

The Past/Le Passé (2013)

“In these cases, you can never be sure.”

Major Credits:

Writing and Direction: Asghar Farhadi

Cinematography: Mahmoud Kalari

Principal Cast: Bérénice Bejo (Marie), Ali Mosaffa (Ahmad), Tahar Rahim (Samir), Pauline Burlet (Lucie), Elyes Aguit (Fouad), Jeanne Jestin (Léa), Sabrina Ouazani (Naïma), Babak Karimi (Shahryra)

Production Background:

Following the international success of *A Separation*, Farhadi's sixth feature is his first outside Iran, filmed in French (a language he does not speak) in Sevran, a mixed neighborhood on the outskirts of Paris. Viewers familiar with the earlier work will recognize Farhadi's tightly constructed script around the topic of divorce, the astonishing performances of an ensemble cast that features children, and his preference for shooting in confined spaces. The opening shot at the airport, in fact, is almost a sequel to the closing shot in *A Separation*: a couple separated by a partition that precludes communication. Marion Cotillard was originally cast for the role played by Bérénice Bejo (*The Artist*). As is his practice, Farhadi rehearsed his actors for three months prior to shooting, having them improvise many scenes that were not part of the film itself.

Although it did not garner quite the same international acclaim as *A Separation*, *The Past* did earn strong reviews and a Best Actress award for Bejo at the Cannes Festival.

Cinematic Aspects:

1. Set design: Farhadi was a theatrical set designer before he became a filmmaker. He participated in the meticulous design of the apartment, with its many small rooms and wide openings to allow for tracking shots and birds-eye views. Although a long shot establishes its location at the side of railroad tracks, the actual apartment was constructed on a studio sound stage. The claustrophobic tension is mirrored by the tight interior shots.
2. Setting: Although shot in Paris, the film goes to great lengths to avoid showing any tourist sights—this is a Paris rarely seen by Westerners, the very opposite of Woody Allen's *Midnight in Paris* (2011). This depiction has at least two effects: 1) it reflects the current conditions in a “borderless” Europe where immigrants have disturbed the older sense of nationality and *fraternité*; 2) it suggests the alienated states of mind of the protagonists, separated from their families, lacking moral certainties, trying to re-build a sense of place.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Farhadi has acknowledged the profoundly ethical concerns running through his films as well as his empathy for all his characters. Consider how each of the adult characters here—including Lucie and Naïma—remain both morally flawed and fundamentally sympathetic.

2. The screenplay is partially structured by a series of apologies—Ahmad to Marie, Samir to Marie, the kids to Ahmar, Naïma to Samir—none of which seem unreservedly accepted. “Some things are unforgiveable,” Samir concludes. How does the film force us to reconsider the nature of apologies? Put another way, what is an apology supposed to accomplish, and is the effort worthwhile?
3. Ahmad alone has no back story (although an early draft described him as a filmmaker), other than coming from Iran: “You were not made for this place,” his friend tells him. “I’m nobody in this story,” he protests to Marie. How does his detachment affect your response to his character? Or apply this question another way to his ex-wife: what is the effect of knowing that Marie is about to marry for a third time and is expecting to raise a fourth child?
4. The film’s ending drew a lot of attention, including from some reviewers who seem to have missed an important detail. As with *A Separation*, viewers are left in the same position as the characters within the frame, without resolution and between hope and despair. Pay close attention, then discuss your response to the closing image.