the happy ending - once a basic component of melodrama - and replace romantic fulfillment with emotional turmoil or unfulfilled, sometimes platonic, desire. Active protagonists are frequently replaced by passive or uncertain characters, while the light-hearted

playfulness typical of earlier romantic narratives gives way to greater philosophical and psychological depth.

In film genre theory, there is a view that contemporary cinema relates to classical genres in two distinct ways: through eclectic irony or through what has been called “new honesty “. These represent two fundamentally different attitudes that allow filmmakers to reproduce, reinterpret, or recycle genres that have existed since the early history of cinema. Eclectic irony relies on self-reflexivity and a postmodern sensibility. It produces its effect by playfully turning stylistic conventions inside out. In contrast, the approach of “new honesty” is characterised by a kind of search: an attempt to rediscover a more elemental beauty and emotional purity. Within this framework, long-established genre conventions are not mocked or decontrasted but reactivated and used sincerely.

Celine Song’s *Past Lives* clearly follows this tradition. The film portrays the relationship between a Korean man, Hae Sung and a woman, Nora. They spend their childhood together in Seoul until the girl and her family emigrate to Canada. While Hae Sung remains in Seoul, Nora grows up abroad, and after twelve years he begins searching for her again. The narrative traces their relationship across twenty-four years, moving back and forth in time as their relationship converge and diverge. In the perspective of passing time, their connection sometimes grows stronger, sometimes fades into distance, and at time it seems to disappear altogether. Eventually, Nora, who is now long married, and Hae Sung end up at bar in New York City and they are forced to confront their feelings that have lingered around them for decades. Their encounter brings to the surface not only a love that has never been fulfilled, but also the cultural roots that continues to shape their identities. In the end, Nora faces perhaps the most difficult decision of her life: she must let Hae Sung go, even though she feels a deep and almost inexplicable connection to him - one, that in certain ways, appears stronger than the bond with her own husband.

II. Love and “Injon” as Philosophical Terms in the Service of aesthetics

Past Lives operates on multiple levels; however, its central concern appears to be the nature of love. The film therefore develops the situations it portrays with considerable philosophical depth. The fact that it approaches the characters’ emotions and life paths from two different perspectives - instinct and time - demonstrates the director’s sensitivity and insight. In this context, instinct should not be understood in its conventional biological sense. Rather it functions as the metaphor for the “will to live”, the fundamental driving force of human existence described by Schopenhauer. Similarly time is not treated merely as a chronological measurement, as indicated by clocks and calendars. Instead, it reflects the idea that past and present are inseparable: the past continually becomes the part of the present, merging with it through an almost unconscious process.

Love, understood as a concept with far more abstract meaning than the everyday usage suggests, remains one of the most fundamental and frequently interpreted questions of human existence. How does one relate to time, which serves both as a framework and an overarching structure of our lives? How should we understand fate, which exists somewhere between conscious decisions and unfulfilled dreams? When

it comes to love, are there truly present decisions or are these merely reinterpretations of past experiences and imagined future possibilities? Can we believe that everything happens with a reason, or are we simply puppets of the patterns shaped by the partial knowledge of our own inner selves? Do we endlessly repeat the same story without change, or do we merely replay the same narrative in different circumstances?

Celine Song introduces the concept of “In-yun in *Past Lives*, incorporating elements of autofiction in the narrative. According to this traditional Korean spiritual concept, which is often associated with Buddhism, people’s souls encounter one another repeatedly across different reincarnation - these encounters forming what are known as “past lives”. Such connections can manifest in many forms: great loves, deep friendships, a brief glance, or a gentle touch. Each meeting suggests that the individuals involved share some unfinished business, and over countless lives thousands of these bonds may be formed - some profound, others barely noticeable. Because of this, You can never know which life you are living in the present. Is it the life when two people are meant to be together? Or merely the one in which their coats brush against each other in a crowded street? Or perhaps this is the life in which they feel a deep connection, yet their paths ultimately diverge.

This idea resonates with the Platonic concept of anamnesis, or the theory of remembrance. According to this view, everything we know about the world is in fact a form of recollection: knowledge carried over from the previous existence of our souls, which we have partially forgotten. In this philosophical framework, the soul once existed in the so-called “world of ideas”, where all things appear in their most perfect and immutable form. When the soul is born in a human body, most of this knowledge is lost. Nevertheless, throughout life the soul attempts to recover fragments of it through acts of remembering. The characters’ reflection on the philosophical concept of In-yun, presented in *Past Lives* echo this Platonic notion of the immortal soul. As Nora and Hae Sung contemplate whether their relationship might unfold differently in a different life - or whether they are somehow meant for each other, despite the circumstances of their present lives - their conversation transcends from the immediate setting of that bar in New York. Their reflections become intercultural, timeless, touching upon one of humanity’s oldest philosophical mysteries. In that moment, it is almost as if the immortal soul and the infinite possibilities of existence were engaged in a dialogue about the meaning of time.

III. Decision as an Aesthetic and Ethical Dimension

When Nora and Hae Sung switch to Korean at the bar and start talking about possibilities, the idealised love concept of In-yun becomes overshadowed by a new more profound layer in the form of anxiety. Anxiety is brought to life through decision-making. The situation seems somewhat simpler for Hae Sung because he already has an agenda that brought him to America - to confess his love to Nora. He arrives with an uncertain background: he either has a girlfriend waiting for him in Korea or not; even he himself is unable to decide, and the viewer has the feeling that this aspect is relatively unimportant. In contrast, Nora lives in a harmonious relationship, her husband supports her in everything. They share the same interests; they are both writers. They have built up a stable financial situation, they possess common experiences, and their relationship can be traced back to a romantic starting point.

They meet at the beginning of a writers' retreat, talk through the night and Nora raves about In-yun. However, her approach to it is quite different than it will be many years later, as she now uses the wisdom of her country as a tool for seduction. Many years later, at that bar, even referring to In-yun makes her anxious, since she sees it as a question of identity - a battle of dimensions within her soul. She sits between the two most important men in her life and she knows that no matter what she decides, she will lose something significant. This is the source of her fundamental experience of anxiety. Her emotions are ambivalent, in the Kierkegaardian sense, she is under the simultaneous pressure of both the aesthetic and ethical dimensions. Hae Sung represents childhood love; everything that drives the aesthetic stage revolves around him - desire, pleasant feelings associated with youth and homeland, and the image of a past, idealised love infused with romantically exaggerated elements. In contrast, the ethical dimension centres around Nora's husband. She is connected to him through commitment, artistic harmony, her new identity gained through life in America, and her ability to make decisions. Whenever Hae Sung appears in her life, Nora loses her ability to make decisions, which makes their relationship a nearly thirty-year-long emotional turmoil, broken down into equal twelve-year units by the path of psychological development in a person. Nora can reach a still point only if she makes a choice between the desired reality represented by Hae Sung and the chosen reality represented by Arthur. She makes a painful decision to stay with Arthur - a decision that might help her sever the roots of her periodically recurring anxiety.

However, it would be difficult to claim that there is a resolution at the end, since the feeling of "what if" lingers around both here and throughout the entire film. Hae Sung is present not only as a physical character, but also as the symbol of another life. He represents what Nora might have become had she made different choices at key points in her life. This emotion forms the core of the film: either the painful acceptance of her decision accompanied by eternal sorrow or the acknowledgement that things happened as they were meant to. This is a profoundly existentialist idea beautifully nested within the depth of this quiet, minimalist drama.

IV. Time in Love and Love in Time

Traditionally, we consider love as a timeless substance, always placing it above time seen through the purple haze of poetry and inspiration. If we think of love as the eternal feeling of the lover, we may come to see that the desire for love is a glimpse into a borderline area where the everyday codes of consciousness no longer function properly - the person who observes this borderline exists above time. Love, as an emotion, is always embedded in people's identity, quickly transforming into a narrative filled with stories that we interpret again and again throughout our lives. In the film, Nora and Hae Sung's love has a clear narrative that divides their lives into the previously mentioned periods, but it lacks the present. Just as the philosophy of time views the present - a momentary situation - with uncertainty, the romance depicted in the film moves along the axis of the past and future. Years pass, events unfold, and Nora and Hae Sung drift towards each other resulting in a cyclical relationship. Their love does not unfold in moments of time but rather in closed reminiscence and vague, unspoken future promises. It ignores the present hiding in the layers of time where it does not have to confront the "now" of everyday life. This is where timelessness exists - where their desires, memories of themselves and their home live as well as the

feeling of youth persist, accompanied by the illusion that certain things in the world will never change. At the end of the film, we let Hae Sung go still holding onto this idealised state. However, Nora realises something important: love can never be truly timeless, because if it were, it could never be real - just like her love with Hae Sung. It is not necessary to fully understand that, but to acknowledge the passage of time; only then can one approach the reality of love where no walls can shield the self. Letting go of the illusion of timelessness carries within it the possibility of loss and harm.

The love portrayed in the film transcends the periodical, philosophically described concept of time, and guides its viewer into a completely new interpretive space: what if we could experience eternity after peeling away the shell of fixed time? The concept of In-yun resonates with the Platonic thought of the immortal soul and the world of ideas; however the film also hovers around Nietzsche's notion of the "eternal return". According to this idea, it is not the state of the world that recurs, but the actions of the "I" in the present. One should regard their actions as having already occurred countless times in the past, and as destined to occur countless times in the future as well. This thought generates anxiety about the incomprehensibility of eternal time and compels the individual to ground their actions on a deeper and moral level. Returning to *Past Lives*: do the infinite possible bonds between two people justify the harm inflicted upon the ethical dimension of the self? Is the relationship among Hae Sung, Nora and Arthur determined by the imperatives of fate, ethical responsibility, or instinct?

V. The Shadow of Nora - Forms of Identity in the Film

Identity is not stable, but a continuously changing entity. We construct a narrative about ourselves that we communicate both to the world and to ourselves. This narrative is never fixed; it is constantly expanded and reinterpreted through the events we experience and the emotions we feel. In the film, Hae Sung represents a force that compels Nora to further develop the story of her identity. As time passes, more and more dimensions emerge within her identity, continually confronting her with decisions. As mentioned earlier, one of the most significant decisions of Nora's life is the choice between two paths: one that connects her to Hae Sung, and the other to Arthur - desired versus chosen life. Through this decision, Nora not only defines her psychological dimension but also shapes her identity and establishes her personal boundaries.

Her desired life seeks to tie her to her Korean childhood identity, where everything is organised around structured forms of the mother tongue, where everything feels familiar and the people, places and movements are painted with the brush of love. This idea is reinforced by the film's visual style, which portrays the metropolitan whirl of Seoul as cosy and affectionate. Figuratively, whenever Nora sees Hae Sung, she finds herself amidst such profound and repressed cognitive structures, where he ceases to be just another individual and becomes a surface overloaded with signals that provide her with a sense of comfort and familiarity.

Her chosen life demands a completely new identity. After the fight with her sister over names, Nora - originally Na-Jong - is born. She becomes an immigrant transformed

into an American woman with a successful career, a manageable workload, and the ability to observe the world from the privileged perspective of an artist.

Nora and Hae Sung are at different stages of individuation, integrating unconscious contents and attempting to analyse their relationship in depth. In a Jungian sense, they traverse the long and rocky road towards over the years. The path of their love and relationship rises above rationality, moving through the deeper layers of possibilities and eventuality.

If we seek archetypal interpretations in the film, we are not mistaken, as the viewer can trace a clear line of collective experience. Hae Sung and Nora's love - and its stages - are relatable to anyone because they are built on both general and timeless elements: childhood meeting, friendship turning into love, forced separation, reconnecting (initially online due to distance), separation again, reunion, and finally farewell - a moment that functions as a kind of still point. The ultimate moral of their relationship may convey a deeply universal message: a relationship or attachment can end without fulfillment, yet still play a crucial role in shaping one's identity.

VI. Questions for Processing

- What is the first feeling you have after watching the film?
- What might it be like to start over in a completely unknown world?
- What is your opinion, to what extent is the film about reality, and to what extent is it about possibilities that we never cease?
- Are there "past lives" of which we have no recollection?
- Which is more significant in life: decisions or desires?
- Do karmic relationships exist?
- How can we relate to the philosophy of In-yun? What does the film convey about it?
- Why is it difficult to let someone go who only partially and periodically belongs to us?
- What does Nora's decision at the end of the film symbolise for you?

