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Hello and Happy Sunday. I hope you're having a beautiful day and I hope you're having a beautiful weekend. Thank you as always for supporting me and I have your bonus resource for you today. So today is Oscar day (*text: JUST KIDDING, IT'S NEXT WEEK*) if you are watching this when it comes out that means that the Oscars are on tonight (*text: * 10th MARCH, 2024*). I don't particularly put a whole lot of stock or fanfare into industry awards and institutions like that. However, it can put a lot of interesting and sometimes smaller scale, more independent films on the radar, which I think can be a benefit.

The film Past Lives tells a pretty polyamorous love story whether they meant to or not, it's heavily polyamory coded, like heavily polyamory coded. In this Oscar nominated film, the main character feels and explores – on purpose, in the open, with consent – two deep intimate connections at the same time: her first love from Korea and her eventual husband from the US.

Sometimes people get a little confused when I call a love story polyamorous, even though only one duo is actually sleeping together. And that is the case in this film, where our protagonist is only actually sleeping with her husband. But polyamory has nothing to do with sex, right? Plenty of polyamorous people are asexual or they're aromantic, It is not about who is in your bed and it is about who you are bringing close, who is in your heart. and that can look so many ways. And if you do want more examples of polyamory on screen, especially those that are not overly sexual or chaotic and played up for drama, if you want to see the normalcy and the humanity of non monogamy, sometimes you have to read between the lines and look for non monogamy coded media.

But I'm not labeling any real-world people polyamorous if they would not call themselves that. these are fictional characters so we can interpret them however we want. So let's explore all the ways that I see past lives as a not-so-secretly polyamorous film.

TITLECARD: SYNOPSIS

Let's start with a brief synopsis. In case you haven't seen it, obviously spoilers ahead. We actually open the movie looking at these characters through the eyes of confused onlookers who have no idea what this relationship even is.

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Onlooker 1: Who do you think they are to each other?

Onlooker 2: I don't know...

Been there! Been there. I think gossip avant luggers is a rite of passage for a lot of polyamorous people.

TITLECARD: 24 YEARS EARLIER

We meet the main character Na Young as a young girl in Korea. After her initial introduction, she actually picks her English name Nora.

Na Young: I don't have an English name that I like.

Na Young's father: How's Leonore?

Na Young: Nora. Nora Moon.

So I'm going to be using both names interchangeably because that's what the film does. At the same time. We also meet her best friend and crush, Hae Sung.

Na Young: Hm. Yeah. I will probably marry him.

Na Young's mother: Would you like to go on a date with him?

This is setting the tone for: yes they are young, and yes it is brief, but it feels significant. However, her parents have already decided they are going to be immigrating to Canada. She's going to leave Hae Sung. they are destined to head down two very different paths.

We flash forward and Nora is now living in New York. She's pursuing a career as a playwright, and sort of on a whim she goes on to newly founded social media, and looks up Hae Sung, only to find out that he was actually looking for her too.

Ah the Skype sound! Side note – how much did Skype fumble the bag when it came to the lock downs? like you could have been Zoom baby, you were primed to be Zoom... Anyway, so that also, you know, contextualizes the era of the 2010s, early 2010s, they are reconnecting via Skype and begin chatting online on a very regular basis.

However, Na Young realizes that the lives that each of them are pursuing, along with their present circumstances of a 14 hour time difference. They are in two very different worlds. There are huge barriers to their connection. She is sort of

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overwhelmed by that. It's this question of like, "what is this? How are we going to keep doing this?" And she asked us to stop chatting for a while.

Hae Sung: It took me 12 years to find my friend...

Hae Sung is upset but can't fully admit why.

Hae Sung: Why are you sorry? What, were we dating or something?

And at that point, they disconnect again. Nora leaves the city for a writer's retreat where she meets Arthur and they fall in love. We get another time jump where Nora and Arthur are married now in New York. And Hae Sung, having just broken up with his longtime girlfriend, takes a trip to visit the city for the first time. He's denying to his friends that it has anything to do with Na Young. But...

Nora (to Arthur): He came here to see me.

After spending the day with her, a lot of tension, a lot of long pauses and deep emotions welling up. It's clear that that's why he's there. At first glance, this could look like the cliché love triangle we've seen a million times, the trope of two romantic interests with someone caught in the middle. Except in those stories usually there's secrets and lies you know, it's not all out in the open with everyone knowing what is happening.

But as well, usually there's this competition inherent to the unfolding of those stories, where the person in the middle is trying to gauge who's quote unquote "best", who's going to win. and then when they ultimately do pick the winner, monogamy is framed by the movie as being a relief, a happy ending, a conclusion that is comforting like a warm blanket, you don't have to struggle anymore. You don't have to choose anymore. You've picked one. And now you can rest, right? that's kind of how those love triangle competitions usually unfold.

But in past lives, they do everything differently. They challenge monogamous norms on purpose. They say "why is this what we have to do?" Our protagonist openly explores concurrent love with the men supporting this, and then the two men even get to know each other and make an effort to be kind and supportive to each other.

Arthur (in Korean): Uh. Are you hungry?

Hae Sung (in English): Uh. Pasta?

Arthur (in English): Pasta? Yeah!

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That's polyamorous is hell.

TITLECARD: VISUAL METAPHOR

I think an extra layer to this love story is how it is told. It is a love poem full of metaphor, full of symbols and rhythms and yearning and aching. It is Vibes, it is not explicit, or on-the-nose hardly ever at all. And it feels like the script and the dialogue is accentuating, maybe filling in the gaps, to what you see rather than the other way around.

Let's talk about Bridges and Windows. Let's talk about connections and barriers. Bridges being structural connections. They are often driven over when characters feel close to each other. They are seen broken and fractured in the background when characters are feeling distant from each other. A bridge dominates the shot when Hae Sung and Na Young are finally reconnecting again in person for the first time in years. And similarly to bridges, we've got Windows showing up over and over again. Outside looking in. Like "You're so close, I can see you but there is something in the way". Characters will be isolated, staring out of windows when they feel alone.

But not all of the windows are closed. When we first see Arthur, it is through an open window. There is a notable lack of any sort of barrier between them. The house, where they are staying for the art residency, notably features countless open doors and windows to an almost kinda ridiculous degree like "Okay, girl, we get it". But yes, this is a place where connecting is easy. We're hearts are open, and there's nothing in the way.

And so once I clocked those metaphors, I started looking for other infrastructure that was playing a role in people getting together or being pushed apart. In New York, when Na Young and Hae Sung are waiting to board a ferry to go around Liberty Island, an American flag is literally in between them, it is separating them in the frame. And while they ride the boat, they stare up at the Statue of Liberty, one of the most well known symbols of the US and Hae Sung comments, "She has turned against us".

I think probably one of my favorite visual metaphors is a representation of childhood and memory, which is the spinning carousel. While Nora is sort of time traveling in her mind, bringing herself back to growing up in Korea or reconnecting with Hae Sung, on what they did share together and overlap in real life. That has this carousel just spinning behind her, lit and animated and her head is swirling. I find that to be

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very hypnotic and really beautiful. And then later, when she is back talking with Arthur about how she usually only dreams in Korean, she doesn't dream in English, he is feeling a little bit separated. He doesn't have access to that part of her; he doesn't have the ability to ever share the same mother tongue or share a similar childhood culture. And we end that scene and that sort of ache cutting back to the carousel with the lights turning off.

Arthur (to Nora): You dream in a language that I can't understand. It's like there's this whole place inside of you where I can't go.

On my Patreon I have a long form video called "Why don't we share that?" which does explore a bit more of the distress that can come up when you don't share everything with a partner like you're told you're supposed to. But I see that here, where there's a lot of tension and insecurity, especially on Arthur's part, at his realization that he will always be from the US. Korean will always be a learned-in-adulthood language, an entered-into-adulthood culture, he will always be a guest in that space. He will never be Korean. Right? And so that creates this feeling of like, "am I enough for you? I don't understand your dreams, does that mean something's wrong with our relationship?"

And I imagine even if Hae Sung wasn't in the picture, he would feel that ache. But when there is another love interest or another significant connection, that can then spotlight the fears or insecurities we already had. that can then shine a light on like, "Oh, I really feel this now, it is really contrasted now. And I'm suddenly very aware of and confronted with all of the things that I fear I am not enough of."

Arthur: Childhood sweethearts who reconnect 20 years later only to realize they were meant for each other... In the story, I would be the evil white American husband standing in the way of destiny.

He's not sure if, in a monogamous context, he has the place he thought he had. And funnily enough, actually, both men do express different kinds of insecurities. Hae Sung is talking about how he feels like he would never be enough for her, how she has always had, you know, these very big ideas and big ambitions, and he fears that he's too regular or basic, and she would leave him behind.

Hae Sung: I'm too ordinary.

Nora: You're ordinary?

Hae Sung: My job is ordinary, my income is ordinary. It's all ordinary.

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Meanwhile, Arthur is also a best selling author and creative. And in that respect, he and Nora are a bit more of peers there. So both of these relationships have a lot of significance. And she is their equal in a lot of ways. And the two men are very different from each other. But very importantly, Nora is not doing that to them. she is not weighing her options; she is spending time with and appreciating what each man is, not what they aren't.

So I think that that is also very familiar. And I encourage that when people are practicing polyamory, to try and get the competition out of your head. Because, if actually, what you're doing is trying to accept that so many different kinds of love can exist, then we don't want to compare the incomparable.

TITLECARD: MULTIPLE SELVES

So with these multiple sides of Nora – which we keep being reminded of, inherent to the fact that we go switching back and forth between her Korean and English names – There are several selves in the mix. Using that sense of multiple selves as an entry point to recognize that we can have multiple loves, we can hold several ideas as not contradictory, but rather just parts of a tapestry. And we see this experience of multiple aspects of ourselves explored deeper with the concept of In-Yun.

Nora: It means providence. But it's specifically about relationships between people. It's an In-Yun if two strangers even walk by each other in the street, and their clothes accidentally brush, because it means there must have been something between them in their past lives. If two people get married, they say it's because there have been 8000 layers of In-Yun over 8000 lifetimes.

It challenges the Western – so called Western – narrative of having just one life, of having just one soulmate. So by centering this love story around the concept of In-Yun, it spotlights how relative cultural norms are. And we can know it, but I think it's different to see it, experience it, see an example of it right? That few things are universally normal, including how we love or how we structure our love.

TITLECARD: MONOGAMOUS NORMALITY

So In-Yun challenges mononormativity, but I think – at least in the way that this film and these characters interpret In-Yun – I think it can also reinforce or justify a different kind of mononormativity.

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Nora (to Hae Sung): But in this life, we don't have the In-Yun to be that kind of person to each other.

Hae Sung: In this life, you and Arthur are that kind of In-Yun to each other.

Couldn't you have multiple people with 8000 layers of In-Yun? I guess I struggled to see, or the film struggled to explain, why it had to be this way. It almost accepted as given fact that only one person could occupy this closest space. And that part felt a little disappointing at the very least, but I'm curious if that's actually at the core of the In-Yun concept, or if that's like the filmmakers interpretation of it. So if you have any different insights, you know, I would love to hear about that in the comments.

TITLECARD: METAMOUR RELATIONSHIP

And Nora is not the only one who has In-Yun with the men, they also have it with each other. The connection between Arthur and Hae Sung, this metamour connection, the relationship between the partner of your partner, when Arthur and Hae Sung are interacting, they have now their own relationship. They have their own dynamic independent of her. She removes herself from the table. And there is a moment where the two men are alone. And they are trying to speak, they're trying to connect, they're trying to see and learn about and validate the other person.

Arthur (to Hae Sung): Really glad you came here. It was the right thing to do.

I was just heartened, and if I'm being real, pleasantly surprised, to see this in a film. To see how generous and thoughtful they all were in this moment, that no one's wishing the other would leave already, or being underhanded and playing games. there's no power struggle here. There is no disingenuous passive aggressive or cruel competition between the men.

Hae Sung: You and me.

Arthur: Yeah, yeah, you and I, are In-Yun too.

That got me. That still gets me. because it is so reaffirming, that we can know each other in infinite ways. They are implicitly open to all the other ways that their one-on-one relationship can look in future or in past lives.

Hae Sung: Nice to meet you.

Arthur: Nice to meet you too/

Hae Sung: Come visit me in Korea.

Arthur: Definitely.

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It felt so expansive, it felt so full of love, it felt so unrestricted and like no one was imposing rules and barriers and gates to the nature of two humans interacting. They just let the interaction swell, and be new and different, and undefined and scary, but still feeling that warmth. that is so beautiful to me. And I really just related a lot.

TITLECARD: WHEN MONOGAMY BREAKS YOUR HEART

That said, this ultimately does turn into a film that is pretty heartbreaking. Plenty of movies about monogamy are beautiful and rewarding and I'm rooting for them. I'm so glad that they found each other. But the fact that this film ends in monogamy, it feels tragic.

Hae Sung: What if this is a past life as well, and we are already something else to each other in our next life?

Na Young: I don't know.

Hae Sung: Me neither.

No one is happy about it. Nora breaks down in tears. Arthur is sad for her trying to comfort her. Hae Sung says basically "I'll see you in another life I guess" and leaves. They are all mourning love that they think cannot be. But why can't it? For a story desperately wanting to challenge norms, a story calling out the cultural differences of social constructs, it also at the same time resigns itself to stay stuck in a norm of monogamy, to just let the social construct of mononormativity go unexamined, go unchallenged. When we see that the characters can stretch themselves, we see that they're capable of pushing past artificial limits that they were just told they should have, in pursuit of doing what feels more real or more honest. They can imagine a different way of doing things but they stopped short of imagining how this could be a happy ending. And I see it so clearly for them, I want to reach through the screen and shake them because they don't even try. and it is possible. This heartbreak is so avoidable in my opinion, and so that really adds to the tragedy for me.

This is a beautiful film. It is patient and soft and stunning to watch. I absolutely recommend it. And, if you are polyamorous, my warning would be to go in prepared, to proceed with caution. Because you might really see yourself represented and love that and feel excited by it, until you suddenly don't. And that can be a sharp turn to make, it can be a big drop to experience. So I'd be curious your thoughts and feelings on past lives, what angles I missed, or you think I misinterpreted. I'd love to know what your takeaway was and how it hit you. Otherwise, thank you so much for being here and I will see you next time.

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