

# Aftersun 2022

Translated by Kornelia Kincses

## 1. The Plot

The story takes place in the late 1990s to early 2000s. Eleven-year-old Sophie and her young father, who is in his thirties, spend their summer holiday at a Turkish beach resort. Sophie's parents are separated, so this trip with her dad is an opportunity for them to spend quality time together.

### 1.1 Events of the Holiday

The film seemingly depicts ordinary moments:

- Diving together, playing billiards, and sunbathing at the pool.
- Sophie, who is on the threshold of adolescence, meets older peers.
- Calum makes an effort to provide his daughter with a carefree experience while trying to hide his own struggles.

### 1.2 Tension underneath the Surface

Although the holiday appears idyllic at first glance, subtle signs suggest that Calum is carrying a heavy emotional burden. He is struggling with depression, financial difficulties, and the pressures of being a father. These issues surface when Sophie is not present—for example, during lonely nights or through his sudden, withdrawn behavior.

### 1.3 The Framework of Memory

The story is told from the perspective of the adult Sophie, who is trying to reconstruct her image of her father twenty years later. As an adult, she seeks to understand the man she loved as a child but was unable to fully perceive in his emotional pain at the time.

## 2. Psychological Analysis of the Film

### 2.1 Psychological Phenomena Occurring in the Film

*Depression:* The portrayal of a functional but deeply rooted melancholy and despair through Calum's character.

*The subjectivity and fragmented nature of memory:* How adult Sophie tries to reconstruct her father's image from fragments of memory and video recordings.

*Retrospective recognition:* The process of, as an adult, understanding signs that were not recognized in childhood, such as the father's pain.

*Father-daughter dynamics:* The duality of unconditional love and the unbridgeable emotional distance between them.

*Grief and processing loss:* The entire film functions as a silent process of grieving, guiding the viewer toward coming to terms with the past.

*Coming-of-age:* From Sophie's perspective, it marks the end of childhood and the recognition of parental vulnerability.

*Generational differences and alienation:* The subtle emotional distance between daughter and father during the summer holiday.

*Crisis of the father role:* Calum struggles with expectations, responsibilities, and his own internal demons, which he tries to hide from his daughter.

## **2.2 Detailed Analysis**

### *Depression*

The film portrays the dynamics of hidden, atypical depression through Calum's character. According to cognitive psychology, a depressed person's everyday life is shaped by the cognitive triad—negative beliefs about the self, the world, and the future (Beck, 1976). In Calum's case, his apparent sense of having no future may suggest suicidal ideation, which is often associated with emotional numbness (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2022)

### *The Subjectivity and Fragmented Nature of Memory*

The film's narrative is grounded in the concept of reconstructive memory. Since Frederic Bartlett's (1932) groundbreaking work, it has been understood that memories are not static imprints but are continuously reconstructed in light of our present knowledge and schemas. Adult Sophie attempts to fill gaps in her memory with the help of video recordings, reflecting the interaction between episodic and semantic memory described in memory research (Tulving, 2002).

According to recent research, memories recorded by digital devices can significantly alter the way we process experiences, supporting the construction of narrative coherence during the grieving process. (Garden-Hansen, 2021).

### *Retrospective Recognition and Mentalisation*

Adult Sophie becomes capable of mentalisation, meaning she can infer the mental states and intentions underlying others'—in this case, her father's—behaviour (Fonagy & Target, 2006). As a child, due to cognitive egocentrism (Piaget, 1952), she focused primarily on her own experiences; however, as an adult, she comes to recognize her father's vulnerability through the process of deidealisation.

### *Attachment Dynamics (father-daughter relationship)*

Their relationship reflects an ambivalent, or insecure, attachment pattern. According to John Bowlby's attachment theory, parents should serve as a "secure base"; however, Calum's emotional isolation and unpredictable withdrawals disrupt this sense of security, which may have long-term effects on the child's development.

### *Grief and Trauma Processing*

The entire film can be seen as an experiment in narrative integration. According to trauma theory, unprocessed, fragmented memories can only be worked through when they are organised into a coherent story (van der Kolk, 2014). Sophie processes her grief by arranging fragments of the past into a narrative, a process that Sigmund Freud identified as essential for detaching from melancholy.

### *Crisis of the Father Role and Repression*

Calum's struggles highlight the constraints of social expectations and traditional masculinity. Research suggests that men often mask depression through somatisation or anger, as displaying vulnerability conflicts with conventional gender norms (Addis, 2008).

In light of recent research, Calum's withdrawal and emotional outbursts can be understood as characteristic features of male depression, in which psychological distress is frequently expressed through avoidant or risk-taking behaviours (e.g., his nighttime swim in the sea) (Rice et al., 2021).

## **2.3 Psychologically Significant Scenes**

### **2.3.1 The Karaoke Scene**

One of the emotional turning points of the film is the karaoke scene, in which the previously subtle cracks widen into deep chasms between Sophie and Calum. In this scene, Sophie sings "Losing My Religion" by R.E.M. alone, as her father—breaking with the tradition of previous years—coldly rejects performing on stage with her.

### *Interpersonal Rejection and the Attachment Trauma*

The central element of the scene is interpersonal rejection, which is unexpected and distressing for Sophie. According to John Bowlby's (1988) attachment theory, a child develops an internal working model based on their parents' responsiveness. When Calum refuses to participate in a ritual that previously signified security and unity, Sophie experiences emotional unavailability. In this moment, the secure base is temporarily lost: she stands on stage, exposed to the audience, while the one person from whom she seeks support becomes a passive observer.

Recent longitudinal research suggests that a parent's "invisible" depression and emotional withdrawal can significantly affect a child's capacity for emotional regulation, even in the absence of physical neglect (Stein et al., 2020).

### *Anhedonia and Depressive Isolation*

Calum's behaviour is indicative of anhedonia, a common symptom associated with major depression (APA, 2022). The scene highlights the fact that his internal pain is so overwhelming that he is unable to maintain the illusion of being a "good father." According to the cognitive model of depression (Aaron T. Beck, 1976), individuals can become so absorbed in negative thought patterns that positive experiences from the external world—even those involving their own child—may feel distant, irritating, or unbearable. In this sense, the rejection is not directed at Sophie, but reflects Calum's inability to experience joy.

### *Role Transition and the Beginning of Childlike Mentalisation*

In this scene, Sophie is confronted with what psychology refers to as parental abandonment, even though it is unintentional. According to Fonagy and Target's (2006) theory, this is the moment when Sophie begins to understand that her father's inner world does not necessarily revolve around her needs. The choice of song (*Losing My Religion*) is symbolic: Sophie loses her belief in her father's emotional omnipotence. This marks the beginning of a painful process of deidealisation (Piaget, 1952), in which the parent is no longer perceived as a stable source of security but as an unpredictable and suffering individual.

### *Communication Barrier and "Stonewalling"*

Gottman's (1994) concept of stonewalling aptly describes Calum's reaction in the tense aftermath of the scene. When Sophie attempts to confront or approach him, he responds with emotional withdrawal. In depressed parents, this form of disengagement can function as a distorted defence mechanism: they may believe that by withholding emotion they are protecting the child. In reality, however, it often deepens the child's sense of alienation.

### **2.3.2 The Scene of Spitting on the Mirror**

In this scene, Calum looks at himself in the mirror while applying sunscreen to Sophie. In a sudden moment, he spits at his own reflection.

### *The Fragmentation of Self-image*

This scene offers a stark depiction of the fragmentation of self-image and self-loathing. According to the cognitive model of depression (Aaron T. Beck, 1976), an individual's internal dialogue is often dominated by persistent self-devaluation. Calum's action suggests that he cannot tolerate the image of himself, which reflects the tension between the "functional father" he presents to the outside world and his internal impulses toward self-destruction.

According to recent research, self-loathing is a distinct aspect of depression that is more strongly associated with suicidal thoughts than general sadness. Calum's act of spitting at the mirror can be understood as a physical rejection of his own self-image. Powell et al. (2020) note that self-loathing often manifests as "bodily disgust," in which individuals feel unable to tolerate their own physical presence.

The duality of care is also evident: while hating himself, Calum continues to care for Sophie, applying sun cream to protect her. This can be understood as a form of reaction formation, in which he directs his energy into her well-being—ensuring she does not get sunburnt—while he himself is already emotionally burned out.

While taking care of Sophie by applying sunscreen, Calum catches sight of himself in the mirror and perceives a stranger—someone unable to live up to his own expectations. Seidler et al. (2023), in their work on male mental health, introduce the concept of “male depressive conformity”: men often experience intense internal tension when trying to fulfil the role of the caring father while internally feeling emotionally depleted.

### **2.3.3 Farewell at the Airport, the Last Recording**

At the end of the film, we see the holiday come to a close: Calum waves goodbye to Sophie at the airport, then turns and walks into a dark corridor, which dissolves into a stroboscopic, disco-like vision.

#### *Final Separation*

This scene symbolises the final separation and the process of grieving. The disco sequence, in which adult Sophie tries to reach her dancing father, represents the intrusion of traumatic memory. Bessel van der Kolk (2014) suggests that unprocessed trauma often returns in vivid flashes, accompanied by a sense of timelessness.

Adult Sophie attempts to connect with her father through digital recordings. Recent research in media psychology (Haskins, 2022) examines the phenomenon of “digital haunting,” in which such recordings become both a source of comfort and a trigger for distress. The wave at the airport becomes the last “live” memory, endlessly replayed through technology, potentially preventing a sense of traditional closure.

The metaphor of departing into darkness: as Calum walks into the darkness, it may symbolise not only the end of the holiday but also his final departure from his life. For adult Sophie, this moment represents the culmination of her search for identity, as she attempts to integrate the image of her loving father with that of the stranger lost in depression (Garde-Hansen, 2021).

### **3. Recommended Questions for Processing**

- How is depression represented in Calum’s behaviour?
- What influence might Calum’s depression have on Sophie’s life as an adult?
- How did Sophie experience the holiday as a child?
- How does she perceive the holiday as an adult?
- How does Sophie feel during the karaoke scene?
- How does Calum feel in the mirror scene?
- In the closing airport scene, what might the disco doorway symbolise?

# Acceptance Wild Roots (2021)

Translated by Kornelia Kincses

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 centre of these interactive sessions is the 2021 film Wild Roots that creates an opportunity for young people to think about the importance of connections and the sense of belonging in relation to their own experiences. During the discussion young people can express how they experience their presence in their communities; how does it feel when they are accepted, what effect does loneliness and exclusion have and how does this all influence their self-acceptance. Processing the film creates an opportunity for young people to think about the specific issues of social existence occurring in adolescence and young adulthood, and the balance between social integration and personal identity through their own experiences. The reflections may highlight the challenges of the digital age, which has a huge impact on young people’s social experiences nowadays. The aim is to help students express their own feelings and thoughts, develop greater awareness of the resources and challenges inherent in human relationships, and improve self-reflection and social competences. 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. Processing the topics is scaffolded by a wide range of materials and activities that help participants’ active involvement and collective thinking. During the discussion, it is useful to prevent the shared experiences from becoming too intimate, since in a group setting it may cause anxiety. The role of the facilitator is to support participants in verbalising their experiences, but prevent the dialogue from becoming too personal. It might be useful, for instance, to help self-reflection with general examples, and questions that create a safe environment for expressing emotions, but at the same time avoid the risk of excessive self-disclosure. However, it is important to provide the possibility for sharing personal thoughts and experiences if needed. It is useful to emphasise empathy, acceptance of different perspectives, and the fact that there are more than one answer to a question.

## 1. Tuning-in - First Impressions and Emotional Resonance

Sharing the first impressions and emotional experiences in connection with the film can help participants initiate self-reflection and begin thinking about their own inner processes within a safe framework. This phase of the discussion promotes the development of emotional awareness in adolescence and young adulthood, which is one of the key elements of self-awareness at this stage of life. When young people reflect on how the film affected them, they also practice identifying and verbalising their own emotional responses, which helps them to handle and communicate their

feelings with greater awareness. The questions supporting tuning-in do not require deep or personal self-disclosure, but they create an opportunity for young people to express their experiences and impressions. In order to minimise potential anxiety, it is beneficial to emphasise at the beginning that each and every personal experience is valid and valued. Sharing feelings and associations create a shared experience, since the members of the group recognise that others have similar emotions and thoughts, which strengthens the connection and the feeling of security. All of these ensure that the processing discussion begins in an open, honest and safe atmosphere, laying the foundation for further collaborative work on heavier topics.

### Conversation Starter Questions

- What feelings did the film leave you with?
- Which scenes had the greatest impact on you?
- If you had to describe the atmosphere or message of the film with one word, what would it be?

### 0. Processing the Film Experience and Seeking Points of Identification

This phase of the discussion creates an opportunity for participants to engage with topics indirectly through the characters, enabling reflection on matters that may concern their own lives. This phase of the discussion offers an indirect approach, where participants can explore the dilemmas of loneliness, sense of belonging, acceptance and self-acceptance through the perspectives of the characters while avoiding excessive self-disclosure. This indirect approach is essential at this age since young people's, especially adolescents' emotional world is intense, and it is often difficult for them to express and verbalise their emotions, problems and anxieties. It is much easier to reflect on a fictional character's decisions, dilemmas and life situations because that way they do not have to talk openly about their own vulnerabilities. The film thus provides a projective space through which participants can explore their own experiences, insecurities and inner conflicts, which helps with self-reflection and processing experiences. Analysing the characters and the supporting, plot-related questions help young people to identify the dilemmas of exclusion, loneliness, sense of belonging, desire for connection and self-acceptance without having to express their own emotions directly. This creates an opportunity for self-reflection while keeping distance from self-disclosure. Personal associations linked to the film provide an opportunity for participants to explore their own life situations and experiences, and they gently cross over from the storyline of the film to the bridge leading into their own reality. The discussion in the group works as a model: it helps participants practice forming opinions, listening to others' perspectives and expressing thoughts in a safe way.

### Conversation Starter Questions

- How would you describe the two main characters? What are their strengths and weaknesses? How do they relate to their environment?

- What might have motivated Niki to seek a connection with her father despite all the obstacles? What does this show about her inner needs and desires?
- What could explain Tibor and Niki's attachment, even though they barely know each other?
- Have you noticed that both main characters are searching for their place in the world? What signs suggested this in the film?
- How did the film portray Tibor and Niki's isolation? Which scenes expressed their loneliness the most?
- Why do you think Niki felt that she had to show a different self for her peers? How is this in connection with the desire for acceptance?
- What do you think Niki's shoes symbolised? How did they contribute to the story and the character's inner struggles?
- What could have Tibor done differently so that his environment accepted him more easily? What external and internal factors stood in his way and how can we interpret his decisions?
- How did you perceive Tibor's relationship to himself and his past? How did this affect his behaviour towards his daughter?
- How would you interpret the title of the film (Wild Roots)? What message could the title send about relationships, community and being an outsider?
- Why do you think Tibor turned back at the end of the film? What does it mean in relation to the father-daughter relationship?
- If you could give advice to either Niki or Tibor at the end of the film what would it be? How could it help them with self-acceptance or forming relationships?

## 0. Loneliness and Solitude

Adolescence and young adulthood is all about identity exploration and transformation of relationships (Ruiz, & Yabut, 2024). The absence of a supportive, holding environment and meaningful, fulfilling connections can be especially impactful for this age group. Chronic loneliness is strongly connected to the occurrence of mental health issues (Matthews, et al., 2023). Having a discussion about loneliness can help the participants recognise that these feelings are universal, presented in everybody's life, yet can be experienced in completely different forms. Anxiety and tension can already be relieved by facing the fact that they are not alone with their feelings, their peers fight the same battles as they do. This alone reduces the feeling of isolation, strengthens the sense of belonging to a community and supports empathy towards others.

During the discussion it is helpful to emphasise the difference between loneliness and solitude. Loneliness is usually experienced as a painful and isolating sense of deprivation in which the quality or quantity of our relationships does not meet our needs (Supke, Hahlweg, Job & Schulz, 2025). People often do not feel genuinely connected even when physically surrounded by others. It is important to emphasise that the fear of being alone is quite common among young people (Corsano, Grazia & Molinari, 2019). As a result of this, they force themselves to create social situations around them, however, these connections are often superficial and they lack emotional stability. This mechanism can maintain or intensify the experience of loneliness in the long run. During the discussion, it is made aware that solitude is not necessarily a negative state, but it creates an opportunity for identifying personal needs and

improving self-awareness. Solitude can be a relaxing and self-reflective experience that can serve as an inner resource (McVarnock, Cheng, Polakova & Coplan, 2023). Making this distinction can assist young people in approaching their experiences more consciously, recognising when they genuinely need social interaction and when spending time alone may be more restorative.

It might be an important experience to recognise that the modern forms of interaction, such as social media, offer a possibility for connection, but at the same time they involve the risk of loneliness (Pum, Salama, Lin, Kirschmann, Johnstonn & Hendel, 2025). When examining the experience of loneliness, special attention should be paid to the impact of the digital world, since that is the primary setting for interactions among young people. Although social media and constant connectivity appear to offer a continuous opportunity for interaction, they often reinforce the feeling of isolation. Interactions experienced on social media platforms are often superficial, transient and do not necessarily offer real emotional security. Moreover, young people are exposed to constant comparisons. The idealised and carefully curated self-presentations of others may contribute to self-esteem issues and intensify the feeling of loneliness. Thinking about this phenomena during the group discussion may help young people to see online interaction more realistic and critical. In addition to this, the discussion draws attention to those forms of connection that provide genuine support and resources for us, such as friendships, family bonds or community experiences. It is also emphasised that everyone has such resources (people, places, activities) that provide support when the feeling of loneliness intensifies.

### Conversation Starter Questions

- If loneliness was a weather condition, what would it be like and why?
- Do you think that loneliness is more like noise or silence?
- Have you ever experienced loneliness while having family and friends around? Why do you think this feeling might arise?
- Have you ever felt like an outsider in a friendship group or community? How did it feel?
- Does it happen that you chose to be alone on purpose? When do you feel that being alone is more calming and recharging rather than making you feel lonely?
- Has it ever happened that someone joined a group simply for not being alone?
- Do you think that social media and online interactions reduce or increase loneliness? What is your personal experience about this matter?
- Why do you think so many young people feel lonely today, even though the internet allows them to stay in touch with almost everyone?
- Was there a time of your life where you felt lonely? What helped you feel better?
- Name three of your resources (person, place, activity) that would make you feel better when you experienced loneliness?

### 0. The Significance of Social Groups and the Human Need for Belonging

Belonging to a community and the need to feel connected are fundamental human needs, which become particularly important in adolescence and emerging adulthood as the experience of acceptance contributes to the development of healthy self-

esteem and identity formation (Allen, et al., 2024). Belonging means healthy, stable and positive relationships, and it involves interactions based on mutual care (Howard, Dadirai, Gwenzi, Newsome, Gebru & Gilberston Wilke, 2023). One of the most important psychosocial characteristics of adolescence is the strong orientations towards peers and the increased need for belonging to a community (Cole&Cole 2006). Young people partly define themselves through the groups they belong to. Belonging to a group gives them the feeling of security, emotional support and identity, and it helps consolidate their personal and social identity (Ragelienè, 2016). The group norms and expectations strongly influence young people's thinking, decisions and values. Stable attachments and social support continue to serve as crucial protective factors during emerging adulthood (Lane, 2015). This phase of life is a critical stage for strengthening of identity, where young people face several new challenges. Such challenges are the studies, fitting in the world of work, independence, separation from family, long-term relationships and building friendship networks. Secure attachments and supporting social connections work as psychological resources in these transitions. However, the influence of the community can also have negative effects so it may be beneficial to draw attention to its dual nature.

Belonging to a group is versatile: family, school/university communities, friendship circles, sports, hobbies and online groups all serve different purposes in young people's lives. The diversity of social belonging points out that the identity is not static but is continuously shaped through connections with different groups (Erikson, 1968). Young people often take different roles in different social settings, they behave differently with family, at school or in an online community. Changing roles serves the development of social competencies, but at the same time it can create dilemmas about the question of identity (Meeus, 2011). The processing discussion creates an opportunity for participants to recognise that it is fine to show different sides of themselves in different social groups, since this is a natural part of social development. It is beneficial to talk about the times they feel this change authentic and the times it feels like the result of external expectations. This type of self-reflection helps them to recognise the situations, where they feel authentic and the communities that support their development and the ones that can exert a constraining influence. This awareness can help young people to develop a more nuanced understanding of their social roles, to identify constructive and harmful group dynamics, and to make more conscious decisions regarding the communities they choose to engage with.

The reflection about communities can help young people differentiate between supportive, constructive group influence and harmful, destructive dynamics. Supportive communities offer a secure frame, strengthen the sense of competence, develop a healthy self-expression and contribute to the positive reinforcement of identity (Masten, Burt, Roisman, Obradović, Long & Tellegen, 2004). However, communities with negative effects often present conformity, exclusion, too much emphasis on hierarchy or destructive behaviour (such as aggression, deviance) (Regeliene, 2016). These kinds of experiences may lead to self-esteem issues, insecurity or maladaptive behaviour strategies. That is why it might be crucial to think together about what makes a good community. This kind of mindset helps them to recognise that the quality of social belonging is at least as important as the mere fact of belonging. It is a useful experience for young people to verbalise the values, aims, habits and behavioural patterns they attribute to a secure and supportive community. This helps not only with the interpretation of the group experiences, but also projects

the skill of choosing communities more wisely in the future, and it actively contributes to the formation of community norms.

### Conversation Starter Questions

- Why do you think it is important for people to belong to a community?
- What feelings come to your mind when you think of the sense of belonging? Why those feelings? If you had to describe the sense of belonging with one movement, metaphor or image what would it be and why? Think of an object, natural phenomenon or colour that symbolises this feeling for you?
- What communities do you belong to? Which ones are the most important for you? How did priorities change in the last few years?
- In what ways do you think your group memberships define your identity? How did a community you are a member of affect who you are?
- Can you say an example of a community forming your opinion, decisions or values?
- Imagine that one of your communities stops existing from tomorrow? What changes would you feel in yourself or in your life?
- Have you ever noticed that you behave differently and take different roles in different groups? For instance, do you behave differently with your family, in school or on an online platform? Why is that and what does it say about you?
- Have you ever experienced a situation where the community had a negative impact on you or someone else? If yes, what happened and what did you learn from it?
- What do you think makes a community 'good' or 'bad'? If you had the possibility, what kind of community would you create? What would it be like, who would you like to see in it and what kind of habits, experiences and values would you like to have?

### 0. Acceptance and Fitting In

Acceptance and fitting in is a crucial question in adolescence and emerging adulthood as the quality of peer relationships and the sense of belonging to a community affect young people's self-esteem, identity and mental wellbeing directly (Ragekienè, 2016; Rejaän et al., 2022). The supportive community environment serves as a protective factor: it provides security, emotional support and stability (Butler et al., 2022) while exclusion, abuse and bullying can cause serious psychological damage (Han, Ye & Zhong, 2025). Discussing the topic collectively can help young people become aware that through their own behaviour they also contribute to shaping the atmosphere of the community, and that they share responsibility for ensuring that everyone feels safe. An important aspect is that young people recognise that the destructive effects of the lack of acceptance influence not only the victim, but also the atmosphere of the group, while an inclusive attitude creates a more secure and open environment for everybody. Such awareness can support participants in recognising their own role in maintaining and shaping community norms. The discussion also gives an opportunity for participants to reflect on what makes a community truly inclusive, what small gestures or actions can support the integration of new members, and how they can prevent anyone from feeling excluded. Collective reflection not only develops empathy but also

offers practical ideas for how to consciously and actively contribute to maintaining and creating a supportive community environment. The digital world deserves special attention since bullying and exclusion occurring online have different dynamics compared to face-to-face interactions. Anonymity or physical distance often reduce empathy and intensity aggression. It is also important for adolescents to recognise that bystanders have responsibilities in an online context as well; they can stand up for victims, report inappropriate behaviour, or promote positive community norms.

### Conversation Starter Questions

- When do you feel safe in a community? What things and circumstances give you trust and protection in a group? How do others show you that you matter to them?
- What do you think makes a community truly inclusive and safe for its members? What can the members do to ensure that nobody feels excluded? What is needed to create a positive atmosphere for everybody?
- What effect do you think it has on a community when the norm is to accept and include everyone? What effect does it have on the mood of the community and the relationships between the group members?
- Have you ever felt like you need to hide something from yourself in order to be accepted by others? Are there any groups where you never had to play a role? What is something you would never give up just to belong somewhere?
- Have you ever experienced or witnessed abuse or exclusion from a community? How did it affect the excluded person? What can help them get over it?
- How do you think it is different when people hurt each other online and offline? Why is people's behaviour different online?
- Have you ever come across a case online, for instance in a group or on social media, where someone was bullied or left out by others. In your opinion, how can a bystander most effectively support a victim in such situations?
- What would you do to help a newcomer feel included if you saw that the group wasn't involving them? How would you make them feel welcomed and show them that they are part of the group?
- How can you contribute to making your environment more accepting and inclusive? Can you name one small step or example that you could do even tomorrow to make this happen?

### 0. Being Accepted and Accepting Myself

Understanding the relationship between self- acceptance and social acceptance is crucial in adolescence and emerging adulthood, as young people's identity, self-esteem, and relational patterns are still in the process of developing. The way communities provide feedback about them significantly influences how they view themselves and how acceptable they feel. Positive feedback improves young people's self-confidence and contributes to the development of a more stable self-esteem, while judgment, exclusion or conditional acceptance can easily lead to insecurity, self-esteem problems or anxiety ( Arian, Shen, Wu, Xu &Yan, 2025). Understanding the relationship between self-acceptance and social acceptance can help young people

recognise that, although external feedback significantly shapes their self-image, in the long term, the stability of their relationship with themselves provides genuine security (Branje, 2021). During the group discussion it is useful to emphasise that self-acceptance does not mean that one sees themselves perfect, but that they are able to see their strengths and weaknesses realistically and with empathy. This internal sense of security gives a greater resilience against external criticism, social pressure or exclusion (Ruan, Shen, Wu, Xu & Yan, 2025). During the processing conversation it could also be useful to talk about identity and authenticity. It is common for young people to feel accepted in certain communities only if they give up aspects of themselves or conform to group norms even if they are not aligned with their own values. Drawing attention to these situations may help participants recognise that the communities that provide lasting security are those in which individuals can participate authentically. This recognition supports creating healthier relational patterns and a more stable identity.

### Conversation Starter Questions

- How important is it to you what others think of you? How does this change depending on who the people are?
- Do you think there is a difference between being loved and being accepted? What is the difference?
- How does the feedback from important communities influence our self-image? Is there a connection between how we see ourselves and how we perceive our communities?
- How does your self-esteem change depending on whether you feel accepted or excluded in your friend group?
- How does the opinion of your environment influence you? How does it form your self-image? Have you ever had an experience where the positive feedback from a community helped you accept yourself more?
- Imagine a situation where you want to fit in a group but you feel that you could only be accepted if you gave up certain parts of yourself. To what extent would you be willing to change yourself for acceptance and how would that make you feel?
- What does truly accepting yourself mean to you? Can you think of a moment when you really felt it or when you found it difficult?
- Do you think that self-acceptance can be learned? How can it be developed?

### 0. 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 arose during the day?
- What is it that you take with you from today's session?

## Acceptance ( 2021)

Translated by Kornelia Kincses

### . ***Wild Roots* as an Auteur Film with Documentary Realism**

Kis Hajni's 2021 debut feature film, *Wild Roots*, quickly won over both critics and audiences. This comes as no surprise, as in her earlier short films she had already demonstrated a deep understanding of the traditions of Hungarian cinema and, more importantly, a strong awareness of the social milieu around her. Social sensitivity is a crucial characteristic of a self-conscious auteur filmmaker, and Kis Hajni has already embarked on a difficult yet intriguing path with her first feature film. The whirl of contemporary life was portrayed through a lens of documentary realism.

Hungarian cinematic tradition has a designated space for this genre structure. It was primarily employed in the 1970s - 1980s wave known as *New Sensibility*. The artists of this era - such as Béla Tarr, Péter Gothár, János Xantus, Gábor Bódy and András Jeles - sought to detach themselves both from the politically infused feature films of the time and from postmodern experiments with temporality in cinema, shifting the focus from the collective to the individual. They were heavily influenced by the British New Wave known as *Free Cinema*, and by the new wave followed in its footsteps. These filmmakers portrayed the mundanity of daily life and the microdramas of the community, always from the perspective of ordinary people, dreamy youth and individuals jaded by the routine of everyday life. The two central concepts - documentary and realism - formed significant parts of their toolkit, alongside original venues, natural lighting and camera movements, and often the use of amateur actors. Many of the films produced during this era remain relevant today as a model for the debut of contemporary auteur filmmakers.

*Wild Roots* fits perfectly into this tradition, both in theme and execution. The camera follows venues that might be familiar to anyone living in Central and Eastern Europe: forests of panel flats, everyday stairwells, dimly lit corridors, rusty railings, old trees in the parks, playgrounds among the flats, suburban clubs, late-night diners, and loop routes. The documentarist, almost sociographic elements blend seamlessly into the fiction. The narrative unfolds along two separate storylines: on one hand, the story of Tibor, the bouncer, and on the other, the story of Niki, a teenager living with her grandparents. They belong to each other but drifted apart long ago. Tibor, an ex-con, can only work as a bouncer. He is trying to pull himself together and save enough money to move out of his brother's house. Niki has a complicated family background: she hasn't seen her father for a long time and her mother died in an accident caused by his father. When Tibor appears looking for an old passbook, sets off an avalanche, and the former family units seem to fall apart.

Kis Hajni chooses authentic methods to explore this topic. She often uses handheld cameras and never overexposes anything, instead relying on natural lighting and the conditions of the venue. She also adapts to the scenes; for example when Niki is searching for her father, the camera adopts hidden angles, as if taking over the perspective of the hiding girl. The director frequently works with long takes, so the film's visual language follows two paths: it is simultaneously documentarist/realist and lyrical. The former is required by the depiction of the milieu, the portrayal of everyday life, the quiet nature of relationships, and the authenticity. Lyricism emerges in subtle details, as the camera lingers on small elements such as gnarled tree trunks, sunlight filtering through leaves, lights in the disco, faces, veins of a leaf, or a beetle walking on the grass. This creates a poetry-infused realism in the film with the father-daughter relationship as its central axis.

## **II. Father and Daughter: Missing bonds and Unhealed Wounds**

If one of the main virtues of the film is its style and execution, then the other is undoubtedly the nuanced and deeply problematic father-daughter relationship. Tibor has been estranged from his daughter for years, and he would not want to take the role of the father if his daughter did not seek him out. In fact, the film revolves around the rebuilding of their relational dynamics.

The girl, Niki, is in puberty and creates numerous problems around herself - at school, at home and wherever she goes. Her mother is dead, her father is absent, and her grandparents try to raise her. Niki rightly feels that the emerging family roles are on shaky grounds. She struggles to connect with her grandparents due to great distance between them. At the beginning of the story, the family dynamics lack the roles of mother and father which the grandparents are meant to fill. In contrast, an empty space emerges around Niki - if we interpret this through the duality of love and care - where there is no emotional support or connection. Her grandmother is supposed to fill the void left by her mother, just as her grandfather should fill the void left by her father. However, the grandfather is very sick and bedridden, and the grandmother must care for him constantly. As a result, the family dynamics that were meant to fill the void shift in a completely different direction: the act of care moves from Niki to her grandfather leaving her increasingly alone. Consequently, she loses her childhood and must navigate in an adult world for which she lacks the emotional maturity to understand its system of rules. She develops a defense mechanism to avoid facing these harsh facts: she lies, wanders around and builds a separate world with her best friend - a distinct clique based on complicity. Niki constantly rewrites the narrative of her harsh reality with these lies: in her imagined world, her mother is the singer of a popular northern synth-pop band on a world tour, and her father is a white-collar criminal laundering money through offshore companies currently on the run from the authorities on the Cayman Islands. Her behaviour represents the internal turmoil of absence, stemming from a lost childhood and the intangible nature of the care and parental love she craves. This core trauma may be the trigger that drives her to seek out her father in the Budapest night.

After many years, father and daughter meet again following a fight at the disco where Tibor works. The first thing Niki sees is her father brutally abusing a guest who had attacked him. From the very first encounter, this sparks ambivalent feelings in Niki. As

she sees her father, her feelings oscillate between curiosity and fear, mistrust and the desire for love. While she hopes for some kind of openness - a "tabula rasa" moment - Tibor is uncertain how to react. He has never experienced what it means to be a father, so at their first meeting, he flees wherever he can. In the end, however, he returns. This decision signals that he will, in some way, become a part of his daughter's world.

From a cinematic perspective, it is highly compelling how Niki and Tibor begin to rebuild their relationship. This father-daughter universe is ruled by minimalist dialogues, long, profound silences, penetrating stares and intuitive gestures. They do not attempt to describe; instead, they reveal themselves through small details that carry multiple meanings - first through northern synth-pop music and Scooter, then through tiny secrets and gestures - while their repeated encounters gradually open the possibility of emotional connection. Each scene they share is striking: the empty disco where they try to outbid each other with their favourite songs; the fancy party where Tibor works as a doorman; the scene they sit on opposite sides of a tree while he tells her about the accident; Tibor's plan to escape from the authorities which quickly transforms into something else; and finally, the closing scene, which is both cathartic and deeply painful. This is where the emotional impact of the ending lies, it is neither judgemental nor didactic. Instead, it traces a path at the end of which each character must accept the other without expectations.

### **III. Warrior Father - Antisocial Man**

The most interesting and complex character within the model of family dynamics in *Wild Roots* is Tibor, as he can be analysed from both psychological and sociological perspective. From a sociological point of view, he represents the identity of a drifting, marginalised Central-European man in the 21st century. From a psychological perspective, he is equally compelling as it remains unclear whether he should be understood as a pathological case or as a traumatised and anxious individual.

Both analytical perspectives are supported by the film's realist cinematic approach: there is no explanation, no judgement, no explicit moral. It simply presents its subject, shows how it operates and then leaves it open without turning into a parable. In doing so, it creates space for nuanced interpretation and deeper understanding.

From a sociological perspective, Tibor embodies an identity - or rather an identity crisis. By the 2020s, everything is changing. People still live in brutalist panel blocks yet they can no longer identify with the social roles available for them. This is particularly true for men as the traditional role and identity of the socialist, Central European, working-class breadwinner vanishes, leaving nothing to take its place. A void emerges in male identity affecting both those living on the periphery and the middle class. Tibor symbolises an entire segment of society that responds to change and the passage of time with violence and misunderstanding. This dynamic sweeps him further and further away from both society and his daughter. Ideally, a learning process could help him decode the altered parameters of the new world, but his personality prevents him from doing so.

Tibor is hard to categorise, as his personality raises so many questions. He is violent, impulsive, disrespectful of social norms, and does not seem empathetic. However, certain characteristics suggest that he is more anxious or frustrated than pathological. His relationship with his daughter is highly specific, dividing his emotional world into two spheres. On one hand, he exists in the male-dominated world where the only language is power - bouncers, criminals, cruel bosses, pubs, nightlife and homeless shelters. On the other hand, he feels that he should show tenderness towards his daughter who embodies everything he cannot understand: grandmother, school rules, emotions, the absence of Niki's mother. Amid the emotional emptiness he shows to others, the tenderness that awakens towards his daughter is the only thing that penetrates the walls he has built around himself. Tibor's character inevitably moves towards tragedy because he can only engage with the world through the language of male dominance. For him, anger is the core experience, as he was socialised in a world where men are not allowed to feel fear, cry, or experience profound emotions - they must radiate strength and confidence at all times. His stern exterior embodies this masculine ideal: tattoos, weathered face, physical deformities and scars. His body functions almost as Kristeva's abjekt, as well as a male portrait tied to the past whose rule system seems collapsing. The greatest strength of the film is that it introduces his character without any judgement. Tibor is not evil yet he is a violent criminal; his only chance lies in the love for his daughter, but he is unable to fully experience this emotion because he never learnt how. That is the protagonist's crisis, his tragedy - so convincingly real, that he could walk past us in the street at any moment.

#### **IV. Closing**

*Wild Roots* is an exceptionally sensitive and perceptive film. It is precise both formally and psychologically, and it reflects the same duality as its characters. On one hand, it follows the rules - respecting the documentarist/realist traditions, the psychologically grounded characters, and the use of amateur actors; on the other, it breaks them - incorporating the lyricism, avoiding cliches, and remaining completely free of kitsch. This bold balance is where its strength lies, elevating it above the contemporary scene.

#### **V. Questions for Processing**

- How did you feel after watching the film?
- Which part of the film affected you most?
- Was the film realistic? Did you empathise with the characters? Have you ever met people in similar situations?
- What do you think of Tibor? Do you think he is a bad person or does he simply express himself poorly?
- What do you think of Niki? What impact does living with her grandparents have on her life?
- Do you think it is possible to restart a relationship when someone reappears in your life?
- Why is it difficult to show your love?

- Do you think that Tibor will be able to apologise to his daughter and rebuild their relationship?
- What do you think of the relationship between men and emotions? Is it acceptable for a man to show vulnerability?
- What did the film teach about relationships?
- What overall impact did the film have on you? Is there anything you now see differently?

# Carpe Diem - Another Round (2020)

Translated by Kornelia Kincses

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 attitudes and experiences of the target group towards substance abuse alongside the 2020 film Another Round. The aim is to help students express their own feelings and thoughts, develop greater awareness of the underlying motivations and consequences of substance abuse, and improve self-reflection and social competences. 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, Emotional Resonance

Sharing the first impressions and emotional experiences in connection with the film can help participants initiate self-reflection and begin thinking about their own inner processes within a safe framework. Young people’s emotional world is very intense at this age, and it is often a big problem for them to verbalise and express their feelings. This phase of the discussion promotes the development of emotional awareness in adolescence and young adulthood, which is one of the key elements of self-awareness at this stage of life. When young people reflect on how the film affected them, they also practice identifying and verbalising their own emotional responses. This supports them in developing greater emotional awareness, and communicating their feelings effectively to others. The questions supporting tuning-in do not require deep or personal self-disclosure, but they create an opportunity for young people to express their experiences and impressions. In order to minimise potential anxiety, it is beneficial to emphasise at the beginning that each and every personal experience is valid and valued. Sharing feelings and associations create a shared experience since the members of the group recognise that others have similar emotions and thoughts, which strengthens the connection and the feeling of security. All of these ensure that the processing discussion begins in an open, honest and safe atmosphere, laying the foundation for further collaborative work on heavier topics.

### Conversation Starter Questions

- What feelings did the film leave you with?
- Which scenes had the greatest impact on you?
- If you had to describe the atmosphere or message of the film with one word, what would it be?

## 2. Processing the Film Experience, Seeking Points of Identification

This phase of the discussion creates an opportunity for participants to engage with topics indirectly through the characters, enabling reflection on matters that may concern their own lives. It is often difficult for young people to verbalise and express their own feelings, problems and anxieties. However, they reflect on a fictional character's decisions, dilemmas and life situations more easily, since it is a less personal setting. The film thus provides a projective space through which participants can explore their own experiences, insecurities and inner conflicts, which helps with self-reflection and processing experiences. When group members examine how the characters change throughout the film under the influence of alcohol - what drinking provided and what it took away, and the point it became clear that alcohol is no longer a solution but a problem - they are, in fact, processing the gradual development of addiction and the process of losing control. This topic is crucial at this age since adolescents and young adults tend to underestimate the risks of substance use and they often can not distinguish between occasional experimentation and regular use with problematic addictive behaviour. However, alongside the examples of the film, it becomes clear from a safe distance, how a habit can gradually turn into a need, and which warning signs indicate the development of addiction.

### Conversation Starter Questions

- Could you identify with any of the characters? If yes, in what way?
- Why do you think the characters turn to alcohol?
- Which emotional or situational challenges did alcohol help them cope with?
- What emotions did they want to suppress or intensify?
- Why is it easier to turn to alcohol than express one's anxiety, insecurity or the feeling of burnout?
- How did characters change due to alcohol?
- What did drinking give them and what did it take away?
- What's your opinion, did they really perform better under the influence of alcohol or was their self-image distorted?
- How did the character's lives change during the "alcohol-experiment"?
- Did you see examples of drinking alcohol turning from a habit into a need?
- What were the signs of losing control?
- When did it become clear that alcohol is not a solution but a problem?
- If the characters hadn't turned to alcohol, how could they have relieved tension?
- Where was the point from where they could still have turned back?
- How do you think the film showed the double sides of alcohol?
- Was there a difference between the consumption of the teachers and the students?
- How did you interpret the closing scene?

### 3. Substance Abuse and Addiction - Psycho-Education

Adolescence and emerging adulthood are naturally characterised by experimentation, seeking new experiences and testing boundaries. In this stage of life young people come across situations where alcohol, cigarettes or other psychoactive substances are offered to them, and their decisions in these situations are strongly influenced by their peers. That is why it is essential to provide them credible and comprehensible information about addiction, its short- and long-term consequences and the risk factors of the development. During the processing conversation it is highly important that instead of a top-down delivery of information, participants are encouraged to actively contribute, and draw on their own prior knowledge and experience. This increases motivation and the authenticity of the conversation since the students are not passive recipients of ready-made knowledge, but active participants, who examine the topic through involvement, collective thinking and sharing experiences. Identifying the short- and long-term consequences of substance abuse and understanding the dynamic of addiction help young people recognise risky situations, warning signs and evaluate their own vulnerabilities in a more realistic way. It is worth talking about why some people become addicted more easily than others. This makes them aware of personal differences due to genetics, increased stress levels, problems with emotion regulation or effects of social patterns. Through this young people can understand that addiction is a result of a combination of psychological, biological and social factors, which promotes a more accepting and supportive attitude towards themselves and others. So the discussion not only serves a preventive purpose, but also improves social skills, empathy and responsible social awareness. Reflecting on these questions creates an opportunity for young people to examine the problems in a supportive and sensitising atmosphere instead of a deterrent and fear-inducing approach. This approach not only decreases the oppositional behaviour, but also helps students form a nuanced understanding of the complex nature of addiction.

#### Conversation Starter Questions

- What addictive substances do you know?
- What other things can cause addiction?
- Why do you think someone turns to substances?
- Where is the line between experimentation, habit and addiction?
- Why do you think someone becomes addicted more easily than others?
- What long-term consequences does addiction have?
- How does addiction change someone's life ?
- What feelings does a person want to avoid or suppress by using substances?
- How is self-confidence and self-esteem affected by addiction?
- How is personality affected by addiction?
- Why is it difficult to ask for help?
- How is an addict seen by society?
- Is there a difference in how people judge different types of addiction?

#### 4. “Why Do I Do It if I Know It Is Harmful” - Emotions, Needs, Substitute Behaviours

It is important that the participants understand that underlying addiction are often psychological issues such as anxiety, burnout, isolation or problems with self-esteem. They need to understand that substance use is often not just a “bad decision”, but an attempt to solve serious emotional and psychological difficulties. There is often a lack of resources to deal with painful feelings constructively. In such situations drugs seem to offer a quick and immediate solution, however, they more likely make the situation more complicated in the long run. The use of substances can temporarily reduce tension, ease anxiety, increase the feeling of courage, mask problems and facilitate social integration or the experience of belonging to a community. This realisation is crucial so that young people do not perceive prevention as a form of prohibition but understand the working mechanisms. The group discussions create an opportunity for the participants to identify those situations in their own lives where they feel a stronger urge to engage in harmful substitute behaviours. This helps them see what feelings they are trying to suppress or compensate, and how they can find more adaptive ways for coping.

#### Conversation Starter Questions

- How is it possible that substance abuse persists despite the awareness of its harmful consequences?
- What can substances provide short-term? (courage, relief, oblivion)
- What feelings does someone want to get rid of through drinking and substance use?
- Why do you think it is easier to drink than to talk about the problems?
- What do you think: do problems really disappear or are they just suppressed?
- Why is it more attractive to party with drugs or alcohol?
- What needs do different substances fulfill?
- What illusion can substance use give? (eg.: “everything is alright”, “I’m stronger”, “I forget about all my problems.”)
- Could substance use be a way of “self treatment” or “escape”? If yes, what would someone like to treat or avoid?

#### 5. The Characteristics of Substance Abuse in Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood

During adolescence there is a natural increase in seeking new experiences, testing boundaries and the desire to assert independence and demonstrate adulthood. At this stage of life young people often come across situations where alcohol and other psychoactive substances are offered to them and their decisions in these situations can strongly affect their future lives. A characteristic of this age group is the biased and optimistic risk assessments. They tend to underestimate the potential risks and often think that addiction happens to others, not to them. They usually prefer short-term advantages to long-term risks. Adolescence is also the most sensitive phase of the psychological development that is characterised by anxiety, inner tension, emotional fluctuations, lack of self-confidence and identity uncertainty. In this phase

young people are more sensitive to the feedback and expectations of their peers, so the insecurities, sense of failure and anxieties experienced in social situations can be particularly significant. The desire for social integration and acceptance are natural in this phase of life however, they can easily lead to decisions that are not made because of personal beliefs but of group pressure. When it comes to drugs, the main attraction is often not the drug itself but the social meaning young people associate with it. It is essential to mention the influence of social media and pop culture that often show an idealistic picture of substance abuse. Improving critical thinking helps students differentiate between reality and messages transmitted by the media.

### Conversation Starter Questions

- What do you think is the role of alcohol among your peers?
- Why is it typical that someone tries alcohol, drugs or smoking in their teenage years?
- What social expectations and norms affect substance abuse?
- Is there a difference between expectations of family, friends and society when it comes to substance abuse?
- How do you think famous people (musicians, influencers) affect young people's substance use?
- How would it feel to say no when everyone else says yes?

## 6. Alternative Coping Mechanisms

Young people often experience that anxiety, tension or the lack of self-confidence can be "cured" temporarily with substance use, however, it only intensifies the problems in the long run. That is why it is crucial that they get to know such adaptive and healthy strategies that offer real coping without harmful consequences. It is important to create opportunities for young people to identify substitute strategies based on their experiences and creativity. This helps them recognise techniques (eg.: sport, relaxation, music, talk with friends) that provide liberation, courage or relief without the risk of addiction. It is beneficial to draw attention to the fact that it is not necessary to use substances in order to see the world more colourful. Seeking new adventures, creative activities, social experiences or self-expression can serve this purpose. This is particularly important because the natural adolescent drive for new experiences and risk-taking can also be fulfilled in constructive and healthy ways. During the conversations young people can also identify the factors that can help prevent addiction and the tools that can be used when someone loses control. This last one is extremely important because it normalises the option of asking for help and reduces the stigmatising feeling that one must handle problems alone.

### Conversation Starter Questions

- If you didn't turn to alcohol what could you increase your courage or release tension with?
- What other ways do you think there are to make the world more colourful?

- If someone is anxious or stressed in what other ways could they calm themselves down?
- What would provide the same sense of courage or relief without being harmful?
- Do you have experiences with difficult situations where you coped in a more healthy way?
- What do you think can help someone to avoid addiction?
- What opportunities do young people have if they feel like losing control?

## 7. 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?

Carpe Diem!  
(Another Round, 2020)

Translated by Kornelia Kincses

## I. Introduction: Alcohol in the Cinema

Alcohol has been a recurring element in the history of cinema since its earliest days. It serves a variety of functions—social, psychological, and symbolic—and its significance lies in how it is portrayed across different cinematic eras. These portrayals span a wide spectrum, ranging from the comic to the tragic, and from the philosophical to the psychological.

Alcohol played a predominantly comic role in early cinema, particularly during the era of silent film up to the late 1920s. Characters who consumed alcohol excessively were typically portrayed as clumsy, erratic, and amusing figures, often serving as sources of comic relief. This tendency persisted throughout the silent era and, arguably, extended into much of classical Hollywood cinema. In the 1930s, however, this portrayal began to shift slightly under the influence of Prohibition and the cinematic trends that emerged from it. While intoxicated characters continued to function as comic figures, they also began to reflect broader social tensions. Their often desperate or exaggerated pursuit of alcohol mirrored systemic dysfunction and hinted at deeper societal issues. In this sense, the alcoholic figure became not only humorous but also a subtle social commentary, resonating with the anxieties of the period—even if this commentary remained relatively superficial. This transformation was gradual and uneven. Even in the 1950s, major Hollywood productions continued to rely on the comedic potential of intoxicated characters, effectively returning to earlier conventions in order to exploit familiar gags. A notable example is *Some Like It Hot* (Billy Wilder, 1959).

It was not until the end of the classical Hollywood era that the cinematic representation of alcoholism underwent its first major critical re-evaluation. Even earlier canonical films such as *Casablanca* (directed by Michael Curtiz) continued to present alcohol consumption in a largely romanticized or stylized manner. A decisive shift occurred with *The Lost Weekend*, directed by Billy Wilder, who departed from his established comedic style to offer a stark and unflinching portrayal of addiction.

In this film, the humor traditionally associated with intoxicated characters is almost entirely absent. Instead, the dominant tone is one of psychological and visual darkness: even daylight scenes are imbued with a sense of entrapment. The protagonist, Ray Milland, is depicted as a writer gradually losing control over his life, descending into the depths of alcoholism over the course of a single weekend. The film confronts the viewer with hallucinations, withdrawal, and the mental disintegration associated with addiction, allowing only fleeting moments of relief.

Hollywood censorship (the Hays Code) vetoed Wilder's original concept, tying the distribution to a more optimistic conclusion. As a result, the film ends on a cautiously reassuring note, aligning with contemporary moral expectations. That reassured the Film Academy and *The Lost Weekend* achieved significant critical success, receiving multiple Academy Awards, and won the Jury Grand Prize and the award for best actor at the first postwar Cannes Film Festival. This film marked a turning point in cinematic history, opening a way for more serious and psychologically grounded explorations of alcoholism. However, it was not until 1956 when AMA (American Medical Association) recognised alcoholism as a disease.

Modern European cinema adopted a notably permissive and naturalistic approach to the depiction of alcohol. Rather than treating it as an exceptional or morally charged element, many films incorporate alcohol consumption as a routine aspect of everyday life. This does not imply a lack of awareness of its problematic nature; on the contrary, alcohol is often used as a symbolic device to convey decadence, alienation, or emotional emptiness. In this context, drinking frequently functions as a form of substitute behavior, reflecting the inner void of characters who struggle with disconnection or existential uncertainty. Consequently, the depiction of alcohol serves less as a vehicle for individual narrative conflict and more as a means of expressing broader social and psychological conditions. This tendency can be observed across various strands of European New Wave cinema, including the French, Italian, Hungarian, Polish, Czech, and British movements.

Postmodern cinema continued the permissive tendencies of earlier European film movements, but extended them into a more radical engagement with alcohol and psychoactive substances. In many films, these substances are no longer merely social markers or symbols of decadence, but are used deliberately by characters as tools for accessing altered states of consciousness. Substance use often functioned as a form of rebellion associated with marginalized or disillusioned individuals. Films such as *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969) reflect this ethos, both in their narratives and, to some extent, in their production culture. While certain works, including *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols, 1967), contain moments of self-reflection regarding substance use, such critical distance is relatively rare. Within the broader context of the 1960s counterculture, including the sexual revolution and the hippie movement, there was a permissive attitude towards psychoactive substances that often influenced the procedure of the film making itself. Some clear examples of this are the infamous shootings of *Easy Rider* and *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979). By the 1980s, this attitude began to shift, though not toward outright moral condemnation. Instead, the depiction of addiction increasingly served to articulate a broader existential worldview, in which substance use—and even the act of inducing dependency in others—could appear as a strategy for escape or survival. This perspective is evident in the later films of John Cassavetes, such as *Opening Night* (John Cassavetes, 1978) and *Love Streams* (John Cassavetes, 1984). In a Hungarian context, similar concerns emerge in the works associated with the Budapest School and New Sensitivity, as well as in the collaborations between Béla Tarr and László Krasznahorkai, for instance in *Damnation (Kárhozat)*, Béla Tarr, 1987). We can also consider cult classics like *Scarface* (Brian de Palma, 1987), which reflects screenwriter Oliver Stone's own escape from substance abuse, as well as *Barfly* (Barbet

Schroeder, 1987)), a film steeped in alcohol-induced delirium and often regarded as part of Charles Bukowski's oeuvre—who, in fact, wrote the screenplay.

The major shift came in the 1990s and the turn of the millennium, when films about addiction began to emerge as a distinct genre. In addressing the subject, many earlier cinematic approaches were abandoned in favor of a more realistic—often brutally naturalistic—style. These films engaged with long-standing questions through ambivalence and psychological complexity rather than clear moral frameworks. Filmmakers repositioned themselves by presenting rather than judging and by portraying without being too didactic.

Already in the 1990s, several foundational works on addiction were produced, many of which remain key points of reference today. Notable examples include *Leaving Las Vegas* (Mike Fights, 1995), *Trainspotting* (Danny Boyle, 1996), *The Basketball Diaries* (Scott Kalyert, 1995), *Requiem for a Dream* (Darren Aaron of sky, 2000), *28 Days* (Betty Thomas, 2000), *Postcards from the Edge* (Mike Nichols, 1990), or the very unique *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (Terry Gilliam, 1998).

After this subject had been explored in virtually every form, Thomas Vinterberg reworked the familiar formula, demonstrating that even after more than a century of cinema, it is still possible to say something new about alcohol and its destructive effects.

## II. Vinterberg and the Danish Film

Thomas Vinterberg graduated from the Danish National School of Film in the 1990s, beginning his career with short films. He gained international recognition when, together with collaborators such as Lars von Trier, he co-founded the Dogme 95 movement. The essence of Dogme 95 was articulated in a manifesto drafted by its founders, in which they radically rejected the conventional principles of filmmaking and sought to establish the foundations of a new formal language—a “pure cinema.” Their aim was to counter what they perceived as the decline of the film industry by liberating cinema from entrenched conventions, which they believed had led to the stagnation of the art form. At the same time, they sought to reestablish a human-centered approach to filmmaking, drawing inspiration from movements such as Italian neorealism. In practice, however, after early works such as *The Celebration* (Festen Thomas Vinterberg, 1998) and *The Idiots* (*Idioterne* Lars von Trier, 1998), the filmmakers themselves began to deviate from their own rules. Nevertheless, this does not diminish the originality of the initiative or the spirit that motivated its creators. Dogme 95, as both a formal principle and a broader aesthetic influence, extended well beyond Denmark, inspiring filmmakers across a wide range of national cinemas.

Thus, although Thomas Vinterberg had directed films prior to *The Celebration*, this work is widely regarded as the true beginning of his major career. Owing to the widespread attention surrounding Dogme 95, audiences across Denmark closely followed the work of these emerging filmmakers. *The Celebration* became a major success, and despite its engagement with deeply taboo subject matter, it was seen by approximately one-fifth of the Danish population in cinemas. Vinterberg also gained significant international recognition, which opened the door to an English-language

debut. However, his film *It's All About Love* (2003), featuring an international cast, was met with a largely negative reception, as critics and audiences responded unfavorably to its complex, unconventional blend of science fiction and romance. His subsequent works faced similar critical and commercial challenges.

In 2012, Vinterberg returned to his roots with the *The Hunt* (*Jagten*, Thomas Vinterberg, 2012) va film that echoes *The Celebration* in its themes, formal language and visual style. However, Vinterberged raises the stakes. While *The Celebration* depicts a loss of control within the family, *The Hunt* expands this focus to the level of community. It portrays the identity crisis of a small society, fractured by a single lie and revealed through the suffering of its protagonist. The film demonstrates how collective judgment can devastate an individual, ultimately destroying not only a man's life but also his ability to remain integrated within society. This concern with communal dynamics continues in his later film *The Commune* (*Kollektivet*, Thomas Vinterberg, 2016), which likewise examines the internal mechanisms of a close-knit social group. *The Commune* functions both as a generational portrait—reflecting the prevalence of American-style communes in 1970s Denmark—and as an autofictional exploration, drawing on Vinterberg's own childhood experiences (Vinterberg and his mother lived in a commune like this for a while). At the same time, it offers a nuanced depiction of the behavior of a micro-community, suggesting a possible model—albeit a fragile one—for society at large.

In 2020, *Another Round* was released, representing a kind of summary of Thomas Vinterberg's oeuvre in terms of formal language, themes, and artistic attitude. The story follows four secondary school teachers of similar age who begin an experiment based on a publication of dubious origin. The experiment involves maintaining a constant level of alcohol in their blood in order to remain in a continuous state of mild intoxication throughout their everyday lives. They hope this will have a positive effect on their social lives, relationships, work, zest for life, and faith in the future. They embark on the experiment together and agree to document every aspect and experience in order to keep it "professional." In some respects, *Another Round* can be seen as having a frame-like structure, and it is roughly divided into two cohesive parts. The first part depicts the beginning of the experiment, its apparent success, and the positive feedback it generates in almost every aspect of their lives. The second half, however, focuses on the experiment's decline and the bitter realisation that its true aim is not to improve performance any more, but to avoid social and psychological crises. After one of the men dies as a result of his alcoholism, and the others find themselves on the verge of total breakdown and divorce, they abandon the experiment and attempt to recover their last sober moments and repair what has been broken.

### III. Crisis and Response

As mentioned earlier, the relationship between film and alcohol—or other psychoactive substances, for that matter—has been fundamental since the birth of the seventh art. Over the decades, changing fashions, ideologies, political debates, prevention and movements such as Prohibition, have all shaped its representation, leading into the first and second decades of the 2000s.

Over the past two decades, the cinematic representation of drinking has become increasingly specific. It has ceased to function merely as a side effect of existential downfall and has instead come to represent identity crises. Nowadays, in dramatic films, it would be considered almost sacrilegious not to treat alcohol-related issues as either a character's moral failure or a form of social tragedy. One notable exception is a particular category of films: age-restricted "buddy films" characterized by rampant alcohol consumption. In these works, the use of psychoactive substances is rarely treated in a critical or moralizing way, as the characters are framed as casual users rather than alcoholics, within the conventions of friendship and group dynamics. This genre is extremely popular, and as such, its often formulaic, assembly-line aesthetics—or lack thereof—have produced thousands of forgettable works.

Nevertheless, based on a few key examples, we can identify its distinctive features. Such films include *The Hangover* (Todd Phillips, 2009), *Superbad* (Greg Mottola, 2007), and, more broadly, the output of the Apatow school and its collaborators. We might also consider the cult film *Project X* (Nima Nourizade, 2012).

Thomas Vinterberg's film occupies an interesting position in relation to the genre distinctions outlined earlier. On the one hand, it clearly belongs to the dramatic, moralizing strand that seeks to explore identity crises; on the other, at a more subtle level, it draws on elements of the reckless world of "buddy films," incorporating humor while remaining within the bounds of good taste. From this perspective, it can be compared to *Sideways* (Alexander Payne, 2004) in which alcoholism is not depicted as a disease per se, but rather as an emotional response to a broader personal and identity crisis.

At a psychological level, the film's greatest ambition lies in its attempt to portray the male midlife crisis with unusual depth and clarity. All four men experience this crisis in different ways: they reach dead ends in their work and professional development; their family lives descend into monotony, and most of them exist within rigid routines or social isolation. Ultimately, each of them becomes a textbook example of the burnout phenomenon. As many contemporary studies have shown, burnout as a mental health issue occurs at particularly high rates among teachers. In this respect, Thomas Vinterberg's film appears—most likely deliberately—carefully and thoughtfully constructed.

The protagonist is Martin, a secondary school history teacher, portrayed in Mads Mikkelsen's remarkably nuanced and now iconic performance. Like his friends, he exhibits clear signs of burnout: he is emotionally drained, increasingly cynical, and his professional performance is in decline. When we first encounter him, it is evident that this state already governs his behavior; he responds to the world around him with apathy, whether in relation to his teaching, his family, or his future. The film, *Another Round*, opens with a party scene that functions as a kind of frame, followed by a brief overview of Martin's daily life. We see him arrive at his class, distracted and unfocused, jumping erratically between topics, unsure of his direction, and teaching in a clearly unacceptable manner. Later, at home, he appears almost ghostlike, sitting passively while his family moves around him as if they were part of the background; he is barely included in the life of the household. Subsequently, during a dinner with his friends, he breaks down, admitting through tears that he feels he has reached a dead end in his life. From this moment onward, a direct path leads to the initiation of the "experiment."

One of them introduces a theory he has read, according to which a philosopher-psychiatrist proposes that maintaining a constant blood alcohol level (around 0.5‰) may have positive psychological effects. The film makes effective use of Finn Skårderud's concept as a dramaturgical device, even though it was originally intended as a literary reflection rather than a prescriptive theory. In fact, it functions primarily as a thought experiment, which Skårderud himself presents with caution, emphasizing its inherent risks. Naturally, this instantly provided fertile ground for anyone looking to interpret more into it. The central conflict of *Another Round* emerges when Martin reaches a point where he feels he has nothing left to lose and initiates what becomes an avalanche of alcohol consumption. His friends quickly join him, and in order to justify their actions, they attempt to frame the experiment within a pseudo-scientific structure. They document its progress, take notes, and record their observations. In doing so, they seek to impose a sense of legitimacy on what is, in reality, a deliberately induced pattern of alcohol consumption, forcing it into a framework that even they can accept.

#### IV. The Individual at the Edge of a Cliff

Burnout and the midlife crisis provide the thematic core of the film, but there is one specific emotion that runs throughout the entire narrative: anxiety. Shortly before the film's conclusion, we see a brief scene in which a student is assigned Søren Kierkegaard's philosophy of anxiety as an exam topic. With this explicit gesture, Thomas Vinterberg brings the film's underlying theme out of its previously suffocating, ever-present invisibility and into the open. This thematic shift is further reinforced by the final scene—especially its closing image.

Søren Kierkegaard distinguishes anxiety from fear by arguing that anxiety lacks a specific object, thereby describing it as a fundamental ontological experience. In *The Concept of Anxiety*, he presents anxiety as inherent to human freedom and the necessity of choice, illustrating it through the metaphor of an individual standing at the edge of a cliff. As the individual looks down into the abyss, they are seized by a dual sensation: on the one hand, the fear of falling; on the other, the unsettling impulse—the possibility—of jumping. At the intersection of these two responses lies anxiety, which emerges from the awareness of choice and the burden of freedom. In this way, anxiety reveals the fundamental tension within human existence, the synthesis of finitude and infinity.

If we apply Søren Kierkegaard's theory to the protagonist—or to any of the main characters in *Another Round*, which seems justified given Vinterberg's explicit signal in the exam scene—we arrive at a fundamental insight: anxiety is rooted in the human experience of freedom. This resonates perfectly with the characters' midlife and identity crises, as well as with their attempt to dissolve anxiety, fear, and disappointment through alcohol. Crucially, this shows that their anxiety does not stem from an external threat, object, or circumstance, but is a profound internal experience. It is precisely this inner tension that clashes with the relentless pace of modern life and the crises of self-esteem, forcing the characters to confront questions of authenticity and responsibility.

Regarding this confrontation, three of the four men seemingly reach a reassuring conclusion and bring the experiment to a close. However, one of them cannot break free from the toxic cycle, and his alcoholism ultimately leads to his death. The final sequence begins in this atmosphere of grief and confrontation. Gradually, life goes back to normal: the men attempt to repair their relationships with their families and decide to abandon the mass consumption of alcohol. They are briefly touched by the awareness of life's transience. This moment then grotesquely transforms into a celebration. A crowd of freshly graduated students arrives, accompanied by loud music and copious alcohol. They celebrate both their own success and their teachers, encouraging drinking and creating the sense that "there is room for another round." The film's closing scene embodies the freedom and infinity of choice. Martin drinks once more and dances everything out of himself, eventually leaping into the sea. In a moment of soaring motion, the frame freezes. There is no judgement or prescribed path. The destructive power of alcohol—made painfully evident by their friend's downfall—lurks quietly in the background, almost unnoticed. Yet the final decision remains unspoken. It is limitless: Martin stands as the figure at the edge of the cliff, simultaneously fearing and desiring the fall. In this way, the film's closure is philosophical rather than psychological, yet it remains undeniably and profoundly human.

#### V. Processing Questions

- What feelings did you experience while watching the film?
- What feelings did you have after finishing it?
- How did your perspective or emotions change during the course of the film?
- What effect does the main characters' sense of hollowness have on you? Why do you think they feel that, by the age of 40, they have already achieved everything possible in their lives?
- The characters conduct an experiment with alcohol consumption—where do you think the line lies between play and problem?
- How do young people perceive alcohol? Is it primarily a social tool, a response to social pressure, or an escape from something?
- Are there situations in life in which the mere possibility of choice creates stress and prevents an individual from making a decision?

- The film has an open ending. Do you agree with this choice? If so, how would you interpret Martin's final dance: as a symbol of happiness and freedom, or of flight and fear?

## **Coming-of-age Holy Cow 2024**

The purpose of this material is to support the professional preparation for helping conversations in the frame of “Filmterápiás Filmklub” (Film-therapy - Filmclub). Its main goal is to help professionals start sensitisation, psycho-educational and self-reflective conversations with adolescents and young adults, based on the themes presented in the 2024 film *Holy Cow*. The material provides a structured, psychologically informed framework for teachers to conduct interactive sessions related to the film. Central questions include both the objective and subjective criteria of the often non-linear coming-of-age process, which is frequently accompanied by crises. It also addresses themes such as autonomy and responsibility, as well as the development of adaptive coping mechanisms. The main objective of the processing conversation is that the participants can openly express their feelings, dilemmas and thoughts about coming-of-age within the framework of the film. The conversation aims to raise awareness that experiences such as insecurity, ambivalence, or feeling stuck are normative aspects of development, while also offering opportunities to identify individual strengths, protective factors, and areas for growth. 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. Processing the topics is scaffolded by a wide range of materials and activities that help participants' active involvement and collective thinking. During the discussion, it is useful to prevent the shared experiences from becoming too intimate, since in a group setting it may cause anxiety. The role of the facilitator is to support participants in verbalising their experiences, but prevent the dialogue from becoming too personal. It might be useful, for instance, to help self-reflection with general examples, and questions that create a safe environment for expressing emotions, but at the same time avoid the risk of excessive self-disclosure. However, it is important to provide the possibility for sharing personal thoughts and experiences if needed. It is useful to emphasise empathy, acceptance of different perspectives, and the fact that there are more than one answer to a question.

### **1. Tuning in - First Impressions and Emotional Resonance**

Sharing the first impressions and emotional experiences in connection with the film can help participants initiate self-reflection and begin thinking about their own inner processes within a safe framework. This phase of the discussion promotes the development of emotional awareness, which is one of the key elements of self-awareness in adolescence and young adulthood. When young people reflect on how the film affected them, they also practice identifying and verbalising their own emotional responses, which helps them to handle and communicate their feelings with greater awareness. The questions supporting tuning-in do not require deep or personal self-disclosure, but they create an opportunity for young people to express their experiences and impressions. In order to minimise potential anxiety, it is beneficial to emphasise at the beginning that each and every personal experience is

valid and valued. Sharing feelings and associations create a shared experience, since the members of the group recognise that others have similar emotions and thoughts, which strengthens the connection and the feeling of security. All of these ensure that the processing discussion begins in an open, honest and safe atmosphere, laying the foundation for further collaborative work on heavier topics.

### **Conversation Starter Questions**

- What feelings did the film leave you with?
- Which scenes had the greatest impact on you?
- If you had to describe the atmosphere or message of the film with one word, what would it be?

## **2. Processing the Film Experience and Seeking Points of Identification**

*Holy Cow* portrays coming of age as a process marked by ambivalence, dilemmas, and an ongoing search for identity. Totone's story vividly illustrates the psychological gap between formal responsibility and genuine maturity. His abrupt parentification—being forced to leave childhood behind and assume adult roles—powerfully represents a situation in which an adolescent is expected to function as an adult before this identity has been internally integrated. A central insight of the film is that assuming a role does not automatically entail competence, emotional maturity, or internal stability. The life circumstances of the main characters—responsibility, their relationship to intergenerational patterns, financial instability, and early relational experiences—closely parallel the developmental tasks associated with adolescence and emerging adulthood. Cheese-making functions as a symbolic motif throughout the film. The process is highly structured, requires patience, involves mistakes and restarts, and does not yield immediate success. In this way, it serves as an apt metaphor for psychological maturation, which similarly unfolds through repetition, correction, and gradual integration. Overall, the film offers young viewers an opportunity to reframe their own development as a learning process, rather than as a sequence of fixed or definitive decisions.

The film creates an opportunity for young people to reflect on their own identity-seeking processes through engagement with an external narrative. During the discussion, a safe, indirect reflective space is established in which the participants, through a fictional story, can consider developmental questions that may be relevant to their own lives. This phase offers an indirect approach: the participants examine the question of coming-of-age through the perspectives of the characters. Although the emotional world of young people—especially adolescents—is often intense, they may find it difficult to express their feelings, anxieties, and personal challenges. Reflecting on a fictional character's decisions, dilemmas and life situations is typically easier for them. In this context, personal involvement is reduced, and participants are not required to expose their own vulnerabilities. The film thus provides a projective space through which participants can explore their own experiences, insecurities, and inner conflicts, supporting both self-reflection and the processing of experiences. It enables self-reflection while maintaining a safe distance from direct self-disclosure. Personal associations evoked by the film allow participants to gradually examine their own life

situations and relationships, gently transitioning from the narrative of the film toward their own lived reality. Group discussion functions as a model, helping participants practice forming opinions, listening to others' perspectives, and expressing their thoughts in a supportive environment. Altogether, this process supports young people in developing a more nuanced understanding of the complexity of parent–child relationships, while also laying the groundwork for deeper and more abstract reflection on themes such as autonomy, separation, and reconnection.

### **Conversation Starter Questions**

- **How did Totone's life change after his father's death?** How were his daily routine, responsibilities and decision-making situations reorganised? What new roles did he have to take on? Which of these did not fit his previous life situation and competencies? Which were the most challenging?
- **In your opinion, in which situations does Totone act maturely and in which ones does he act impulsively?** In which situation does he show responsibility and long-term thinking? In which scenes do immediate gratification, risk-taking, and anger-driven reactions dominate? If we look at Totone's story as a developmental trajectory, in which areas does he show improvement?
- **What internal and external factors made his individuation easier or more difficult?** What protective factors can be identified in the story? What risk factors increased the likelihood of him becoming stuck?
- **To what extent could you relate to Totone's character?** Which of his characteristics and dilemmas felt familiar to you? Which of the challenges depicted in the film resonated with you the most, and what emotions did they evoke? What would you have done if you were Totone?
- **Have you ever been in a life situation where you had to take on more responsibility than usual?** Have you ever felt that you had to grow up faster than your emotional maturity allowed? How did you experience this: as a burden, as an opportunity or as something ambivalent? What resources helped you cope?

### **3. Coming-of-age in the 21st century - Criteria Adult Identity Then and Now**

Coming-of-age is not only a question of biology but also the result of an interaction among legal, social, and psychological processes, whose meanings have transformed over the past few decades (Settersten, Ottusch, & Schneider, 2015). It cannot be interpreted as a single event; rather, it is a set of multiple, interconnected role transitions (Schuldenberg, & Schoon, 2012). In the mid-20th century, coming-of-age was associated with well-defined, sequential social role transitions: finishing school, starting work, separating from parents, getting married, and having children followed one another in quick succession. These milestones clearly signaled the beginning of adulthood and were accompanied by strong social expectations, rewards, and

sanctions (Settersten, Ottusch, & Schneider, 2015). In the past, these five markers represented a clear social boundary. Today, however, these events are often postponed or sometimes omitted entirely from individual life courses, making the timing of adulthood less certain (Rankin, & Kenyan, 2008; Schulenberg, & Schoon, 2012).

The process of becoming an adult has lengthened significantly in recent decades, and its structure has been reorganised. Life paths have become increasingly diverse and reversible, calling into question the earlier assumption that classical demographic transitions automatically lead to adult status (Benson, & Furstenberg Jr, 2006). Instead, this process can be understood as dynamic, psychological, and identity-related (Wright, Oxley, & von Stumm, 2025). Compared to the relative homogeneity of adolescence, life paths diverge significantly after secondary school. Therefore, coming of age cannot be described as a single normative pathway; rather, multiple patterns exist, shaped by individual resources, social structures, and institutional environments (Schulenberg, & Schoon, 2012). Young people today tend to leave their parental home later and achieve financial independence, enter serious relationships, and start families at a later age than previous generations (Berlin, Furstenberg, & Waters, 2010). The cultural, social, and industrial transformations of the second half of the 20th century have given rise to a new, non-normative developmental phase in post-industrial societies (Furstenberg, 2015; Leist Balogh, Jámbori, 2016). According to the concept of emerging and early adulthood, late adolescence and the twenties constitute a distinct transitional phase (Walczak, 2023). Arnett's theory conceptualizes emerging adulthood as a separate life stage between adolescence and young adulthood, as described in Erikson's psychosocial framework. It encompasses developmental tasks from both stages, yet cannot be directly equated with either (Vida, 2011).

From the 1960s onward, well-paid jobs requiring low qualifications gradually disappeared, giving way to a knowledge-based economy. As a result, demand for highly qualified workers increased, and participation in higher education became more widespread (Furstenberg, 2015). Due to prolonged education, entry into the labor market has been postponed, and achieving financial independence has also shown a tendency to be delayed (Leist Balogh, Jámbori, 2016; Walczak, 2023). Starting a family—getting married and having children—has shifted from the early twenties to the late twenties or even the early thirties (Arnett, 2000). Traditional adult roles are therefore delayed and tend to occur in less predictable sequences (Ráczová, & Kačmár, 2023). Taken together, these changes reflect evolving social opportunities and the growing role of individual decision-making (Schulenberg, & Schoon, 2012).

Although legal adulthood begins at the age of 18, psychological and social adulthood is a gradual process that develops through experiences, the assumption of different roles, and the completion of developmental tasks (Settersten, Ottusch, & Schneider, 2015; Ráczová, & Kačmár, 2023). The criteria of adulthood have been transforming: instead of traditional role-based milestones, psychological and interpersonal criteria have come to the forefront. These include taking responsibility for oneself, emotional regulation, establishing more equal relationships with parents, as well as achieving financial independence and autonomous decision-making (Settersten, Ottusch, & Schneider, 2015; Sharon, 2016; Walczak, 2023). Regarding subjective adult status, in modern individualising and capitalist societies—especially given delayed patterns of marriage and childbearing, alongside changing family norms—work and career are

more strongly linked to adult identity than family status (Wright, Oxley, & von Stumm, 2025). Traditional adult roles, particularly marriage and parenthood, increasingly mark the culmination of the transition to adulthood rather than its beginning (Settersten, Ottusch, & Schneider, 2015). Although the general trend suggests that young people are less attached to the social roles that once clearly signaled adult status, the social meaning of adulthood is still shaped by group norms and cultural values. In subcultures where traditional expectations are maintained, marriage, family formation, and stable income continue to carry greater weight as markers of adult status (Rankin, & Kenyon, 2008). It is important to emphasize that adult identity is not a fixed state but a dynamic process: not only the acquisition of roles, but also their maintenance, is crucial for sustaining an adult identity (Benson, & Furstenberg Jr, 2006).

Young people often compare their development to that of previous generations. Discussing the historical and social context can help reduce anxiety and ease generational conflicts. It also supports the recognition of structural factors and reduces the overemphasis on individual responsibility. It is important to emphasise that there is no single “correct” life path. A judgmental tone should be avoided; instead, the plurality of life trajectories and the range of possible decisions should be highlighted. The fragmentation of life paths, along with an uncertain labor market and a globalized social environment, requires flexible adaptation. It is essential to help young people understand that setbacks, shifts in direction, or delays are not failures but can be natural aspects of modern life. This perspective can increase resilience and reduce the tendency to frame such experiences as personal failure. Raising awareness of the socially constructed nature of the transition to adulthood helps normalise diverse life paths, reduces maladaptive self-criticism, and supports a more realistic sense of self-esteem. In today’s society, the experience of “feeling like an adult” often precedes—or does not automatically follow—changes in social status. Exploring subjective adult identity can foster self-reflection, self-determination, and a coherent life narrative. Finally, emphasising the psychological criteria of adulthood supports the development of an internalized sense of control and self-sufficiency, both of which are key determinants of psychological well-being.

### **Conversation Starter Questions**

- **Based on what criteria do we consider someone an adult from legal, social, and psychological perspectives?** What behaviours or characteristics signal maturity to you and why? In your opinion, is there a single life event that marks the beginning of adulthood? Is this a social expectation or rather your personal belief? How do “being an adult” and “feeling like an adult” differ from each other?
- **What challenges characterise coming-of-age for your generation?** Do you feel under pressure from expectations about where you should be in life? Do these expectations come from family, society, culture, or are they shaped more by norms you set for yourselves? How realistic do you find the expectations towards your generation in today’s social and economic environment?
- **How was becoming an adult different for your parents’ generation compared to yours?** What structural differences do you see in life path

possibilities—such as education, work, housing, and relationship norms—between your generation and previous ones? Do you think that young people today have more choices or rather more pressure? Why?

- **Who do you usually compare yourself to—peers, siblings, influencers, or your parents' younger selves?** Why do you choose them? Do the areas you compare come from social expectations, or are they genuinely important to you? Do you see the whole picture of a person's life or only a highlighted, visible segment of it? What resources and opportunities might influence where someone is in life?

#### **4. Coming-of-age and Psychological Wellbeing - Difficulties and Protective Factors**

Today, there is no longer a single, unified normative path to adulthood; therefore, the meanings and markers of adulthood are much more individualised and context-dependant (Settersten, Ottusch, & Schneider, 2015). Life paths are becoming increasingly individualised, the boundaries between life stages are more blurred, and age is becoming a less reliable marker of specific life events, roles, or identity (Settersten Jr, 2007). On the one hand, this creates opportunities for independent identity exploration; on the other hand, it may be accompanied by anxiety and insecurity (Sharon, 2016). Many young people feel ambivalent about this stage of life: they may feel like adults in certain situations, while in other contexts they do not feel like adults at all (Settersten, Ottusch, & Schneider, 2015). Without clear life scripts, individuals may find it more difficult to interpret their current situation and envision their future (Settersten Jr, 2007). In the lives of people in their twenties, multiple important developmental tasks often occur simultaneously (Vida, 2011). In academic literature, Robbins and Wilner introduced the concept of the “quarter-life crisis,” which describes the specific crisis experience associated with emerging adulthood (Leist Balogh & Jámbori, 2016). It is characterised by uncertainty, anxiety, identity exploration, fear of the future, and doubts about career, relationships, and independence (Hasyim, Setyowibowo, & Purba, 2024). This stage of life has a dual nature: on the one hand, it offers a wide range of opportunities for self-fulfillment and life-path formation; on the other hand, it is also marked by significant anxiety and insecurity. Young people are required to make many decisions with long-term consequences within a relatively short period of time—regarding career, housing, relationships, and lifestyle—while undergoing intense changes across multiple areas of their lives (Thorspecken, 2005). As a result of heightened expectations and responsibilities, feelings of being overwhelmed and the urge to escape are common. When young people perceive that the norms and decision-making demands placed upon them exceed their current resources, they may withdraw from life structures that present challenges (Robinson, 2015). Such withdrawal or uncertain drifting can lead to an identity crisis, especially when individuals lack stable support for self-determination. This problem is further intensified by the fact that public discourse and institutions often still reflect the expectations of an earlier era. This contradiction places young people in a particularly difficult position, as they simultaneously receive messages that they are already adults and that they are not yet adults (Settersten, Ottusch, & Schneider, 2015). As a result, the delayed transition to adulthood is often mistakenly attributed to young people's indulgence or irresponsibility (Berlin, Furstenberg, & Waters, 2010).

The “quarter-life crisis” phenomenon is influenced by multiple factors, in which the interaction between external (social) and internal resources (such as resilience and decision-making competence) is crucial (Alamsyah, Widhiastuti, & Dewi, 2025). Among these factors, commitment to life goals—or uncertainty regarding them—appears to have a particularly strong impact on the intensity of the crisis experience (Hasyim, Setyowibowo, & Purba, 2024). Some studies emphasise the importance of existential, value-based, and spiritual dimensions, which may reduce the severity of the crisis by providing a more stable value system and interpretive framework (Hasyim, Setyowibowo, & Purba, 2024; Alamsyah, Widhiastuti, & Dewi, 2025). For example, being religious can offer a cognitive-emotional framework that interprets uncertainty as a developmental opportunity rather than a threat. Its role is evident not only in reducing depression and anxiety but also in helping individuals manage the existential uncertainty of young adulthood (Afrilia, 2025). At the same time, anxiety, identity uncertainty, and low self-esteem may intensify the crisis experience (Hasyim, Setyowibowo, & Purba, 2024). High self-esteem tends to increase self-confidence, resilience, and problem-solving willingness, whereas low self-esteem may lead to insecurity, pessimism, and avoidant coping strategies, thereby weakening resilience (Riza, Mubina, Muharsih, & Mora, 2023). Intrapersonal capacities include self-regulation, self-reflection, the quality of internal dialogue, and the ability to set meaningful goals (Solang, 2025). These are not static personality traits but trainable skills that play a crucial role in processing crisis experiences in young adulthood. Weak self-regulation and low levels of reflection may increase the intensity of the crisis, potentially leading to instability, impulsive decisions, and prolonged distress. In contrast, strong self-regulation, conscious self-reflection, and a constructive internal dialogue support meaning-making and adaptive coping (Solang, 2025). Sharon’s study (2016) suggests that, in terms of psychological well-being and self-esteem, the criteria of adulthood that contribute most are those over which young people perceive greater personal control. According to the author, young people construct their understanding of adulthood in an adaptive way by emphasizing criteria that are both meaningful and realistically attainable. This flexible redefinition supports the maintenance of positive self-esteem. An individual’s internalized concept of adulthood—based on relational and internal maturity—may serve as a protective factor against the challenges of emerging adulthood. Shifting the emphasis from status symbols to internal maturity and interpersonal competence could positively influence psychological well-being (Sharon, 2016).

Among external factors, interpersonal relationships and social support are among the most important (Alamsyah, Widhiastuti, & Dewi, 2025). Emotional and practical support provided by family members, partners, or friends can reduce stress and help individuals process crises. At the same time, conflict-laden relationships, breakups, family pressure, and social expectations may intensify feelings of insecurity (Hasyim, Setyowibowo, & Purba, 2024). Secure attachment fosters positive self-esteem, a sense of self-sufficiency, and the ability to seek help, thereby supporting resilient functioning. In contrast, insecure (anxious or avoidant) attachment patterns may increase vulnerability (Riza, Mubina, Muharsih, & Mora, 2023). In addition, the importance of socioeconomic status should not be overlooked. Although gender-based differences have decreased, class-based and ethnic inequalities have grown. For young people from more privileged backgrounds, a prolonged transition period can provide opportunities for self-exploration, whereas for those from less privileged

backgrounds, it often leads to drifting and uncertainty (Settersten, Ottusch, & Schneider, 2015). Young people who enter this stage of life with greater resources and fewer challenges are more likely to navigate the transition successfully, while those in disadvantaged situations often fall further behind (Schulenberg, & Schoon, 2012). These hardships are often structural in origin and stem from the fact that the labor market and educational systems do not provide sufficiently stable and predictable entry points into adult roles (Berlin, Furstenberg, & Waters, 2010). The structure of educational systems, the funding of higher education, and the role of the welfare state have a marked influence on pathways to adulthood (Schulenberg, & Schoon, 2012). Cultural context is also important. In collectivist societies, family expectations and social comparisons may exert a stronger influence on young people, potentially increasing the intensity of the crisis (Hasyim, Setyowibowo, & Purba, 2024).

The topic of coming of age may activate existential anxieties, uncertainty, and pressure to conform. Validation, acceptance of emotional reactions, and the avoidance of stigmatizing comments are therefore essential. At the end of the conversation, returning to a resource-focused perspective can be particularly helpful. One aim of such discussions is to differentiate between external norms and internally driven, autonomous goals. Conditional self-esteem is a common characteristic of adolescence and emerging adulthood, meaning that self-worth is often dependent on external validation and conformity. It is beneficial to guide the dialogue toward emphasising autonomous decision-making, supporting value-based goal setting, and reducing generalised conformity-related anxiety. Strengthening perceived control, self-sufficiency, and identity flexibility is also important. During adolescence and emerging adulthood, the so-called “illusion of finality” is common, whereby young people perceive individual decisions as irreversible. In discussion, it is useful to emphasise the non-linear nature of life paths, the normality of revising decisions, and the importance of a growth mindset. The aim is to support differentiated self-reflection and the development of a coherent self-concept. It is also helpful to focus on already existing elements of maturity by identifying resources and protective factors, as well as encouraging the development of an internal definition of success. Importantly, the feeling that “I still have to mature” should not be framed as a deficiency, but rather as an indicator of developmental potential. This perspective supports the development of a healthy self-concept and reduces all-or-nothing evaluative biases.

### **Conversation Starter Questions**

- **What scares you most about becoming an adult?** Which aspect of adulthood (work, independence, relationships, or responsibility) seems the most challenging to you, and why? What emotions do these evoke? What might help you manage these feelings more effectively?
- **Do your current goals reflect your own expectations, or are they shaped more by the expectations of your environment?** How do you experience this pressure—as motivation or as a burden? What physical or psychological signs do you notice when expectations become overwhelming?
- **How flexible do you perceive your life path to be?** To what extent do you feel you have opportunities to recalibrate if a decision does not work out? Do

you fear going in the wrong direction or not finding your path? Would you view a change in direction as a failure or as part of a developmental process? Why? To what extent do you allow yourself to experiment and accept failure as part of your learning curve?

- **In which specific life situations do you most strongly experience the “feeling of being an adult”?** Which of your personal strengths, characteristics, and skills contribute to your success in these situations? What past experiences have helped shape these competencies? What internal or external resources have you relied on?
- **What does personal success mean to you?** Is it more closely tied to external recognition or to internal satisfaction? Do you see success as result-oriented (achieving a goal) or process-oriented (growth and learning)? How do you distinguish your own definition of success from that of your environment? In which areas of your life do you currently feel successful, and based on what criteria?
- **Are there any life situations in which you still feel insecure or immature?** In which areas do you feel you need more experience, skill development, or a boost in confidence? What experiences might help you become more confident in these situations? How would you recognize that you have developed in a specific area?

## **5. Closing Round**

The closing round supports integration and helps bring an emotionally demanding process to a proper conclusion. It plays a key role in ensuring both the psychological safety of the students and appropriate follow-up. The topics discussed may be emotionally impactful for participants, especially if they are personally affected. Therefore, it is crucial to allow sufficient time for reflection and to create space for them to share their thoughts and experiences regarding the session. Participants should be given the opportunity to articulate what they have learned and to connect with their emotions in order to achieve a meaningful sense of closure. This process supports psychological integration and emotional security. The moderator should also inform participants about available sources of support if needed (e.g., a school psychologist, a trusted adult, etc.).

### **Conversation Starter Questions**

- What was the most memorable thing you heard today?
- What feelings are you leaving with today?
- What are you taking with you from today’s session?

# Coping

Larry (2022)

Translated by Kornelia Kincses

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. One of the aims of this particular session is to examine the connection between the stressors occurring in the life of the target group and their psychological consequences along the 2022 film ‘Larry’. It also aims to make youngsters aware of their own coping mechanisms and recognise new alternative and adaptive strategies that can be integrated in their lives. However this is a story of a vulnerable young man with multiple risk factors, the psychological topics appearing (taking control over fate or channeling tension into constructive activities) not only occur in extreme situations but also connected to the developmental characteristics of adolescence and young adulthood. The overall goal, therefore, is to help students express their own emotions, identify stress reactions and recognise possible coping mechanisms in their own lives. 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 first phase of the processing conversation is tuning in which aims to make the participants aware of the emotional imprints of the cinematic experience and bring these into a shared space for deeper exploration. It is often hard for people to access their own inner world or to find the suitable words to express emotions. This introductory phase helps students build a connection to the film and themselves and start forming a community through shared emotions and experiences. The short, open questions offer an opportunity for an individual connection to the film without having to dive into deeply personal or critical topics right away. Creating emotional safety is crucial for encouraging an open and honest discussion. The awareness of emotional resonance is not only important for self-reflection but also supports the development of emotional intelligence. The participants are able to experience that the expression of their emotions is legitimate and is a valuable part of the communication. They can also see how others experience similar or different feelings which helps them build empathy and the feeling of belonging to a community. Thus this phase is not only tuning in processing the film but also is the first step toward creating a safe space where sharing and accepting personal emotions and experiences are encouraged. This helps the group build the foundation of processing deeper issues related to self-awareness and psychology.

Possible questions:

- What would be one word that describes your cinematic experience?

- Were there any scenes that spoke to you or made you think? Why?
- What feelings did you have during or after the film?

## **2. Character Analysis - Identification, Understanding, Empathy**

This phase of the discussion aims to make the participants understand the multi-layered structure of the protagonist's personality, the inner processes driving his behaviour and his relationship to the outside world. The questions during the dialogue focus on the underlying psychological aspects of his actions. Recognising these is crucial for this age group since they are in the phase of finding their identities. They often struggle with understanding and expressing their own emotions and thoughts. Larry's complex personality that includes anger, insecurity, creativity, vulnerability and a desire for connection, helps students experience the complexity of human behaviour that cannot be described simply in terms of good or bad. Understanding this aspect not only improves empathy but also encourages greater cognitive sophistication. However, Larry's story is set in an extreme life situation, his internal struggles show multiple psychological issues, such as the feeling of taking control, question of autonomy, desire for self expression or the strategies of managing stress or tension. These issues are closely related to the developmental challenges of adolescence and young adulthood. Therefore, character analysis is much more than simply understanding the challenging circumstances. It creates an opportunity for the participants to reflect on their own internal processes, dilemmas and to recognise similarities that make identification easier. The character of Larry thus becomes not only an object of observation but a psychological mirror that helps youngsters explore their own feelings and experiences, therefore more complex psychological processes can be triggered. Through the story of Larry the participants get closer to their own feelings, relational patterns and coping mechanisms.

Possible questions:

- How would you describe Larry?
  - o What are his strengths?
  - o What are his points of vulnerabilities?
- What do we know about his past, present and how do they influence his behaviour?
  - o How does he see himself?
  - o What is his relationship to the outside world like?
  - o What emotions does he experience?
- In what aspect can you identify with him?

## **3. Stress, Trauma, Crisis - Psycho-education And Self-reflection In the Light of the Film**

The purpose of this phase is to give a clear definition of stress, trauma, crisis and their possible psychological effects. The film provides a perfect starting point since extreme

situations and their imprints can be observed through Larry's character. Considering the film, it is beneficial to reflect on the variety of stressors Larry is exposed to. The family background, social exclusion, poverty, abuse, challenges of the talent show or his struggle for self assertion are situations that represent a significant emotional burden. Analysing Larry's behaviour, such as his aggression or shyness, creates an opportunity for collective thinking about the different types of stress and the potential underlying causes. The goal is to make the participants recognise the different forms of stress appearing in Larry's life and the responses to them. This helps them start thinking about their own stressors and responses, however, it is very important not to direct the discussion towards highly painful and personal traumas. Processing these requires a safer and more private environment. Therefore, it is suggested to formulate everyday stress situations that everyone can relate to. It is important to make clear that sharing personal experiences in detail is not required. In order to keep the environment safe, the moderator can list some general stress situations that are relevant for the target group, for instance pressure at school, family expectations, peer conflicts. The participants must also be encouraged to share just as many details of their experiences as they feel comfortable with. This part of the conversation is also helpful for adolescents and young adults because they are in a developmental phase where their perception of the world is portrayed as unpredictable and distressing. They often struggle to express stress and to find appropriate strategies to relieve tension and anxiety. This part is not only for defining these key terms but also for the participants to experience and understand that their reactions are not distinctive or "weird" for that matter but completely normal human responses. In this context, psycho-education is not just about knowledge transfer but also a useful tool for normalisation and emotional self-reflection. The awareness of personal patterns for experiencing and managing stress can be the first step towards recognising and reinforcing more targeted coping strategies later on.

Possible questions:

- What stressors are presented in Larry's life?
  - o Can any of them lead to a crisis?
  - o Did he experience traumatic stress?
  - o What is his response in these situations?
- When was the last time you experienced stress? What was the reason?
- How can you recognise the signs of stress?
  - o How does it affect your behaviour?
  - o What emotions do you experience?
  - o Where exactly do you experience stress in your body?
  - o What thoughts do you have in stress situations?

#### **4. Adolescence, Emerging Adulthood - Challenges and Crises**

Thematization of the age-specific identity crises, interpersonal conflicts and insecurities helps students with self-acceptance and make them recognise their own resources. The focal point of this part of the discussion is the age-specific

characteristics of the participants. Adolescence and young adulthood are marked by intense internal and external changes, insecurities, transformation of social relationships and the process of identity exploration. The aim is to make youngsters aware of the challenges they face during this particular developmental phase and to normalise them internally. Students should be encouraged to express their dilemmas and concerns. This helps them understand themselves better and reduce the feeling of loneliness and being lost. Larry is exactly in this phase trying to find his place in society while struggling with his past and present circumstances. He is just desiring a deeper bond with others and the sense of purpose about what lies ahead. However, Larry is in an extreme situation, his struggles, conflicts and emotions (eg.: feeling like an outsider, desire to prove himself, urge for self expression, fear of social exclusion) can be familiar to this age group. The leading questions encourage collective thinking about real life situations presented in the lives of the participants. Through sharing, students can recognise similarities that help with normalisation and reduce the feeling of isolation. This part of the discussion encourages students to express the struggles they are going through in their lives (studies, orientation, roles) and it helps to improve their self awareness. The realisation of internal and external changes facilitates self acceptance and trust. Through this they can build a more realistic picture of themselves, their resources and possibilities.

Possible questions:

- What do you think is the biggest challenge for the youth these days?
- How do you feel different now compared to your past self?
- What expectations do you have to face every day?
- What roles do you have to live up to in school, at home or among peers?
- How did your relationship to your teachers, friends, parents change?

## **5. Coping - Strategies, Possibilities, Awareness**

The focal point of this part of the discussion is coping. It helps students to recognise different responses to stress situations, crises and negative emotions. Giving them coping strategies is crucial for developing resilience which is one of the most important skills in this age group. Larry displays multiple ways to respond to tension. There are examples of destructive behaviour, such as drug abuse, aggression or social and emotional withdrawal but we can also see him looking for social connections, support and creative self expression, setting boundaries and the need of self reflection. The variety of these forms of coping mechanisms creates an opportunity for the participants to decide whether these strategies are destructive or constructive. This makes it easier to separate adaptive and maladaptive strategies later on. It is important to draw attention to both 'good' and 'bad' strategies by emphasising situations where Larry is trying to make a connection and channel his tension into creative forms of self expression such as music. The questions about personal experience facilitate self reflection but it is essential to emphasise that there are no good or bad answers. The goal is not the evaluation but to show that there are strategies that might ease the tension temporarily but in the long run they fail to resolve the problem while others can

contribute to the solution, such as discussion, sport, writing, humour and other creative forms of self expression. Students often lack a wide enough range of strategies to deal with occurring problems so the methods offered by the film help them broaden their toolkit.

Possible questions:

- What does Larry do when he is experiencing tension?
  - o Which strategies seem to be helpful and which doesn't?
  - o Where do you think he could find support?
- What do you do when you are in a difficult situation? How can difficult emotions be dealt with?
  - o Is there any activity that helps you switch off after a stressful day?
  - o Which one is destructive and which one is constructive?
  - o Who do you turn to when you are in trouble?
  - o Is it easy or hard to ask for help?

## **6. Closing round**

This round helps with integration and closes the process. The discussed topics are emotionally demanding especially when students 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).

Possible 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?

## 1. COPING

“The most common response to a stressor is anxiety.”

### LARRY

Translated by Kornelia Kincses

#### ABOUT THE FILM

Szilárd Bernáth's debut feature film, *Larry*, might initially appear to follow the Hungarian folktale-like trope of the poor shepherd boy (*Larry*. Szilárd Bernáth, 2022). However, the film transcends this familiar narrative pattern. It is a piece of art that is worthy of analysis from multiple angles, so the perfectly layered structure can be unpacked just to make the viewer realise that it is one of the most important Hungarian films of the past few years.

The two greatest challenges of Hungarian contemporary cinema on the level of storytelling are arguably the ability to move beyond the safe surroundings of Budapest, and the courage to address controversial topics. Szilárd Bernáth's film *Larry* combines both of these elements effortlessly. It immerses the viewer in the harsh reality of Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén county, creating a milieu that feels almost tangible - one that the viewer can practically smell and touch. At the same time, the film confronts difficult topics such as domestic violence, the connection between alcoholism and aggression, post-traumatic stress and its psychological effects. It also explores past crimes and the possible ways of processing them, while suggesting that everybody has the right to pursue happiness and find their own path to peace.

As we examine the cinematic techniques used in *Larry*, one of the most prominent is the handheld camera. The camera frequently follows the protagonist closely, almost running after him, a stylistic choice that has become common in contemporary Central European cinema (e.g.: the over-the-shoulder shot in László Nemes Jeles's films, the visual aesthetics of Cristian Mungiu who is the leading figure of Romanian new wave).

At the same time, a striking duality can be observed in the film's visual composition. The scenes alternate abruptly between the bucolic pictures of the rural landscape and the harsh environment of brutalist, dilapidated towns. The restless camera movement might also create tension in the viewers as it prevents them from fully immersing themselves in either landscape. This stylistic choice contributes to an overall atmosphere that sometimes resembles the aesthetics of underground rap music videos. In addition, the influence of several Hungarian directors - Benedek Fliegauf, Szabolcs Hajdu and Kornél Mundruczó - can also be detected. Their work may have served as inspiration. They could provide inspiration for Szilárd Bernáth in terms of the realistic, grainy visual style and its focus on marginalised characters.

One may ask which genre *Larry* belongs to. Is it a melodrama, musical, a rap film, a sociodrama or a coming-of-age story? The most accurate answer is probably that the film incorporates elements of all of these genres. At certain moments, it seems to follow traditions of films such as *8 Mile* (Curtis Hanson, 2002), *Straight Outta*

Compton (F. Gary Gray, 2015), as well as some socially conscious classics by directors such as Spike Lee and Gus Van Saint (eg.: *Do the Right Thing*. Spike Lee, 1989, *Good Will Hunting*. Gus Van Sant, 1997). Despite these brief generic and stylistic detours, the film maintains a distinct identity, remaining unique and unmistakably Hungarian.

The story of *Larry* is built on classical narrative elements. Ádám is the protagonist striving to rise through musical talent while coming from an abusive family background. His mother committed suicide years earlier. His father refers to himself as a recovered alcoholic and attempts to find salvation in the American-style singing Christian congregation. However, he struggles to keep his desire for alcohol, as well as his aggression and destructive nature, under control. At the same time he tries to bind his son to himself through remorseful paternal affection and financial support. Yet as the father's grip tightens, the boy drifts further away from him towards a completely different life - one in which he may finally gain control over his own fate and future. Ádám raps desperately; his epiphanic lyrics strike like whip lashes. For a long time, however, he does not know what to do with this talent. His ambitions are restrained by a severe stutter, which he can overcome only in his solitary rap lyrics and in his intense, murmured monologues to himself. A talent show, however, eventually offers him a possible way out.

#### **“I AM JACK’S SMIRKING REVENGE”**

*Larry* is the triumph of character writing. Ádám is prominently placed in the foreground, every event is filtered through his perspective while the other characters function mainly as supporting figures in his world. A simple interpretation might apply a Hollywood-like cliché: that the protagonist's nature is split into two parts. One part is Ádám, the half-orphan who has suffered mental and physical abuse since childhood and struggles with a severe stutter. The other is Larry, the up-and-coming rapper who speaks without hesitation and seems fearless when it comes to overcoming obstacles in his way. However, the film offers a far more nuanced portrayal. No matter how hard Ádám tries to become Larry, his "tongue fails" him whenever he faces an audience, forcing him back into a stutter - until the grand finale. This sense of duality runs throughout the entire film. As Larry, he appears to be ambitious and talented, while as Ádám, he reaches for opportunities but never quite manages to grasp them. This triggers his anxiety.

Even the film's conclusion offers him only a partial release. On stage he pours out all his pain, but after the curtain falls, he becomes that stuttering boy again trying to find his place in the overwhelming bustle of Keleti Pályaudvar. His soul has no place left to heal the next wound. His nature is a chain of stitches, both metaphorically and physically. Anger becomes his constant companion. He is angry with himself because of his stuttering and the way people look at him. He is angry with the world for its lack of empathy and understanding. He is angry with his father who constantly forces him in a defensive position even now when he has the physical superiority. He is angry with his mother who left when she could no longer endure the everyday aggression and brutality. He is angry with his father because he is the reason for his mother's death. He is angry with alcohol because his father's every move and thought orbit around the possibility or avoidance of euphoria. He is angry at his father's love because he tries to force it on him in the hope of redemption, and he is angry at his

mother's love as well, since he can never receive it again even though he desperately needs it. Ádám screams into the silence of the plain and the roar of trains passing by. Whenever he is alone, he chants his monologue, commenting on the situations in which his stutter prevented him from defending himself. The maddening tension that defines his existence slowly corners him and compels him to act.

In my opinion, the film has three major dramatic moments. The first one occurs when Ádám accompanies his father to church and the priest attempts to bring him into the religious community. He is asked to stand on the stage and the priest makes him repeat a text that tramples the very depth of his soul. It sidelines his childhood, wraps the tragedy of his entire life into the promise of Christ's mercy. It is very moving to see the boy repeating the vows in which for example he must apologise to his father for being rebellious. As the scene progresses he is able to speak less and less; the stutter gradually takes over. You can almost hear the trembling of his lips, balanced between crying and anger. The director cuts the scene before we can see Ádám accept the tragedy forced upon him with an amen.

The next major dramatic moment is the fight between Ádám and his father. The father gets Ádám out of detention using his authority as a policeman and on the way home he stops at a convenience store to buy alcohol after two thousand days of sobriety. While he is drinking at home, Ádám tells him that he is leaving to move to Budapest. The father listens to him with the expressions of a strict god, but when Ádám gets rid of the alcohol, his destructive nature emerges. The boy does not even try to defend himself from the blows. Their paths diverge, meanwhile the bucolic landscapes of Borsod give way to the light-drenched streets of Budapest.

The third climax in the story is Ádám/Larry's performance in the talent show. On stage stands a boy with a battle-scarred face who cuts the final thread that binds him to his painful childhood and the father who he both loves and fears. This is the final challenge of the shepherd boy; there is no turning back. In the end, his performance is shockingly honest and possesses an almost elemental force that cannot be contained within the artificial framework of the talent show. His honesty makes the judges uncomfortable and they send Larry home because, in their eyes, he has ruined the party. The final big day becomes cathartic for Ádám but deeply uncomfortable for everyone else. This is where the excellence of the directions becomes evident because the story still requires a real ending. Ádám's stutter does not disappear simply because he has performed once in front of an audience. He and his companion wander around in front of Keleti Pályaudvar, asking people for change so they can buy a train ticket home. People just walk away from the stuttering boy before he could finish his request. But the two of them simply laugh at the situation. His stutter stops being the catalyst for his loneliness. In this sense, Ádám's failure becomes the viewer's catharsis.

## **CONCLUSION**

Like many debut films, Larry also searches for the answers for a wide range of questions, revealing layer after layer of interpretation through the different genres it evokes. The element of sociodrama presents a social tableau of the neglected and impoverished countryside of Borsod and highlights the clash between different social groups. At the same time, the coming-of-age story embedded in the rap film is focusing

on Ádám's personal drama caught between loneliness and a lack of love. It also addresses themes such as addiction, domestic violence and the possible escape offered by talent.

## **QUESTIONS FOR PROCESSING THE FILM**

- Is it possible for me, as a viewer, to identify with Ádám?
- Is the stutter the result of stress and anxiety or is it an innate speech impediment?
- Is the protagonist capable of overcoming his trauma? In which direction might his life develop? What opportunities does the future hold for him?
- The open ending is a mandatory element of contemporary cinema... do we need closure - such as a happy ending - in order to experience catharsis?
- Can talent or the power of creation help us forget about the corruption of the world around us?
- What do I owe to my parents or potentially to the memory of my parents?
- How do addictions that infiltrate a family begin to erode fundamental values? How is this represented in Larry?
- What emotions did I have while watching the film?
- What emotions do I have after finishing the film?

## **FAMILY AND SEPARATION**

Once Upon My Mother (2025)

Translated by Kornelia Kincses

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. It aims to provide the professionals facilitating the sessions with a structured psychological point of reference for the interactive conversation about the film Once Upon My Mother (2025) with particular focus on family relationships, changes in parent-child dynamics, and issues of separation and autonomy.

Processing the film creates an opportunity for the participants to reflect on their own family experiences, the dilemmas and ambivalent emotions occurring during the transition to adulthood within the safe framework of a fictional story. The sessions focus on investigating how parent-child relationships change in adolescence and young adulthood, what conflicts may appear between attachment and autonomy and how love and care can, despite their original function, turn into a restrictive and burdensome experience. The discussion about the film supports young people in reflecting more consciously on their own emotions, responses and needs for boundaries, in drawing more awareness on the resources and difficulties occurring in family relationships while developing a more understanding perspective toward parental behaviours and challenges. This material does not aim to judge or label but to support a more nuanced and complex understanding. The emphasis is on helping young people recognise that conflicts, ambivalent feelings and difficulties with separation are normative developmental phenomena at this age, which, when processed within appropriate frameworks, can contribute to identity development, emotional maturity and the strengthening of relational competencies. The processing dialogue provides an opportunity for enhancing self-awareness, developing social skills and promoting sensitivity among 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. Processing the topics is scaffolded by a wide range of materials and activities that help participants' active involvement and collective thinking. During the discussion, it is useful to prevent the shared experiences from becoming too intimate, since in a group setting it may cause anxiety. The role of the facilitator is to support participants in verbalising their experiences, but prevent the dialogue from becoming too personal. It might be useful, for instance, to help self-reflection with general examples, and questions that create a safe environment for expressing emotions, but at the same time avoid the risk of excessive self-disclosure. However, it is important to provide the possibility for sharing personal thoughts and experiences if needed. It is useful to emphasise empathy, acceptance of different perspectives, and the fact that there are more than one answer to a question.

## **1. Tuning in - First Impressions and Emotional Resonance**

Sharing the first impressions and emotional experiences in connection with the film can help participants initiate self-reflection and begin thinking about their own inner processes within a safe framework. This phase of the discussion promotes the development of emotional awareness in adolescence and young adulthood, which is one of the key elements of self-awareness at this stage of life. When young people reflect on how the film affected them, they also practice identifying and verbalising their own emotional responses, which helps them to handle and communicate their feelings with greater awareness. The questions supporting tuning-in do not require deep or personal self-disclosure, but they create an opportunity for young people to express their experiences and impressions. In order to minimise potential anxiety, it is beneficial to emphasise at the beginning that each and every personal experience is valid and valued. Sharing feelings and associations create a shared experience, since the members of the group recognise that others have similar emotions and thoughts, which strengthens the connection and the feeling of security. All of these ensure that the processing discussion begins in an open, honest and safe atmosphere, laying the foundation for further collaborative work on heavier topics.

### **Conversation Starter Questions**

- What feelings did the film leave you with?
- Which scenes had the greatest impact on you?
- If you had to describe the atmosphere or message of the film with one word, what would it be?

## **2. Suffocating Maternal Love and Overprotection - Processing the Film Experience and Seeking Points of Identification**

The main topic in the film *Once Upon A Time... My Mother* is the parent - child relationship in which love, care and concern gradually turn into overprotection. The film portrays sensitively how parental love - despite its original intention - can transform into a "suffocating" force that undermines the child's autonomy, especially when parents connect to their children through their own fear, loss, desire and unprocessed emotions. Psychological overprotection refers to a disturbance in the parent - child relationship in which otherwise beneficial and normative parenting functions become extreme, resulting in excessive protective, supportive and controlling behaviours. In such cases parents become excessively involved in their children's everyday lives and attempt to monitor and control every aspect of their experiences (Csomortáni, 2014; Rousseau & Scharf, 2015). They see the natural challenges of life as potential dangers and try to neutralise all obstacles and conflicts occurring in their children's lives, however, in the long run, this attitude prevents their children from forming autonomy and makes it harder for them to get ready for adult roles (Segrin, Woszidlo, Givertz, Bauer, Murphy, 2012). Overprotective parents tend to project their own anxieties to

their children, often reinforcing their dependency by communicating the message that they are incapable of coping independently, thereby maintaining an infantilised and subordinate relationship (Csomortáni, 2014). Psychological control through hidden forms of manipulation, such as emotional pressure, guilt induction, excessive criticism, limits the child's psychological autonomy and development (Csomortáni, 2014).

While processing the film, it is aimed to create a safe and indirect space for reflection where participants can explore relational and developmental issues - that might be relevant for their lives too - through a fictional story. This phase of the processing offers an indirect approach. Young people can examine important issues through the characters' eyes. They are able to reflect on such topics as autonomy, the tension between attachment and detachment, the ambivalent nature of parental love and control and the consequences of overprotection without having to talk about their own family background. Even though the emotional life of young people (especially adolescents) is intense, they often struggle with verbalising and expressing their emotions, problems and anxieties. They often reflect on the decisions of a fictional character more easily, since this includes less personal involvement and makes it unnecessary to talk about their own insecurities and vulnerabilities. The film thus provides a projective space that creates an opportunity for participants to project their own experiences, insecurities, attempts at separation or conflicts of loyalties to the characters and situations occurring in the film.

This indirect approach helps with self-reflection while maintaining a safe emotional distance from excessive self-disclosure. The film-related personal associations create an opportunity for the participants to explore their own lives and relationships gradually, shifting slightly away from the narrative of the film to their own realities. The group discussion works as a model: it helps participants practice forming opinions, listening to others' perspectives and expressing thoughts within a safe and structured framework. This helps young people form a more nuanced understanding of the complexity of parent-child relationships and it prepares the ground for subsequent, more reflective processing that addresses issues of autonomy, separation, and reconnection.

In the course of processing the film *Once Upon A Time... My Mother*, the theme of "too much love" can easily activate loyalty conflicts, guilt or internal ambivalence in the participants. During adolescence and emerging adulthood, it is common for young people to experience a complex mixture of gratitude, attachment, and tension toward parental care. The role of the facilitator in this phase is to prevent the discussion from becoming judgemental or polarising (good vs. bad parent), and keep the complex and nuanced approach. It is beneficial to emphasise that experiencing love and tension, attachment and detachment simultaneously is normative at this age. It is not that the parents intend harm, rather, it reflects that the child's developmental needs are changing. It is also helpful to acknowledge that a behaviour may be well-intended, even though its impact can still be restrictive or burdensome. Avoid comparisons and judgments. The emphasis must be on the fact that different relationship patterns have different effects.

## Conversation Starter Questions

- **How would you describe the mother-child relationship depicted in the film?** Which elements of the relationship do you find supportive or exemplary? Were there any relationship dynamics or behavioural patterns that you experienced as burdensome or restrictive, that you would not wish to see in your own life or relationships?
- **At which points did you feel that, despite the mother's good intentions and care, her presence was no longer supportive but rather had a hindering effect on her son?** How did you, as a viewer, experience the excessive love, concern and control depicted in the film? Did you notice any scenes in which the boundaries between care and control were particularly blurred? Why do you think it is difficult for a parent to keep these boundaries?
- **What impact do you think it has on a young person if the mother's presence is so strong that it sometimes feels suffocating?** What messages might a young person receive when love is regularly accompanied with control and excessive concern? What impact does this have on a young person's self-confidence, ability to make decisions or the perception of their own boundaries?
- **How did the boy react to the behaviour of his mother?** Were there examples in the film where the child gave feedback to the parent, set boundaries or communicated their needs? How did the mother react to this and what impact did it have on the dynamics of the relationship? In what ways can a child or adolescent signal to their parents that they need more independence and personal space?

### 3. The Conflicts of Parent-Child Relationship in Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood

During adolescence, the structure and emotional climate of the parent-child relationship undergo significant changes. Adolescence is the time of rearranging social relationships: young people gradually become more independent, separate from their parents, while peer relationships gain more importance (Nowell, Pfeifer, Enticott, Silk, & Vijayakumar, 2023). They expect more emotional support from their peers and romantic partners while parents may still function as a "safe harbour" (McElhaney, Allen, Stephenson, & Hare, 2009). The parent-child relationship, characterised by hierarchy and dependence in childhood, begins to transform in adolescence (Koepke & Denissen, 2012). This phase is often full of tension and conflicts since adolescents try to extend their independence and parents need to adjust to the changes in the parent-child relationship. The development of autonomy manifests at both intrapsychic and relational levels (McElhaney, Allen, Stephenson, & Hare, 2009). At an intrapsychic level, adolescents begin to perceive their parents in a more realistic way, there is a decrease in idealisation, and an increase in forming individual opinion

and creating personal values. At a relational level, this manifests in an increase in the freedom of decision making, a decrease in parental control and in more frequent conflicts and testing boundaries. The hormonal and neurological changes of puberty intensify the need for autonomy, while the systems responsible for behavioural regulation mature more slowly, creating tension between parental and adolescent expectations (Branje, 2018). According to the Expectancy Violation Theory, parents and adolescents think about the transformation of autonomy, responsibility, and control at different rates, and conflicts create opportunities for the renegotiation of these expectations. If this process succeeds, parents gradually decrease control, and the relationship becomes closer and more balanced with time. According to Smetana's (2011) research the conflicts often originate from the different categorisation of the same question by parents and children. While parents often see certain behaviours as conventional or moral questions (eg.: style, friendships, timetables), adolescents see them more as personal matters ( autonomy, right to make decisions). When it comes to moral questions they tend to acknowledge parental authority and rules, however, for issues categorised by them as a part of the personal domain, obedience is considered less legitimate. This differentiated way of thinking shows that adolescents do not generally oppose parental regulation, but instead reevaluate its legitimacy and boundaries (Smetana, 2011).

During early and middle adolescence (12-16), the amount of turbulent relationships increases - characterised by low support, high rate of conflict and strong parental control occurring simultaneously, while the frequency of authoritative (i.e., supportive yet highly controlling) relationships decreases (Hadiwijaya, Klimstra, Vermont, Branje, & Meeus, 2017). During this period, the frequency and intensity of conflicts typically increase and emotional distancing intensifies, often accompanied by a temporary deterioration in the relationship, authority conflicts, and emotional fluctuations (Koepke & Denissen, 2012). For many young people this period is about questioning parental authority and an intensified need for autonomy (Hadiwijaya, Klimstra, Vermont, Branje, & Meeus, 2017). Cognitive development, especially the increasing capacity for abstract thinking, creates an opportunity for adolescents to perceive parental authority in a critical way, and to view an increasing number of issues as falling within their own sphere of personal decision - making (Branje, 2018). During late adolescence and emerging adulthood (16-20) however, in ideal circumstances, the relationship undergoes a qualitative transformation: reciprocity, greater equality, a more realistic view of the parents, autonomy and attachment occur simultaneously (Koepke & Denissen, 2012). A significant shift towards harmonious relationships can be observed, an increased number of young people report on more supportive and equal parent - child relationships (Hadiwijaya, Klimstra, Vermunt, Branje, & Meeus, 2017). Parents reduce control gradually, and family decision making processes are more commonly based on compromises between adolescents and parents (Koepke & Denissen, 2012). Relationships are considered adaptive when both parties can experience negative emotions during conflicts without getting stuck in them, while still being able to express them. On the other hand, emotional rigidity makes it harder for the relationship to reorganise and can reduce its overall quality (Branje, 2018).

So that the parent-child relationships could be processed in a safe and development-oriented way, it is crucial to emphasise that conflicts at this age are not abnormalities but rather natural components of the developmental process. Communication about this topic helps with the normalisation of conflicts, and decreases the possibility of

young people seeing these conflicts exclusively as the deterioration of relationships or as their own personal fault. The discussion creates an opportunity for recognising that conflicts often arise from differences in perspectives. It is beneficial for the participants to understand the difference between parental intentions (safety, protection, responsibility) and its subjective effects (restriction, control, pressure). This division helps with avoiding simplified and polarised narratives ('good' vs 'bad' parents). It is useful to direct the discussion towards the question of '*What can help?*'. What communication techniques or changes can support the reorganisation of the relationship. This provides a perspective of hope and decreases the feeling of helplessness. The collective thinking of constructive conflict management improves young people's ability for changing perspectives and contributes to establish healthy relationships based on reciprocity. Working through this topic helps not only with family relationships but can also be transferred to romantic, work and other social relationships. The facilitator needs to emphasise that it is possible to love parents and still be critical about some of their functions at the same time. Communicating ambivalent feelings is not the lack of loyalty but a component of emotional maturity. It is important to support the participants in recognising that underlying conflicts are often unspoken feelings and needs. Verbalising feelings helps understand relationships and offers an opportunity against quarrels merely based on rules or power. The aim is making young people understand their reactions, feelings and need for boundaries more nuanced. While formulating the questions it is important to avoid personal disclosure. Talking about general and typical situations provide a safe space for the participants to share information within their own boundaries.

### **Conversation Starter Questions:**

- **What changes can be observed in the parent- child relationship when the child enters adolescence?** What is behind all these changes? (eg.: stronger need for autonomy, peer relationships, testing boundaries) How does the role of the parents change in adolescence and emerging adulthood? What previously controlled parenting and educational functions do they need to let go? What are the new roles and functions that can occur in the relationship?
- **What do you think is considered as 'too strict' or 'too permissive' parenting?** In your opinion, what emotional effects does overly strict parenting or the lack of boundaries have on a young person? What are the advantages and disadvantages of these parenting styles from the perspective of their children? How does these strategies affect the formation of autonomy, feeling of security, self-confidence and the sense of responsibility?
- **What types of expectations do young people need to face in family settings?** (eg.: academic performance, behaviour, responsibility, loyalty, emotional roles, future plans) How can these expectations be perceived by young people? For instance, as supportive guidance, spoken or unspoken pressure or restraining duties? How do you think family expectations affect young people's self-confidence, decision making processes and need for autonomy? Under what circumstances can these expectations become motivating and when can they transform into excessive pressure or anxiety-inducing factors?
- **It can often be observed that the number and intensity of conflicts increase at the beginning of adolescence.** Along which themes do these parent-child conflicts most frequently occur? **What differences can be**

**observed in the ways parents and adolescents interpret the same situations and decision making issues?** How does these differences appear in time management, friendship circles, independent decision making or in taking responsibilities? Do you think this indicates the deterioration of the relationship or a natural component of separation and independence?

- **How can young people and their parents handle conflicts in a way that preserves or enhances the quality of their relationship, even when they have different opinions?** What factors help prevent a disagreement from escalating into an argument at home? What is the significance of expressing not only rules and expectations but also feelings and needs during conflicts? In your opinion, what factor can promote the development of a parent-child relationship towards a more mutual, cooperative, and egalitarian dynamic during the transition to adulthood? What changes are necessary on the part of both parents and adolescents to support this development?

#### **4. Detachment and Reconnection - The Transformation of Parent-Child Relationship in Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood**

One of the central developmental tasks of adolescence and emerging adulthood is the emotional detachment from parents and building an independent identity (Kins, Soenens, & Beyers, 2011). Young people need to restructure their relationships with parents which is a necessary requirement for developing a mature adult identity (Kavčič, & Zupančič, 2019). Identity development and separation-individuation are interrelated psychosocial developmental traits. Their aim is to support the development of a healthy autonomy on both individual and social level (Koepke & Denissen, 2012). According to the “second individuation” process theory of Blos (2016), one of the main tasks of adolescents’ identity development is to override earlier parental internalisations and develop a new and independent ego structure (Meeus, Iedema, Maassen, & Engels, 2005, Koepke & Denissen, 2012). Healthy individuation means the redefinition of parent-child relationship, in which the individual is able to function autonomously while maintaining the possibility of psychological connection as well (Zupančič, Komidar, & Puklek Levpuscek, 2012). The characteristics of this new type of relationship are reciprocity and the striving for an adult-adult relationship based on equality (Koepke & Denissen, 2012). Separation, therefore, does not mean isolation but a shift in the dynamics of the attachment (Koepke, 2012). Emotional detachment is a psychological distancing where the young person stops defining themselves alongside the opinions, feedback or approval of the parents (Sugimura, Hihara, Hatano, Nakama, Saiga, & Tsuzuki, 2023). Transitions, such as adolescence and emerging adulthood, are particularly sensitive phases of the development of family structures because they require new role expectations, boundary rules and emotional balance (Whiteman, McHale, & Crouter, 2011).

Identity and dynamics of parental relationships are temporally dynamic and flexibly organised systems that develop through social transactional interactions in which both young people and parents appear as active agents (Koepke, 2012; Reis, Buhl, 2008). Parents appear in their children’s lives not only as value mediators but also as identity organisers (Koepke & Denissen, 2012).

The parents face their own developmental traits (e.g.: redefinition of parental roles, letting go, re-evaluation of their own identity), that also have an effect on the

relationship ( Koepke, 2012). They often react to their children's independence based on their own unresolved past conflicts which create such dynamics that can hinder the natural process of individuation (Zupančič, Komidar, & Puklek Levpuscek, 2012). Parents, often unconsciously, prevent their children from individuation (e.g.: guilt induction, overprotection, psychological control), and children often internalise their parents' fears and associate the striving for independence with anxiety that might lead to different pathological patterns (Kins, Soenens, & Beyers, 2011). Too much dependency, denial and engulfment are all such maladaptive patterns that reflect a disruption in the balance between autonomy and attachment (Kavčič & Zupančič, 2019). It is crucial that parents handle their children's striving for independence flexibly (Koepke & Denissen, 2012). A mature parent-child relationship can handle ambivalence, expansion of boundaries and acceptance of differences (Zupačič, Komidar, & Puklek Levpuscek, 2012). The "independent autonomy " is the foundation of an optimal identity development, since it creates opportunities for young people to make independent decisions and detach emotionally so that the trusting and supportive nature of the relationship is preserved (Meeus, Iedema, Maassen, & Engels, 2005; Sugimura, Hihara, Hatano, Nakama, Saiga, & Tsuzuki, 2023). This ensures the stability of identity, the mutual development of mature attachment and independence (Koepke & Denissen, 2012). Families characterised by sensitive supportive interactions experience less difficulties (Brianje, 2018). The degree of emotional separation correlates with age , while parental trust stagnates or shows minimal decrease (Sugimura, Hihara, Hatano, Nakama, Saiga, & Tsuzuki, 2023).

Individuation is not an isolated event but a long-term developmental process which gains particular importance from the beginning of adolescence to the end of young adulthood (Zupancic, Komidar, & Puklek Levpuscek, 2012). Individuation is an active process in emerging adulthood as well which is strongly influenced by significant transitions in life, such as graduation, romantic relationships or financial independence (Reis, & Buhl, 2008). These transitions are accompanied with increased psychological sensitivity, so when it comes to adaptation family support becomes critical (Isik, Akin, Breeman, & Branje, 2024).

It is important to emphasise that separation does not mean disengagement but the rearrangement of the relationship: the relationship based on dependency gradually transforms into a more equal one. This helps reduce feelings of guilt and loyalty conflicts that often occur in connection with this topic. The discussion about this topic helps normalise the difficulties of separation and reduce the risk of young people interpreting their feelings as ingratitude, egoism or failure. One of the tasks of the facilitator is to emphasise that it is possible to experience the desire for independence and the need for connection at the same time. Controversial feelings are natural parts of development. It is beneficial to facilitate the discussion so that the feelings of both young people's and parents' sides become visible. This helps avoid blaming narratives and support empathy as well as develop the ability for changing perspectives. The overview of long-term consequences (eg.: the effects of stalled or conflicted separation) creates an opportunity for young people to think ahead about their relationship patterns, and identify the protective role of gradual, communication based separation not only in the family but also in later romantic and adult relationships. The important message is that separation is not an irreversible process, halts and conflicts can be rethought or rearranged later. It can be particularly helpful for those who experience their situation as hard or compromised.

## Conversation Starter Questions

- **What do you think separation from parents mean in adolescence and young adulthood? Is it more like distancing, independence or the transformation of the relationship?** What is the difference between Individuation and complete emotional cutoff from parents? What difficulties do young people face when they want to become independent but also preserve the relationship with their parents?
- **Why can separation be hard for both young people and parents?** What emotions may occur on both sides? (E.g.: insecurity, fear, loss, guilt, ambivalence) What can young people lose, even if only temporarily, during individuation? What can they gain simultaneously? What can make the period of separation particularly difficult for parents? What support can you lean on during individuation (friends, school, workplace, hobbies)?
- **How can a young person experience more freedom and responsibilities?** What emotions may arise in this transitional period? (E.g.: liberation, insecurity, anxiety, pride) What conflicts may appear when your own desires do not align with parental expectations or previous patterns?
- **What are the things you want to decide independently about?** Why do you think these are the things that are important to decide independently about? What needs are in connection with these? (E.g.: self expression, taking responsibility, authenticity) What emotions do you experience when you have real choice in these situations? What happens when someone else is making decisions for you? Do you think there are areas where it is easier to accept parental guidance or restrictions and ones where it is more difficult?
- Have you ever experienced a situation where you felt parental presence in your decisions too much? In what situation was this particularly prominent? How did you react in these situations? What emotions occurred? (E.g.: anger, guilt, helplessness, ambivalence) What makes it particularly hard to articulate your needs? (E.g.: fear of conflict, loyalty, guilt, fear of refusal) How do you or can you signal towards your parents if you needed more space, independence, trust? What forms of communication could work well and which ones could not?
- **What long-term effects can occur if the process of individuation gets stuck, is prolonged or happens abruptly, with conflicts?** How can this affect young people's independence, stability of their identity, and self-confidence? What effect can stuck individuation have on young people's ability to make decisions, take responsibilities, or make mistakes? Do you think it is possible to rearrange a stuck individuation later on as well? What factors can support this?( mature communication, support from outside, time)
- **What does it mean that the parent-child relationship transforms into an adult-adult relationship with time?** What new qualities appear in this relationship? What is the difference between a relationship based on reciprocity and one where the parents have more as a controlling or guiding role? What new form of connection to your parents may occur? (E.g.: shared activity, humour, shared decision) what would you like to preserve from the relationship after individuation as well?

## **5. Closing Round - Thoughts to Take Away**

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. It would be beneficial to close the discussion with a question that focuses on the takeaway rather than the mistakes. It is beneficial to 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 arose during the day?
- What is it that you take with you from today's session?

# FAMILY

## ONCE UPON MY MOTHER

(2025)

### 1. Introduction

The film *Once Upon My Mother* (Ma mère, Dieu et Sylvie Vartan. Ken Scott, 2025) is a bittersweet work infused with charming humour. It portrays a close-knit family and an unwavering mother-child relationship unfolding along the triad of illness, faith and love evoking intense emotions for the entire family.

It is Ken Scott sits in the director's chair and *Once Upon My Mother* marks his seventh feature film. He previously established himself with light-hearted "buddy" comedies such as *Starbuck* (2011), *Delivery Man* (2013), *Unfinished Business* (2015), or *The Extraordinary Journey of the Fakir* (2018). *Once Upon My Mother* represents his first venture into melodrama, while still incorporating the director's characteristic comic sensibility and the nostalgia typical of a generational mood film.

The film is based on the autobiographical novel of Roland Perez. Roland was born in 1963 in Paris as the sixth and youngest child of a Sephardic Jewish couple. His story begins as a tragedy: he is born with a clubfoot, which in the 1960-ies was considered an incurable and lifelong disability. Doctors, as well as many friends and acquaintances, attempt to comfort the family by encouraging them to accept the inevitable, claiming that the boy will never be able to live a full life. Roland's mother, Esther, however, the mother, Esther, refuses to accept this prognosis. She rejects medical aids that would label his son as disabled and continuously searches for alternative therapies that might help him walk and lead a full life. The film portrays Roland's long period of quiet anticipation, while his mother – guided by her faith and belief in alternative medicine - works tirelessly to improve his son's condition. This anticipation lasts for years, sometimes marked by forced stillness while straps and corrective devices do their work. During this time, the family, led by Esther develops a kind of cult around the French singer, Sylvie Vartan in order to distract Roland from boredom. The singer's persona becomes a symbolic point of reference for the family, conveying to Roland the reassuring message that everything will soon be fine. Meanwhile, Roland spends much of his time watching television from his bed. Through the screen, the events of contemporary France unfold before him: political and cultural developments, tabloid stories, and significant historical turning points. The film draws on these moments with a gentle sense of nostalgia, making it easy for the viewer to become immersed in the whirlwind of years that pass around the bed-bound boy. Eventually one of the treatments proves to be successful and Roland is able to stand on his feet again. This marks the beginning of the second phase of his life. Although he can now walk freely, he soon realises that while during he has changed during those years, but his mother has not. Esther continues to surround him with the same intensity of passion, care and love as before – an affection that gradually becomes suffocating as Roland attempts to live his own life, build a family and make independent decisions. In time, he recognises that this circle of overprotection his mother created may continue to shape his life indefinitely.

Thus, *Once Upon My Mother* becomes suitable of analysis from multiple perspectives. It may be interpreted as a work that belongs to the tradition of films employing the classical cinematic trope of the mother-child relationship, or it may also be approached from a psychoanalytic perspective, drawing on the theories of Freud, Jung and Lacan regarding the role of the mother in the development of the individual. At the same time, the film can also be examined through contemporary concepts such as the “toxic mother” or the “helicopter-parent “. In this context, these notions should not be used as psychological diagnoses, but rather as interpretative frameworks that highlight the tension between close parental care and delayed individuation surrounding the protagonist.

## **2. Remarkable Mothers, Remarkable Children - Cinematic Precedents of *Once Upon My Mother***

The depiction of the mother-child relationship is widely regarded as a classic trope in film history. When referring to this motif, it is also important to acknowledge that the figure of the woman and mother has long served as a conceptual foundation in mythology and art history. Even the earliest representations of this theme portray womanhood not merely in a narrative or emotional role, but as an ontological principle associated with the forces of nature - earth, water, grain, fertility and nourishment – and, in Greek mythology, with the very idea of genesis and creation.

The symbolism of this connection has also been inherited by cinema. Whenever filmmakers portray maternal figures protecting their children and preserving the integrity of the family unit, they draw on these early archetypes, ancient patterns and cultural norms. The cinematic offers a particularly effective framework for both the literal and symbolic representation of these patterns. *Once Upon My Mother* and the autobiographical book on which it is based present the personal story of Roland Perez. Yet, as the title itself suggests, the narrative ultimately focuses more on the mother than on the miraculously recovered boy. In order to better understand this maternal figure, it is helpful to consider two recurring cinematic tropes: the self-sacrificing mother and the smothering mother. In the film, Esther’s character delicately balances between these two maternal archetypal poles.

### **a. The Self-Sacrificing Mother**

The trope of the self-sacrificing mother already appeared during the era of classical Hollywood cinema and soon became connected with emerging genres such as film noir. One of the classic examples within the noir tradition that centres on this maternal figure is *Mildred Pierce*, the adaptation of the novel by James M. Cain. From this point onward, the trope developed further, gradually breaking down into a variety of narrative and character variations, that continues to shape cinematic representations of motherhood to this day. This enduring influence can also be observed in *Once Upon My Mother*, where the motif of maternal sacrifice plays a central role.

A typical subgenre within this tradition focuses on films in which mothers caring for a sick child (husband, partner) occupy the central role. In these narratives, the moral

compass of the story is often defined by the mother's response to the illness: she becomes the primary source of support for the patient and is willing to make sacrifices in order to protect and advocate for them. Two recurring motifs frequently structure these stories: illness and talent. Illness manifests in the physical body and while talent often appears as a form of intellectual, emotional or creative potential. The dramatic stakes typically revolve around whether the mother can challenge the stigma imposed by society on the sick or disabled child and help both the child and the surrounding community recognise the individual's capabilities and possibilities. In doing so, the mother symbolically opens a path towards the future. Even if she cannot "repair" the body, she transforms the experience of disability into a form of moral strength and social recognition. Numerous films illustrate the trope of the self-sacrificing mother in film history: *My Left Foot* (Jim Sheridan, 1989), *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994), *All About My Mother* (Todo sobre mi madre, Pedro Almodovar, 1999), *The Sea Inside* (Mar adentro, Alejandro Amenábar, 2004), *The Sessions* (Ben Lewin, 2012), *Edward Scissorhands* (Tim Burton, 1990), *The Theory of Everything* (James Marsh, 2014), *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (Le scaphandre et le papillon, Julian Schnabel, 2007).

Approximately halfway through *Once Upon My Mother*, the image of maternal presence begins to split in two contrasting forms. The first half of the film is clearly dominated by the figure of the self-sacrificing mother. Esther reorganises the entire life of the family in order to create the conditions in which her quiet, clubfooted son can live happily. In doing so, she comes into conflict with numerous people and institutions, including child protection services which at one point attempt to remove the boy from the family. Esther refuses to send him to school because she fears he might become the victim of cruelties of the outside world. At the same time, the boy's illness is deeply repressed within the family: it is symbolically exiled from the family's collective psyche. It becomes almost forbidden to speak about it, and Esther also rejects medical aids and prosthetics, since these would make the disability more visible. For Roland, the family's flat functions simultaneously as the domain of childhood and the domain of illness and isolation. It is the place where he plays with his siblings, but also the place where his physical limitations confine him. The family's relationship to the illness is also shaped by the mother's faith. Faith and illness functions as a kind of binary opposition. The illness must not be spoken about because naming it would make it real and visible; faith, on the other hand, must constantly be spoken aloud, because only through this repeated affirmation can divine help be invoked. In this way, faith becomes the family's primary strategy for coping with the boy's condition.

## **b. The Trope of the Smothering Mother**

The trope of the smothering mother in cinema offers insight in an even more complex set of problems than the model of the self-sacrificing mother. In cinematic representations, this type of maternal figure *is* more than simply a negatively coded parent; rather she functions as a structural element that exposes the fragile boundaries of the mother-child relationship, particularly at the point where the child's autonomy is threatened and the foundations of individual identity begin to weaken. In these depictions, the mother is not necessarily portrayed as an evil or overtly toxic character. Instead, her presence becomes troubling precisely because of the boundlessness of her love and encouragement. This excessive emotional closeness penetrates the

child's psychological space and disrupts the process of separation and individuation. As a result, the child remains symbolically tied to the mother, their psyche suspended in a transitional state in which independent desires struggle to emerge. It is notable that different cinematic genres tend to be associated with these two maternal archetypes. Narratives centred on the self-sacrificing mother most often appear in melodrama, realist social dramas, or biographical films whereas the figure of the smothering mother frequently emerges in genres such as horror, science fiction, psychological thrillers, and certain forms of auteur cinema.

The history of cinema offers numerous examples of the development of the trope of the smothering mother. Several well-known films depict explicitly oppressive or abusive maternal figures, such as *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960), *Carrie* (Brian de Palma, 1976), *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols, 1967), *Precious* (Lee Daniels, 2009). In these narratives, the mother appears as a clearly oppressive presence whose behaviour directly harms the child. On the other end of the trope are maternal figures who suffocate their children through excessive love and protection. These mothers often insist that they merely wish to help or protect their loved ones, yet their overwhelming emotional presence ultimately obstructs the process of separation and individuation. Their attachment binds the child psychologically and prevents the development of autonomy. This latter model can be observed in films such as *The Piano Teacher* (La pianiste, Michael Haneke, 2001), *Black Swan* (Darren Aronofsky, 2010), *The Room* (Lenny Abrahamson, 2015), *Bubble Boy* (Blair Hayes, 2001), *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (Lynne Ramsay, 2011). In film theory, the figure of the smothering mother is often associated with genres such as horror, science fiction, or psychological thriller, particularly in the work of Barbara Creed. Yet many of the films mentioned above redirect this figure towards the terrain of melodrama. In these narratives, the mother's suffocating presence is not necessarily conscious or malicious; rather, it emerges from an intensely closed emotional bond that becomes threatened by the outside world.

The main character of *Once Upon My Mother* can only be fully understood if she is examined from a dual perspective: that of both the self-sacrificing and the smothering mother. The figure of the smothering Jewish mother emerged as a cultural and literary trope in the late 1960s, most famously with the publication of *Portnoy's Complaint* by Philip Roth. Although the novel initially provoked considerable controversy, it soon became a key reference for discussions of Jewish family dynamics. Its psychoanalytic perspective and confessional narrative form continue to offer fertile ground for interpretation. Since then, the representation of the identity formation of the Jewish son in relation to a dominant maternal figure has gradually become a recurring motif in film and pop culture. Woody Allen famously developed this pattern through his portrayal of the neurotic, anxious urban intellectual, a figure deeply shaped by maternal influence. Later comedians such as Ben Stiller and Seth Rogan further transformed this motif into a form of self-reflective humour. The trope has also entered mainstream television culture, for example the character of Howard Wolowitz in the series *The Big Bang Theory*, whose humorous portrayal of the overbearing Jewish mother-son relationship illustrates the enduring popularity of this cultural pattern.

As noted earlier, the first half of *Once Upon My Mother* presents Esther primarily through the trope of the self-sacrificing mother. The dramatic turning point occurs when one of the alternative treatments begins to improve Roland's condition and his

foot eventually heals, making it possible for him to join his peers and participate more fully in social life. Significantly, Roland's reintegration into the community also depends on his mother's decision, since she is the one who finally lifts the prohibition surrounding the word "illness". In this sense, Roland symbolically becomes a "whole" person. Yet Esther does not allow the process of separation to begin. Instead, she continues to intervene in nearly every aspect of Roland's life: she communicates with his teachers, writes letters and appeals on his behalf without his knowledge, and gradually tightens the invisible bond that connects them. Roland occasionally attempts to resist this control, but he ultimately resigns himself to his mother's decisions. The underlying tension becomes more visible when Roland starts his own family and finds himself caught between the expectations of his wife and the overwhelming presence of his mother. At this point, the question of personal boundaries becomes unavoidable: where does maternal care end, and where does intrusion begin? Esther's devotion effectively traps Roland in an emotional bubble in which autonomy and distance are difficult to establish. Within this closed space, Roland remains less an independent individual, than an extension of his mother's desires.

### **3. Family as a Linguistic Space in *Once Upon My Mother***

*Once Upon My Mother* offers rich possibilities for analysis not only at the level of the representation of the mother figure, but also at the level of family structure. If the family is understood not merely as an emotional or biological unit but also as a deeper and less explicit linguistic space, another, less visible dimension of the film becomes apparent. In this sense, the family can be imagined as a community connected not only by blood but also by a closed linguistic code that remains largely inaccessible to the outside world. Within the family, communication is organised around three categories: things that can be said, things that must be repeated, and things that cannot be spoken about. Everyday conversations – comments about the outside world, tabloid news, or television programmes – belong to the first category. The second category consists of statements that must be constantly repeated: expressions of faith, the conviction that God will help, reassurance that Roland is just like any other boy and capable of achieving anything, or the comforting presence of the songs of Sylvie Vartan as a remedy for sadness. The third category includes those topics that are strictly forbidden: illness, chronic condition, disability and the use of medical aids. This linguistic structure forms the conceptual framework of Roland's world. Since he is largely confined to the family flat – often even to his bed – these discursive boundaries shape the development of his identity. As the film gradually reveals, this communicative order is almost entirely established and maintained by Esther. Roland's father remains largely passive, while Esther controls the family's symbolic universe and determines what may or may not be expressed. In this way, maternal care and protection gradually lead not only to emotional dependency but also to a kind of linguistic enclosure, a labyrinth of meanings through which Roland's identity is filtered and shaped.

Certain concepts from psychoanalysis may help to decode this complex linguistic system. In the work of Sigmund Freud, repression is described as a defense mechanism through which the individual removes painful or threatening thoughts, fears and experiences from conscious awareness and pushes them into unconscious. Freud initially applied this mechanism primarily to the psychic life of the individual. However, in his later writings, he also considered the possibility of collective forms of

repression. In *Totem and Taboo*, for example, Freud suggests that communities may develop shared silences, taboos and forms of collective guilt. Such mechanisms can structure the symbolic order of a group in ways that resemble individual psychological repression. If this idea is applied to the linguistic structure observed in the film, an important question emerges: do the subjects that cannot be spoken about – illness, disability, and physical limitation – become symbolically excluded not only from everyday conversation but also from the family's shared psychological space? In other words, does the linguistic prohibition surrounding these topics function as a form of collective repression within the family.

This line of thoughts naturally leads to the theories of Jacques Lacan. Lacan reread the work of Freud through the perspectives of structural linguistics and philosophy, thereby introducing a new and influential framework for understanding the human psyche. According to Lacan, the human psyche is organised around three interacting registers: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. In simplified terms, the Symbolic represents the domain of language, social law, and cultural order. It is also associated with the concept of the "Name-of-the-Father", which signifies the symbolic structures that regulate social life. Everything that can be articulated through language and structured by symbolic markers can be integrated into the identity of the subject. By contrast, those aspects of experience that cannot be articulated linguistically – the "unspeakable" or the "impossible" – belong to the register of the Real. For Lacan, the Real marks the limits of the symbolic order. It represents a dimension that resists symbolisation and therefore appears threatening, uncontrollable, and ultimately impossible to fully grasp through language.

If Lacan's three registers are used as an analytical framework, Esther's behaviour can be interpreted as a continuous filtering and narrowing of the Symbolic order. As noted earlier, only those elements of experience that can be articulated linguistically can become symbolic markers and thus be integrated into the subject's identity. Esther deliberately renders the illness – and many of the concepts associated with it – unspeakable. By excluding these terms from everyday life, she attempts to prevent Roland's disability from becoming a defining symbolic marker within the family's discourse. In other words, if the condition cannot be named, it cannot easily be incorporated into Roland's identity. Instead, Esther repeatedly affirms the opposite narrative: Roland is capable of anything, he is not ill, he is no different from other children, and divine help will eventually arrive. Through constant repetition, these statements gradually move from describing reality to actively constructing it. The missing terms – such as "clubfoot" – are replaced by the excessive use of transcendental or emotionally charged concepts. As a result, the family's linguistic space becomes organised around symbolic nodes such as God, love, normality, and the frequently evoked figure of Sylvie Vartan. This self-protective mechanism resembles mechanisms of repression or taboo. It shields Roland from internalising a fixed identity centred on illness or disability. Yet such linguistic strategies cannot permanently protect the family from what Jacques Lacan describes as the Real. The threat of illness persists as an unarticulated presence, exerting emotional pressure on the family space like a latent trauma that cannot be fully symbolised.

In this way, the film not only explores the physical and emotional dimensions of maternal care, but also raises questions about its linguistic and symbolic structure. Because the family's linguistic space is largely shaped by Esther, Roland's own voice

rarely appears as fully autonomous. Instead, it often seems as though Esther is narrating his life for him, while his identity is constructed from the symbolic markers she has assigned to him. It is therefore highly symbolic that Roland can speak openly about his illness only after his mother's death. Even then, however, he continues to refer to it as something that remained unspeakable within the family for many years. Seen from this perspective, the film's final scene becomes particularly meaningful. Standing before the roaring waves of the sea, Roland cries out, begging for his mother to truly disappear and never again haunt his life. Yet at the same time he must confront the paradox that the bond between them remains indestructible. This connection, formed through years of care, control and emotional dependence, proves easier to accept than to fully understand.

#### 4. Processing Questions

- How did you feel while watching the film?
- Which character did you feel closest to, and why?
- How did you perceived Esther's character in the first half of the film and in the second half ? Do you think she changed or did she remain the same?
- Where do you think the boundary lies between parental care, help and control?
- In the film, the family tries not to talk about the illness? Why do you think they made this decision? Do you think it was a decision made by the whole family or mainly by the mother?
- Is it possible that avoiding certain topics can protect us from the harms of the outside world?
- Have you ever been in a situation where you preferred to stay silent about a certain problem? What happened afterwards? Did the problem disappear or was it transferred elsewhere?
- Esther strongly believes in positive thinking throughout the film. In your opinion, can maintaining a positive attitude help people cope with difficult situations?
- Do you think the mother made Roland feel guilty by telling him that she had done everything for him and that he was not grateful enough? What might Roland have felt in those moments?
- What do you think is more frightening for a parent: the fear of losing their child, or the possibility that the child might succeed without them?
- If you had been one of the characters, would you have said something out loud in order to ease the emotional burden?

# **Love, Relationships**

(Past Lives 2023)

Translated by Kornelia Kincses

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?

## Peer Relationships - FOMO FOMO - Fear of Missing Out (2019)

Translated by Kornelia Kincses

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 centre of these interactive sessions is the film FOMO: Fear of Missing Out (2019) that creates an opportunity for young people to think about the importance of friendships and other peer relationships based on their own experiences. Participants can reflect on how they are influenced by the norms and expectations of their peers, and they can explore the topic of peer bullying together. During the discussion attention is directed towards the role of social media as a catalyst in these processes. Talking about the film offers an opportunity for young people to think, in relation to their own experiences, about the challenges of social life in adolescence and emerging adulthood, and about finding balance between fitting in and staying true to themselves. During the reflection the challenges of the digital age can appear, as they mostly form young people’s social experiences. The aim is thus to create an opportunity for young people to express their feelings about this topic as a result of the film experience. Further goals are, on one hand to make them aware of the psychological and emotional resources or difficulties embedded in interpersonal relationships, and on the other hand to make them 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, in order to keep the discussion authentic and individual for the students. Processing the topics is scaffolded by a wide range of materials and activities that help participants’ active involvement and collective thinking. During the discussion, it is useful to prevent the shared experiences from becoming too intimate, since in a group setting it may cause anxiety. The role of the facilitator is to support participants in verbalising their experiences, but prevent the dialogue from becoming too personal. It might be useful, for instance, to help self-reflection with general examples, and questions that create a safe environment for expressing emotions, but at the same time avoid the risk of excessive self-disclosure. However, it is important to provide the possibility for sharing personal thoughts and experiences if needed. It is useful to emphasise empathy, acceptance of different perspectives, and the fact that there are more than one answer to a question.

### 1. Tuning In - First Impressions and Emotional Resonance

Sharing the first impressions and emotional experiences in connection with the film can help participants initiate self-reflection and begin thinking about their own inner processes within a safe framework. This phase of the discussion promotes the

development of emotional awareness, which is one of the key elements of self-awareness in adolescence and young adulthood. When young people reflect on how the film affected them, they also practice identifying and verbalising their own emotional responses, which helps them to handle and communicate their feelings with greater awareness. The questions supporting tuning-in do not require deep or personal self-disclosure, but they create an opportunity for young people to express their experiences and impressions. In order to minimise potential anxiety, it is beneficial to emphasise at the beginning that each and every personal experience is valid and valued. Sharing feelings and associations create a shared experience, since the members of the group recognise that others have similar emotions and thoughts, which strengthens the connection and the feeling of security. All of these ensure that the processing discussion begins in an open, honest and safe atmosphere, laying the foundation for further collaborative work on heavier topics.

### Conversation Starter Questions

- What feelings did the film leave you with?
- Which scenes had the greatest impact on you?
- If you had to describe the atmosphere or message of the film with one word, what would it be?

## 2. Processing the Film Experience

Processing the film creates an opportunity for participants to engage with topics indirectly through the characters, enabling reflection on matters that may concern their own lives. This phase of the discussion offers an indirect approach, where participants can explore the dilemmas of loneliness, sense of belonging, acceptance and self-acceptance through the perspectives of the characters, while avoiding excessive self-disclosure. This indirect approach is essential at this age since young people's, especially adolescents' emotional world is intense, and it is often difficult for them to express and verbalise their emotions, problems and anxieties. It is much easier to reflect on a fictional character's decisions, dilemmas and life situations because that way they do not have to talk openly about their own vulnerabilities. The film thus provides a projective space through which participants can explore their own experiences, insecurities and inner conflicts, which helps with self-reflection and processing experiences. Analysing the characters, and the supporting, plot-related questions help young people to identify the dilemmas of exclusion, loneliness, sense of belonging, desire for connection and self-acceptance without having to express their own emotions directly. This creates an opportunity for self-reflection while at the same time keeping distance from self-disclosure. Personal associations linked to the film provide an opportunity for participants to explore their own life situations and experiences, and they gently cross over from the storyline of the film to the bridge leading into their own reality. The discussion in the group works as a model: it helps participants practice forming opinions, listening to others' perspectives and expressing thoughts in a safe way.

### Conversation Starter Questions

- How authentic do you think the film portrays the world of today's young people? Have you recognised any situations or phenomena that also happen around you?
- The members of the "Pack" are distinctive characters. How do you see them and what characterises their personalities and group dynamics? Do you think they would be popular in your school as well? How would you react if your classmates did similar things? Would you join them, fight them or stay out of it?
- The boys in the film did more and more daring and often dangerous things. Where would you have stopped? What do you think their motivations were - for example, attention, acknowledgement, curiosity, boredom or rivalry? What factors do you think could stop them before going too far? Where was the point you felt it was already too much?
- How were you affected by the boys wanting to document and share everything online? In your opinion, how can content creators get from harmless tricks to serious and harmful actions? How do you think their decisions are affected by the thought of something being good content? Have you ever done anything just for the sake of posting it on social media?
- In the film we can see Gergő being unsure about his friends' decisions and actions, but he always ends up going along with the group. Why do you think it is? What do you think the underlying emotions, fears or desires are - for instance, fear of exclusion, need for validation from friends or his own search for a place and identity?
- Throughout the film we can see Gergő standing up for himself in certain situations such as saying no to a challenge because of his fear of heights. However, he did not say no in the most critical situation when exploiting Lilla's unconscious state, recording and sharing his actions? Why do you think he could set boundaries in a harmless situation while he could not in another one where someone else's integrity was at stake? What role do you think it played that Lilla was perceived as an object rather than a person with emotions? How do you find the fact that in the film Gergő is portrayed both as an insecure and impressionable young person, and as a responsible character whose decisions contribute to serious consequences?
- Several characters reacted in different ways to what happened to Lilla. Which reaction could you identify with and why? Why do you think it often happens that the social group starts to examine the behaviour of the victim, rather than the responsibility of the perpetrators? What message does society send when

it holds the victim accountable rather than the perpetrators? What would be the responsible and right reaction in a situation like this - both as a peer or an adult?

- How offensive and harmful is it to film someone, for example girls, without their knowledge or consent, whether for entertainment or content creation purposes? How might the person feel if a video of them is made public without their consent? Who is responsible when something like that appears on the internet, is it the person who made it, the one who posted it or also the ones who shared it?
- How do you see the role of the instigators who did not do the harmful action, but encouraged others to do it? How about those who shared the video - are they part of the abuse or just intensified the effects by exposing it to a wider audience? Is responsibility limited only to the perpetrators, or does it also extend to those who allow, support, or spread the harm?
- The film provides an insight into Gergő's family background and we can see that his relationship with his parents is tense. To what extent do you think the parents can be held responsible for the boys' behaviour? Is Gergő's problematic family background an excuse for his behaviour, or do you think everyone needs to take responsibility for the consequences of their decisions?
- Why do you think the boys wanted to find Lilla? What was their motivation; was it guilt, anger, did they want to pressure her or help her? Can it be expected from Lilla to forgive them and move on after what happened? Is it even possible to move on after such a traumatic event and who has the right to expect this from her?
- The story is portrayed mostly from the perpetrators' point of view and we see only a segment of the victim's perspective. What emotions and thoughts did this perspective evoke in you? In your opinion, what would have changed if the film shows the events from the perspective of the victim? To what extent does it affect your interpretation that you saw the inner worlds of the perpetrators?
- The ending of the film remains open, we are not given a clear resolution. How would you continue the story? What do you think could happen to the characters after the film? What consequences do they have to face; what do you think would be the fairest and most educational outcome?

### 3. The Characteristics of Friendships in Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood

In adolescence, peer relationships have a significant psychosocial importance, as they serve as the primary setting for social and emotional development (Cole&Cole, 2006).

Young people spend more and more time with their peers, and relationships based on equality and voluntary choice, such as friendships, become the key settings of their everyday lives. These friendships differ from childhood relationships in quality because they are more characterised by reciprocity, intimacy and trust (Youniss & Haynie, 1992). Friendships represent an important social support: the trust and acceptance of peers facilitate adolescents in coping with new life situations and challenges, and can contribute to maintaining mental wellbeing (Luijten, van de Bongardt & Nieboer, 2023). Among the developmental tasks of adolescence are the formation of an autonomous self and the consolidation of a coherent value system, to which the feedback of peers provide the most important point of reference (Bora & Vaida, 2023). The orientation to the peer groups in this process also supports the emotional detachment from the parents (Cole & Cole, 2006). During adolescence, teenagers gravitate towards peer groups of similar age and initially of the same gender, and they typically strive to adapt to the group norms (Shah, Szewedo, & Allen, 2024). Young people tend to resemble their friends closely, from whom they adopt model behaviours and values. Over time, these friendships become more intimate. By the end of adolescence cross-gender relationships become more common, and the hierarchical structures in the group are replaced by bonds based on mutual trust (Shah, Szewedo, & Allen, 2024).

Friendships are not static relationships but change dynamically according to the developmental tasks of the particular stage of life (Hartup, & Stevens, 1999). Emerging adulthood is full of changes and uncertainties, as young people typically face multiple developmental challenges simultaneously, testing the resilience of their social networks as well (Kirwan, O'Súilleabháin, Burns, Ogoro, Allen & Creaven, 2023). In this phase of life, personal relationships transform intensely. There is an ongoing emotional and financial detachment from the parents, while romantic relationships become more significant, and close friendships also play a central role (Wood, Crapnell, Lau, Bennett, Lotstein, Ferris, & Kuo, 2017). Age-related transitions, such as university, moving and first job, typically reshape friendship networks (Pătrașcu, & Vaida, 2025). Many young people need to build a new friendship network, since old bonds can hardly be maintained because of the distance (Khullar, Kirmayer, & Dirks, 2021). At this stage, most people expand their social networks within new communities (college, university, workplace), establishing new social groups that correspond to adult priorities. Although the number of friends often decreases, the quality of deeper, more intimate and close friendships gains greater significance and has a stronger impact on mental wellbeing (Pătrașcu, & Vaida, 2025).

Examining peer relationships and friendships is therefore of great importance, as these relationships fundamentally shape young people's identity, self-esteem, social competencies and mental wellbeing. Processing such topics creates an opportunity to make young people more aware of how their social groups influence them, what values, habits and patterns they adapt from them, and how all these influence their everyday decisions and self-perception. The differentiation between relational qualities help young people see the worth of their relationship networks with greater awareness. Exploring the topic of the needs, expectations, boundaries and challenges occurring in friendships promotes relational awareness, strengthens social skills and supports the development of realistic expectations in interpersonal relationships. Young people can learn to identify the factors that make a relationship sustainable and the strategies for coping with changes occurring in different life situations. The discussions highlight that friendships change dynamically as individuals grow older; the expectations, the quantity of time spent together and the quality of relationships

transform. It is useful for young people to make it clear that maintaining relationships often requires effort, flexibility and communication. Including the topic of social media is based on the everyday experiences of young people. Digital spaces present both possibilities and risks: it makes keeping in touch easier, however, it can also intensify shallowness and misunderstanding. Mindful evaluation of digital relationships helps young people develop strategies for maintaining meaningful and authentic friendships in both online and offline environments. All in all, the main aim of the processing conversation is to help young people understand their own relationship needs better, create their relationship networks with greater awareness, and strengthen those skills that promote healthy, balanced and supportive friendships.

### Conversation Starter Questions

- **What social groups are you a member of?** Which one of these is the most important for you right now and why? How do you think these groups influence you? How do they make you feel when you are among the members, and to what extent do they influence the way you think about yourself and the world? Have you ever had an experience where being a member of a group helped you through a difficult situation or where the expectations of a group put pressure on you?
- **In your opinion, is it easy or difficult to make friends among your peers?** What makes it easier or more difficult? What traits help people to make connections easier? What are the requirements of forming truly deep and meaningful friendships, rather than just superficial acquaintances, and maintaining them over time?
- **What makes someone a good friend?** Do you think there is a difference between being mates and friends with someone? How would you describe the difference according to your own experience? What makes a friendship truly trustworthy? List some characteristics that you find important in a friend? What expectations do you have of a friend?
- **Have you ever had a change in your life that tested your friendships?** How did this change affect your relationships? Did it bring you closer to each other or did it create distance between you? How did you deal with the difficulties? Did you try to communicate more, to make compromises or did you just let the relationship transform? What insights have you gained about what sustains a friendship over time and what can easily undermine it?
- **How do friendships transform over time?** How do you think friendships of childhood, adolescence and adulthood are different from each other? Think about the time spent together, the activities organised, how important individual characteristics, expectations or mutual support are. What do you think changes relationships? Is it the life situation, maturity, responsibility or something else?

- **How do you keep in touch with your friends?** What possibilities support maintaining existing relationships and what helps adults make new friends? Did you notice that you make friends differently now than in the past?
- **How does social media transform peer relationships?** In what ways does social media make it easier or more difficult to make friends? Have you ever noticed that a relationship works completely differently online and offline? What impact do you think social media has on the endurance and depth of friendships?

#### 4. Peer Pressure and FOMO

Peer pressure is a psychosocial phenomenon, in which an individual conforms to the norms, values or behaviours of a peer group - communicated either through explicit expectations or social cues - in order to gain acceptance and approval from the group or to avoid exclusion (Lou, 2023). It is important to highlight the dual nature of peer pressure. It is usually talked about because of its negative effects, however, it can also be a positive influence (Chen, & Deng, 2022). Peer pressure can be interpreted in a broad sense among young people: it means not only direct coercion, but also general social conformity and the desire for belonging to a group (Álvarez-Turrado, Falls, & Romera, 2025). Young people often feel the urge to conform to the group norms, they copy their friends' behaviour in order to fit in and get social validation. Adolescents' identity and self-esteem are highly formulated through feedback from their peers, which makes social acceptance, validation and acknowledgment particularly significant (Allen, Costello, Stern, & Bailey, 2025). Peer pressure can manifest in explicit forms, such as, direct commands or verbal prompts, as well as through more subtle signals like judgemental looks or gossip, and today it is also reinforced on online platforms (Lou, 2023).

The constant online presence in social media creates new dimensions: young people compare themselves to idealised photos and posts and the competition for likes also represents social pressure (Yelishala, 2022). Social media and the internet transformed peer interactions radically. Most young people are online all the time, the lives of their friends are public, which continuously operates as a signalling system for comparison. Likes and comments provide acknowledgment expressed in numbers, which intensify the need for approval. This is strongly connected to the phenomenon of FOMO (fear of missing out), which is the fear of missing social experiences, events or opportunities, and is a common phenomenon in adolescence and young adulthood (de Bruijn, 2021). Essentially, FOMO can be interpreted as an internalised form of peer pressure. Young people feel themselves under pressure to be present, to take part and to conform to the social norms. They experience anxiety even without explicit pressure from others; simply feeling left out can be perceived as a loss of status.

The phenomena of peer pressure and FOMO are thus key dimensions in adolescence and young adulthood. Processing this topic creates an opportunity for young people to reflect on their own behaviours, inner needs and the impact of external expectations

with greater awareness. Self-reflection helps participants recognise the extent to which they make truly independent decisions and when they are more likely to conform to peer pressure and the norms occurring online. This supports the development of self-awareness and self-reflection, and contributes to the formation of assertiveness and the ability to set self-conscious boundaries. The discussion about FOMO helps young people understand the impacts of comparisons and the interpersonal norms transmitted by social media. This supports online awareness - how they can handle the constant comparisons healthily, and how they can find the balance between seeking social experiences and maintaining authenticity. All in all, these types of discussions improve young people's relational awareness, self-confidence and autonomy. They can experience that a relationship is not only about adaptation, but also the representation of their own needs, and being faithful to their own values is an important requirement of long term wellbeing and a healthy identity.

### Conversation Starter Questions

- **Why do you think the desire for approval and the need to fit in a group is stronger in adolescence than in other ages?** Why are being accepted by your peers, wearing similar clothes, talking and behaving similarly so important?
- **Can you recall any situations where you only did something in order to fit in, although it did not align with your own values?** How did it make you feel? Were you happy because you were a member of the group or were you anxious because you did not agree with it completely? What impact does it have on your self-image and self-confidence, when you conform your behaviour to the norms and expectations of your friendship circle, even if you do not agree with them completely?
- **Have you ever had an experience where you could not say no to something because you were afraid of being an outsider or losing your friends' approval?** Why do you think it is difficult to say no or think or behave differently than everyone else? What internal feelings and desires and external factors and expectations influence this?
- **Was there a situation where you could manage to stand up for yourself even if you had to go against the whole group?** Why do you think it is important to set boundaries and articulate the borders of your comfort zone in your peer relationships? What can you do if your friends do not accept your boundaries, how can a situation like this be dealt with and what does it say about the real quality of the relationship?
- **What factors can help young people resist peer pressure?** What skills (eg.: self-confidence, assertive communication, determination) or what other supportive factors (eg.: a trusted friend, an accepting community, family

support) can give you strength in a situation like that? Why is it good when someone can make independent decisions rather than always conform to others' expectations? How does this affect self-esteem, responsibility, and the development of identity?

- **What are the advantages and disadvantages of conforming to others?** How is it possible to find the balance between authenticity and conformity? Where do you draw the line between compromise and self-sacrifice?
- **To what extent is FOMO characteristic of you?** Have you ever felt pressure to go somewhere, to participate in an event, to join a common activity only because you were afraid of missing something out that the others experience? Has it ever led you to take on something you did not really feel like doing or did not fully agree with?
- **What role does social media play in FOMO?** How do you feel when you see on social media that others are doing stuff, participating in events while you are not there? Do you feel curiosity and motivation to join them next time, or do you feel sadness, jealousy, exclusion? Does it ever happen that you compare yourself to your peers, for example who is more popular or lives a more exciting life? How does this affect your way of thinking about yourself and your self-esteem?
- **What feelings fuel FOMO and what can help prevent it?** What can help with creating a balance between taking part in social experiences and at the same time staying authentic and paying attention to individual needs? How can one find a healthy balance between being present online and not constantly feeling like they are missing out?

## 5. Peer Bullying and Moral Disengagement

Peer bullying is a repetitive, aggressive behaviour that is fundamentally based on an imbalance of power, where the perpetrator gains a position of dominance (status, dominance, control) over the victim through physical, social or informational resources, causing the victim to suffer physical, psychological or social damage (Tight, 2023). This can include physical or verbal abuse, sexual harassment, social bullying (eg.: undermining the victim's social status, exclusion) and online harassment as well (Li, Wang, Martin-Moratinos, Bella-Fernández, & Blasco-Fontecilla, 2024). Bullying, which is often learned through observation, may be reinforced by aggressive patterns witnessed in the family or broader community, leading young people to perceive aggression as a tool for managing conflicts and gaining social status (Powell, & Ladd, 2010). Bullying is often organised on the level of groups, not on the level of individuals. In group settings, especially in online anonymous situations, individuals often leave their moral compass behind much easier, and accept the norms of the group (Alvárez-Turrado, Falla, & Romera, 2025). The role of the audience is key: the quiet support

and passivity of the group legitimize the behaviour of the bully (Maunder, & Crafter, 2018). If the norms of the peer group support violence, a lot of the members do not dare to stand up for the victim because of the strong desire for conformity. They even join in the bullying just to avoid becoming a victim later. These group situations often activate the mechanism of moral disengagement, which is a collection of strategies that help people legitimize their deviant behaviour in order to avoid guilt and shame. (Álvarez-Turrado, Falla, & Romera, 2025). Some of these, for example, are minimising responsibility, distorting the consequences, dehumanising or cognitive restructuring. All kinds of peer bullying is highly represented in adolescence and young adulthood (Tight, 2023). Peer bullying in adolescence and young adulthood is especially harmful because they are in a stage of life where their identity and social competencies are in formation. The impact of bullying means far more than the experience itself, as it has a long term effect on mental health, social relationship patterns and the ability for adaptation in adulthood (Moore, Norman, Suetani, Thomas, Sly, & Scott, 2017). Prevention, early recognition and effective intervention are therefore crucial not only for the victims, but also for the perpetrators, and for the broader peer community.

Processing the topic of bullying creates an opportunity for the participants to reflect on toxic relational dynamics, power imbalance and the role of social norms with greater awareness. Guiding them through the different types and consequences of bullying helps young people recognise the complexity of the phenomenon and highlights the importance of taking these incidents seriously no matter how serious or not serious they look. The aim is neither the demonisation of the perpetrator, nor making excuses for them. Instead of this the emphasis is on exploring the underlying psychological, social and family issues that contribute to the bullying behaviour. Talking about the family dynamics, social norms and attitudes and cultural patterns underlying bullying help young people think not only in terms of victim and perpetrator, but understand it as a more complex social phenomenon. This improves critical thinking and the skills that help them prevent or reduce bullying in their own communities. It is crucial for young people to understand that bullying is not just individual aggression but is often organised on group level and the passivity of the witnesses is an important factor in it. Drawing attention to social atmosphere and interpersonal norms help young people recognise their own responsibility in stopping bullying, and they can experience the strong effect of standing up for the victim, even if it is only one person. The discussion creates an opportunity for young people to understand the psychological experiences of the victims and the long term consequences, and it makes them see how important the role of the witnesses is in maintaining or stopping bullying. All of this improves empathy towards others and the ability of taking responsibilities. Last but not least, the inclusion of the topic of cyberbullying is particularly relevant, as young people's presence in the online space is highly intensive. The common thinking about this topic increases digital awareness, highlights the characteristics of cyberbullying, and may also contribute to the development of strategies that enables young people to protect themselves and their peers against cyberbullying.

### Conversation Starter Questions

- **What forms of abuse do we know?** Do you think people take all of these different forms equally seriously? Have you ever had an experience where certain forms of abuse were presented as jokes, even though they deeply hurt

the other person? Why do you think it is important to take all kinds of abuse equally seriously? What consequences does it have if peers or adults fail to take these matters seriously?

- It is common practice in peer groups for the members to engage in joking and playful teasing. **Where would you draw the line between playful teasing and real bullying?** Have you ever been in a situation where playful teasing made someone feel bad? How can you tell that a situation has crossed the line? What responsibility do you think the group has in preventing a situation from turning into bullying?
- **Why do you think humiliation, exclusion and bullying are more common among adolescents than adults?** How does peer pressure affect bullying, for example when someone only joins the abuse because they do not want to be outsiders?
- **Have you ever seen that someone was regularly bullied in the peer group or online?** How did it make you feel? Have you ever felt that you rather turn your head and stay quiet because you were afraid that if you stood up for the victim, you would become a target as well? Why is it so hard to stand up for someone who is bullied? What does it mean to the victim when someone stands up for them, and why is it crucial in a situation like that?
- **What do you think is the role of bystanders in either perpetuating or stopping bullying?** What social atmosphere gives way to bullying? What norms and values (competitive, hierarchical systems, lack of empathy) make it easier for bullying to appear and persist? How can a community put an end to bullying?
- **What cultural and social factors do you think strengthen or weaken the occurrence of bullying?** (eg.: messages from the media, social inequalities, gender role expectations) How do you see the society's attitude towards victims and perpetrators? Are they making excuses for the perpetrators or are they taking the victims' situation seriously?
- How can one become a bully? How can it happen that someone is a bully and a victim at the same time? What factors (eg.: insecurity, low self-esteem, lack of empathy, unresolved tensions, impact of family or social environment) play a role in someone becoming a bully? How can this influence their own life paths, self-image, future relationships, and social evaluation? Is it possible that being a bully gives power and acknowledgment short term, but in the long run it leads to isolation, stigmatisation or inner emptiness?

- **How does someone who becomes a victim of bullying feel?** How does it affect their everyday lives? How does it change the way they look at themselves, others and the world? What long term impacts do you think bullying may have on the lives of the victims even in adulthood (eg.: anxiety, self-esteem issues, relationship difficulties)?
- **Why do you think it happens that the victims of bullying stay quiet rather than talking about the things that happened to them?** Why do you think it is hard to ask for help in a situation like that? What can help victims feel more confident in turning to someone for support? Why is it important that the environment takes news about bullying seriously and responds in a sensible way?
- **What specific characteristics does cyberbullying have on the lives of the victims compared to real life bullying?** How is it different when someone is bullied online? (eg.: the bullying can be present day and night, it is happening in front of a bigger audience, it often leaves traces like messages, photos, comments) Why do people bully more easily online than in real life? (eg.: anonymity, no direct consequences, there is no direct reaction from the victim, at least they cannot see it) How do you think this changes the dynamics of bullying and why is it particularly difficult for victims to protect themselves from cyberbullying?

## 6. Closing Round

The closing 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 are you leaving with today?
- What is it that you take with you from today's session?

## Sick of Myself (2022)

Translated by Kornelia Kincses

### The Plot

The central characters of the story are Signe and Thomas, who are in an unhealthy, highly competitive relationship. Both are obsessively driven by a desire for recognition. Thomas is an up-and-coming visual artist who creates installations using stolen furniture and is beginning to achieve the fame he has long sought.

Signe, who works in a café, feels insignificant in the shadow of her boyfriend's success. After witnessing a dog attack at her workplace and receiving sudden attention because of her blood-stained clothes, she realises that the quickest path to recognition is through the role of a victim.

To regain dominance in their relationship and social circles, Signe makes a dangerous decision. She finds an illegal, Russian medication (Lidexol) on the internet, which has a well-known side effect of permanent skin damage. She begins deliberately overdosing on it in order to produce increasingly mysterious symptoms.

When her face becomes deformed and covered in wounds, she gets what she wanted: the media, her friends, and Thomas also become concerned about her.

The spiral of lies quickly begins to get out of her control. She enjoys the fame that comes with her illness—an agency promoting “imperfect beauty” even offers her a contract—but in the meantime, her body truly begins to deteriorate.

By the end of the film, the girl has completely deteriorated both physically and mentally. Her environment gradually begins to recognise her lies—or simply grows tired of the constant drama—so Signe becomes more isolated than ever, while also suffering from permanent health damage.

### Psychological Analysis

#### 1. Münchhausen Syndrom

This is one of the film's most central themes. Münchhausen syndrome is a psychological disorder in which a person deliberately induces illness or fabricates symptoms in order to receive medical care, attention, and empathy. (APA, 2013)

Signe not only lies about the illness but also actively poisons herself with Lidexol, in order to have visible physical symptoms. For her, physical pain and permanent damage are secondary to the “attention profit.”

Signe's behaviour is an extreme example of a factitious disorder. Feldman (2018) emphasises that patients with this condition do not engage in such behaviour for financial gain, but rather to obtain the psychological benefits of the “patient role,” such

as attention and empathy. In the film, this internal motivation is dominant, as opposed to rational self-preservation.

## **2. Pathological Narcissism**

Both main characters display significant narcissistic traits. Their relationship is not based on love, but on mutual rivalry.

Thomas uses his art to feel special, while Signe, lacking a comparable talent, adopts the role of the victim. According to Pincus and Lukowitsky (2010), a core feature of pathological narcissism is an obsessive need for recognition. Signe cannot tolerate not being at the centre of attention; for example, she fakes illness at Thomas's dinner in order to divert attention from his success.

The rivalry between the two main characters shows signs of malignant narcissism (Otto Kernberg, 1984), in which a partner's success is perceived as a threat to one's self-esteem. This is why Signe resorts to drastic measures, as Thomas's artistic success threatens to deprive her of "narcissistic nourishment."

## **3. Digital Narcissism and "Victim Culture"**

The film shows how suffering and marginalisation have become a form of "social currency" in the modern world.

Signe realises that if she is seen as the "victim," she becomes both untouchable and interesting. Social media and modern marketing—along with the agency that seeks out "imperfections"—can legitimise and even reward self-destructive behaviour.

The film's social-psychological layer is grounded in Campbell and Manning's theory, which describes the rise of a "victim culture." In this context, status no longer derives from dignity or honour, but from the expression of grievances and experiences of marginalisation. Signe recognises that illness grants her an "untouchable" and socially elevated position within the modern hierarchy.

## **4. Pathological Lying**

Signe's lies eventually begin to take on a life of their own. She not only fabricates her illness but also lies about her past, her family, and events that have happened to her.

She herself becomes lost in the web of lies she has created. The film often depicts Signe's daydreaming—for example, about her own funeral or her bestselling book—where reality and desire-driven fantasy merge.

In Signe's case, lies are not merely tools but the building blocks of an alternative reality. According to Dike (2008), in "pseudologia fantastica," these lies are elaborate and persistent over time. For Signe, fabricated stories about her traumas, as well as her non-existent book project, function as obsessive means of maintaining self-

esteem, in which the boundaries between fantasy and reality become increasingly blurred.

## **5. Sociopathic Features**

Although Signe mainly displays narcissistic traits, she also shows signs of antisocial characteristics such as complete lack of empathy and feeling of guilt.

She coldly exploits her doctors, friends, and even her medication addict dealer. She does not care whom she hurts or deceives, as long as she can maintain and construct her own narrative.

Signe's behaviour shows a complete lack of empathy and a ruthless manipulation of her environment, which aligns with the concept of the Dark Triad. Research by Paulhus and Williams (2002) suggests that narcissism and subclinical psychopathy often co-occur. In Signe's character, this is reflected in her indifference to others' physical well-being and her lack of guilt.

## **6. Pathology of "Attention-economy"**

This is not a classical clinical diagnosis but rather a social-psychological phenomenon. The film suggests that, for many modern individuals, lack of attention and social invisibility can feel more unbearable than physical harm.

For Signe, the greatest tragedy is not her disfigured face, but the moment people begin to move on and she is no longer the most interesting topic in the room.

From a social-psychological perspective, the film portrays the struggle for attention as a form of market competition. Lanham's (2006) theory of the attention economy suggests that in an age of information abundance, attention has become the scarcest resource. Signe's radical "body modification" can be seen as a form of marketing strategy through which she seeks to convert attention into capital, in a world where invisibility is experienced as a form of social death.

## **Summary**

All in all, the film suggests that Signe's illness does not originate from the chemicals she applies to her skin, but rather from a deep internal identity crisis and a constant hunger for validation that she attempts to alleviate through radical, self-destructive means.

Kernberg (1975) argues that pathological narcissism is often rooted in a profound sense of inner emptiness and a fragmented identity (identity diffusion), which individuals attempt to compensate for through external recognition and "mirroring." According to Kohut (1971), this intense need for validation stems from a lack of adequate parental mirroring in early development. As a result, individuals may struggle with self-regulation and become reliant on external sources—such as social media or other forms of attention—to sustain their fragile sense of self.

Baumeister (1990) describes this radical, self-destructive tendency through the theory of “escape from self”: the individual experiences their identity crisis as so unbearable that deliberately inflicting illness or pain creates a form of cognitive narrowing, which can temporarily alleviate psychological suffering.

### **Processing Questions**

- What was Signe and Thomas’s relationship like at the beginning of the film?
- What was missing for Signe in the relationship, and how could Thomas have provided it?
- When did Signe decide that she needed to take radical action to attract attention?
- When did Signe realise that she had caused irreversible damage to herself?
- Why is a positive self-image crucial for an individual?

## Andrea Arnold: Bird (2024)

Translated by Kornelia Kincses

### 1. The Premise of the Story

The story follows Bailey, a twelve-year-old girl who lives in a run-down building in northern Kent, England, with her immature father, Bug, and his son from a previous relationship. Her mother lives elsewhere with Bailey's three younger siblings and a partner who is abusive toward them. Isolated and emotionally neglected, Bailey finds solace in watching the videos she makes of animals.

### 2. The Main Points of the Plot

- Family tension: the father, Bug, is about to marry a woman he barely knows, while pursuing a bizarre business idea—selling the hallucinogenic slime of a toad. Bailey feels neglected and is increasingly frustrated by her father's irresponsibility.
- The encounter: Bailey meets a strange and enigmatic man named Bird in a field. An outcast, Bird is searching for his family and exhibits unusual, bird-like behavior.
- Unique friendship: Bailey and Bird develop a deep, almost spiritual bond. Through their connection, Bird helps Bailey cope with the emotional challenges of puberty and the trauma within her family.
- Magical realism: Although the film begins as a social drama, it gradually shifts toward magical realism. The mystery surrounding Bird intensifies, and he comes to symbolize freedom and hope for Bailey.

### 3. Themes of the Film

- Coming of age: Bailey's journey from neglect and emotional isolation to self-awareness and maturity.
- Desire for freedom: expressed through the recurring bird metaphor, reflecting a longing to escape poverty, instability, and a sense of hopelessness.
- Social realism: the film offers a stark portrayal of the hardships faced by the British working class.

### 4. The Psychological Analysis of the Film

#### 4.1 Role Confusion and the Breakdown of Generational Boundaries

The most prominent psychological layer in the film is the collapse of traditional family subsystems. Bailey's father can be seen as a modern, declassed embodiment of what Carl Jung (1969/1991) described as the **Puer Aeternus** ("eternal boy") archetype. Bug

is not only irresponsible, but also infantile emotionally: he perceives the world through a magical, narcissistic lens, in which his impulsive actions—such as his sudden decision to marry or his toad-based business scheme—take precedence over his children’s need for stability and security.

In contrast, Bailey undergoes an extreme form of parentification. According to Hooper (2007), a parentified child is forced to take over the emotional cognitive functions of the parent which can disrupt or even block normal childhood development. Bailey becomes highly rational and protective of her brother, while also managing her father’s emotional instability. This reversal of roles generates a constant sense of internal anxiety, which she attempts to regulate through the use of a camera. By positioning herself behind the lens, she transforms threatening reality into an “observed object,” thereby creating distance from her own emotional pain.

For Bug life is only a game—whether in his toad project or his impulsive approach to marriage—but this “game” generates instability and danger in Bailey’s world. Her outbursts can thus be understood as cries for help: emotional responses to the loss of childhood security.

#### **4.2 Disorganised Attachment and the Erosion of the “Secure Base”**

According to John Bowlby’s attachment theory, a child requires a predictable and responsive “secure base” for healthy social and emotional development. In Bailey’s case, this secure base is almost entirely absent.

- Her relationship with her mother is marked by fear and distance due to the presence of an abusive partner, leaving Bailey without a stable maternal model for care and emotional regulation. This emotional vacuum renders her both vulnerable and unusually receptive to forming connections with strangers who offer even minimal but consistent attention.
- From the paternal side, attachment is equally unstable: Bug is sometimes affectionate but most of the time neglectful.

This constellation corresponds to the disorganised attachment (Main & Solomon, 1990), in which the caregiver is simultaneously a source of security and fear. Bailey’s oscillation between “frozen” withdrawal and intense emotional reactions reflects this ambivalent attachment. Within this emotional landscape, Bird—the mysterious stranger—functions not merely as a character, but as a source of “corrective emotional experience” (Alexander & French, 1946). This occurs when an individual - through a secure interaction - is able to revisit and rework earlier traumatic relational patterns (the father’s unreliability, the aggression of the mother’s partner) within a new, supportive context. Bird neither punishes, neglects, nor imposes demands; instead, his calm presence and acceptance challenge Bailey’s internalized negative models of relationships. In this sense, he becomes the first figure in Bailey’s life to provide stable attention without expectation, creating a secure relational space in which her trust and self-esteem can begin to develop. Through this connection, her inner world is finally given the conditions necessary to emerge and grow.

### 4.3 Dissociation and Magical Realism as Self-defence Mechanisms

The film's most controversial character is Bird: is he real, or merely a figment of childhood imagination? From a psychological perspective, this question is ultimately secondary; the central issue is dissociation. When stress (poverty, threat) reaches a level that cannot be integrated by the ego, the consciousness may "switch off" and create an alternative reality.

The surreal elements in the film—such as Bird's bird-like behavior or Bailey's transcendental experiences—can be interpreted, in psychological terms, as manifestations of dissociative defense mechanisms. David Spiegel and his colleagues (2011) argue that in cases of prolonged trauma, an individual's consciousness may partially detach from physical reality as a means of psychological survival.

Donald Winnicott's concept of "potential space" offers a useful framework for understanding this dynamic: Bird exists on the boundary between fantasy and reality. If Bailey were unable to seek refuge in this "magical" intermediate space, the brutality of her environment might push her toward a psychotic breakdown or complete emotional exhaustion. In this sense, Bird can be interpreted as a projection of Bailey's desire for freedom and psychological sanity.

### 4.4 Resilience and Post Traumatic Growth (PTG)

While Bug's character represents stagnation, Bailey's path is post traumatic growth (Tadeschi & Calhoun, 2004). PTG is not merely overcoming difficulties, but a deeper process of existential reorganisation.

1. Birth of Agency: By the end of the film, Bailey is no longer merely a passive observer. Discovering personal strength: At the beginning, she retreats behind the camera, distancing herself from reality. However, through her relationship with Bird and her attempt to protect her mother, she gradually realises that she is capable of influencing the world around her. By the film's conclusion, she no longer perceives herself as a victim, but as an active agent in her own life.
2. Setting Emotional Boundaries: Bailey gradually becomes capable of resisting both her father's chaotic behavior and her mother's abusive partner. She learns to distinguish between destructive attachments—such as her father's unreliable affection and the violence associated with her mother's relationship—and healthier, more constructive forms of connection. Her trust in Bird enables her to form relationships that are not rooted in fear.
3. Spirituality and Hope: the bird metaphor symbolises the soul's victory over the material world. The elements of "magical realism"—flight and the bird imagery—represent the experience of internal freedom. Bailey's life begins to make sense as she transforms her tragedy and the neglect of her parents into care and love.

Masten (2001) describes this process as "everyday magic," referring to the activation of normative human adaptive systems despite trauma. Bailey's development demonstrates that supportive interactions—even when they appear in unusual or symbolic forms, such as Bird—can help rewrite the script of even the deepest traumas.

In her case, this “magic” is expressed through her ability to use her story, her videos, and her relationship with Bird to reshape her fate. She does not become a victim of aggression, nor does she conform to her father’s infantile world. The film’s closing scene—though metaphorical—can be understood psychologically as a symbol of post-traumatic growth: a state following crisis in which the individual becomes capable of independent, rather than parentified, existence.

#### 4.5 Mental Contrast: Bailey vs. Bug

The most interesting dynamics in the film are represented by the “emotional asymmetry” between father and daughter. Although they are part of the same family, their mental state and their coping mechanisms are completely different.

Aspect	Bailey	Bug
mental maturity	forced adulthood: parentified, rational, protective (towards siblings)	Puer Aeternus: infantile, impulsive, never considers the consequences of his actions (Jung, 1969/1991)
coping	active and adaptive: making videos, looking for solutions, looking for real connection with Bird	avoidant and obsessive: he dives into the toad project in the hope of quick money and happiness
responsibility	high level of responsibility towards others, which causes anxiety	low level of responsibility: driven by his momentary desires (wedding, party)
development	ascending (PTG): from the trauma, she is headed towards independence	stagnated: stuck in childhood omnipotence, fail to learn from his mistakes

Bug’s character represents regression, in which an individual retreats to an earlier stage of childhood development in response to stress. In contrast, Bailey represents transcendence. For Bug “magic” (toad) functions as an external tool for solving problems, reflecting the illusion of childlike omnipotence and magical thinking (Piaget, 1954). By contrast, for Bailey “magic” (Bird) is an internal resource that supports coping with reality and overcoming fate.

This process is consistent with Jung’s concept of the transcendent function, which enables the resolution of tension between the conscious and unconscious through the emergence of a symbolic third element (in this case, the Bird) (Jung, 1969/1991). Moreover, Bailey’s attitude reflects the capacity for self-transcendence, which, according to Frankl (1988), represents a fundamental strength of the human spirit: the ability to find meaning beyond oneself and to preserve one’s dignity even under the most extreme circumstances.

## **5. Suggested Questions for Reflection**

What is Bailey's personality like, and how does the character develop throughout the story?

What is Bug's personality like, and how does the character develop throughout the story?

What kind of relationship do Bailey and Bug have, and how does it change throughout the story?

What kind of relationship does Bailey have with her mother, and how does it evolve over the course of the story?

What kind of relationship do Bailey's mother and her partner have, and how does it affect Bailey?

What role does Bird play in the story?

**Relationships**  
**Bird**  
**2024**

Translated by Kornelia Kincses

## **I. Introduction**

The contemporary British auteur film has established a distinct place within the current cinematic landscape. British filmmakers such as Mike Leigh, Ken Loach, Kenneth Branagh, Danny Boyle, and Guy Ritchie are regular participants at major international film festivals.

Beyond these well-known figures, British cinema also has a deeply human side: directors committed to social drama and realism who portray contemporary social issues with sensitivity and insight. At the same time, they remain respectful of tradition, deliberately drawing on and blending elements of British realist cinema and the 1960s New Wave, while also seeking new directions. Their work often explores questions of identity and the body, approaching marginalized individuals with profound empathy. A characteristic genre within this context is the coming-of-age narrative, frequently combined with elements of melodrama, social realism, and guilt-driven storytelling. Moreover, female-centered themes have become increasingly prominent, thanks to filmmakers such as the Scottish director Charlotte Wells, Luna Carmoon, and, of course, Andrea Arnold. The worlds they create are somewhat reminiscent of a season of *Skins*, albeit without its humorous sketches.

Andrea Arnold created a distinctive cinematic world from the very beginning of her career. Her connection to the British working class is deeply personal, as her mother raised her and her siblings alone on a housing estate under difficult economic circumstances. In 2005, she won the Academy Award for Best Short Film for *Wasp* (2003). This film offers a powerful portrait of a mother of four and already contains many of the elements that would later come to define Arnold's work: a lonely woman, neglected children, a run-down flat, hunger, bare subsistence, pubs, and the small, everyday moments of ordinary life. She continued to explore these themes in her subsequent films; however, *Red Road* (2006) and *Fish Tank* (2009) move beyond the traditions of British social realism. These works make more forceful artistic claims, posing urgent questions about trauma and the body as a carrier of meaning. As a result, they are no longer primarily concerned with constructing a social diagnosis—traditionally a central tenet of British realist cinema—but instead develop a more body-centered form of realist narrative. Arnold later directed the period drama *Wuthering Heights* (2011), the American road movie *American Honey* (2016), and the documentary *Cow* (2021). With *Bird* (2024), she returns to her roots, once again depicting the graffiti-covered housing estates of the British working class.

The story of *Bird* is relatively simple. Bailey, a twelve-year-old girl, struggles to find her place in the world: she appears strange and dreamy among her peers, hysterical and rebellious at home, and at the same time deeply wounded—someone who would give anything to escape the adult world. She lives in a run-down housing estate with her father, his fiancée and her half-brother. Her mother has abandoned her and started a

new family on the other side of the city. Bailey's father, who was still a teenager when she and her brother were born, is now only twenty-eight. He is irresponsible and impulsive, driven by unrealistic plans and desires. Preparing for his wedding without the necessary money, he comes up with the bizarre idea of acquiring a toad from which he hopes to extract a hallucinogenic substance. Meanwhile, he constantly gets into fights and is unable to maintain meaningful relationships with his children or behave like a parent, acting more like an immature older sibling. Bailey's fourteen-year-old brother is part of a vengeful gang of adolescents who spend their evenings confronting abusive adults. He appears to be repeating his father's pattern: his own fourteen-year-old girlfriend becomes pregnant. After a conflict-filled day, Bailey witnesses her brother and his friends in action. Shocked, she runs to a field on the outskirts of the city and spends the night there. At dawn, she meets a strange man who calls himself Bird. At first she drives him away, but later she helps him in his attempt to find his family. As the day of her father's wedding approaches, Bailey must also confront the changes in her own body. Her growing connection with Bird opens up a new, deeply existential dimension of experience. Increasingly, it becomes difficult for the viewer to determine whether Bird is a real figure or a projection of Bailey's psychological defense mechanisms.

## II. The Paths of the British Realist Film Tradition

The tradition of British realist cinema became particularly influential from the mid-twentieth century onward, leaving a lasting imprint—at least to some extent—on nearly every subsequent British film. From its inception, British realism has remained open to urgent social concerns, including class inequality, marginalized communities, and the material conditions of everyday life. These thematic preoccupations intertwined with an evolving cinematic language shaped by the European New Waves, giving rise to what became known as the “kitchen sink” film: a form of English realist drama emerging from the convergence of the French New Wave and the Free Cinema movement. This genre proved especially resilient during the crisis of the British studio system, as it effectively engaged with the growing class consciousness of its audience. Typically centering on an “angry young” working-class protagonist, these films narrated the failures of the social system through a deeply personal perspective. Shot largely on location, often in black and white and with non-professional actors, they enjoyed a brief but significant period of popularity. During this time, both directors and performers became cultural icons, capturing the existential frustration and rebellious spirit of the era and securing their place in film history. Notable examples from this period include *Look Back in Anger* (Tony Richardson, 1959), *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (Karel Reisz, 1960), *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (Tony Richardson, 1962), *A Taste of Honey* (Tony Richardson, 1961), *This Sporting Life* (Lindsay Anderson, 1963). However, the British New Wave ultimately proved to be short-lived. The commercial failure of *This Sporting Life* in 1963 marked a turning point, prompting many filmmakers to abandon their more radical approaches and gradually move toward conventional narrative forms. Tony Richardson's career illustrates this shift: following *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, he directed *Tom Jones* (1963), a film that, while still drawing on certain New Wave sensibilities, steered British cinema in a more mainstream direction. The final blow to the movement came with the rise of the “Swinging London” ethos and the growing influence of rock-

and-roll culture. In the face of vibrant, colorful productions such as the Beatles' films, the quieter, more auteur realist works struggled to maintain their relevance.

The realist mode never disappeared, but for a long time it was pushed into the background. By the 1990s, it had reached something of a dormant, almost deathlike state. The earlier new waves had come to an end, and postmodern experimentation was also losing momentum. At the same time, mainstream cinema dominated attention, overshadowing quieter films that were more socially attuned. In the 1990s, however, there was a growing demand for realist cinema. Filmmakers began to engage more directly with social issues, particularly in the aftermath of the Thatcher era, as they started to process its social and cultural traumas. From the 2000s onward, realist cinema experienced a revival and expanded its thematic scope. Directors such as Andrea Arnold played a key role in this shift. Her work opened realist cinema to female perspectives while maintaining a strong sensitivity to social issues, in continuity with earlier traditions. Importantly, realism here functions less as a direct political tool and more as a bodily, affective filmmaking approach—one that translates social reality into lived, sensory experience. This is evident in Arnold's films such as *Wasp* and *Fish Tank*, and can also be found in more naturalistic works like *Trainspotting* (Danny Boyle, 1996).

### III. Realism, Coming of Age and Magical Realism

As mentioned earlier, one of the favored genres within realist filmmaking traditions is the coming-of-age film. This type of narrative easily aligns with the conventions of classical realism and is particularly effective at portraying the unstable space between two modes of social existence: childhood and adulthood. In British cinema, the transition between these stages often unfolds within contexts marked by unstable family backgrounds, financial hardship, class constraints, and unresolved trauma, all of which limit the protagonists' possibilities. As a result, these young characters frequently find themselves navigating a labyrinth of emotional and practical parentification.

If we accept that the roots of contemporary British realist cinema lie in the twentieth-century new wave, then we must also acknowledge that, although modern cinema as a movement has come to an end, its fundamental principles continue to resonate in the fabric of auteur filmmaking, particularly in realist dramas. According to András Bálint Kovács, the specific forms of modern cinema—albeit only on certain levels—can be described through three recurring thematic frameworks. First, the individual becomes alienated from their environment. Second, the concept of reality is redefined in subjective, mythological, or conceptual terms. Third, nothing remains hidden beneath the surface; everything is brought into representation. He further argues that these patterns are deeply encoded within modern film.

*Bird* is a cinematic work in which the previously discussed principles not only appear but actively operate. This observation becomes even more compelling when the film is understood through a framework that emerges at the intersection of lyrical realist coming-of-age cinema and magical realism. Lyrical realism remains a contested notion, while magical realism originates as a literary concept; however, it can also designate specific cinematic spaces and strategies. Rather than functioning as a fully

autonomous genre, magical realism operates as a recurring structural and stylistic unit that opens new pathways both within the narrative and in its interpretation. In similar films, magical realist moments are often linked to transitional zones that function as bridges between childhood and adulthood. These spaces belong fully to neither state, yet simultaneously to both. They constitute a liminal territory shaped prospectively by childhood and retroactively by adulthood—a space frequently activated by experiences such as trauma, abuse, or war. Prominent examples include *Time of the Gypsies* (Emir Kusturica, 1988), *Donnie Darko* (Richard Kelly, 2001), *The Devil's Backbone* (El espinazo del Diablo, Guillermo del Toro, 2001), *Pan's Labyrinth* (El laberinto del fauno, Guillermo del Toro, 2006), *Black Swan* (Darren Aronofsky, 2010), *Life is Beautiful* (La Vita e bella, Roberto Begnini, 1997), *Amélie* (Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain, Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 2001), *Life of Pi* (Ang Lee, 2012), etc. It becomes evident that magical realism tends to function most effectively within narratives shaped by crisis or instability, where the irrational, the magical, and the ontological can seamlessly merge with the texture of reality.

As discussed earlier, *Bird* constructs its world through the familiar environment of classical British realist cinema. This milieu is rough, loud, economically vulnerable, and shaped by unstable, often dysfunctional family structures, which impose their own boundaries through the stigma of social determination. Bailey is only twelve, yet as a result of her father's infantile behavior, she is forced into a sustaining role. Through this process of parentification, she becomes exposed to various forms of abuse, leaving her with only a few fragile points of connection. One of these is her brother's gang—he himself is only fourteen—whose members spend their days roaming the streets and their evenings exacting revenge on abusive parents. While this world offers a sense of security, it does so through aggression and vigilantism. It is therefore unsurprising that Bailey's first encounter with their actions terrifies her, prompting her to flee into the fields, seeking refuge among animals. Her second point of connection is Bird himself—a strange, bird-like figure searching for his family. As a magical realist character, he exists on the threshold between reality and imagination. This liminal presence enables Bailey to distance herself, at least momentarily, from the violent environment in which she lives. The third connection emerges through a lyrical realist mode: Bailey is observant and deeply attentive, constantly mapping her surroundings, often recording them on video and capturing even the most subtle movements. These three connections are activated simultaneously when Bailey learns that her father is about to remarry. Her already unstable world begins to collapse, and even its remaining structures become uncertain. From the perspective of cinematic language, the realist and lyrical dimensions establish and define the spatial and social environment, while magical realism provides a means for Bailey to process the surrounding instability on a psychological level.

a title but also a recurring symbolic motif throughout the narrative. The film opens with the image of a bird and closes with a moment in which Bailey herself appears to transform into one. The bird is never the same, it is constantly evolving. Rather than functioning as a straightforward allegory, the title invites a range of interpretations. It can be understood as a psychological projection, a mythical element, an allegory of freedom, the metaphor of a Kafkaesque metamorphosis, or even the configuration of absence. This is where the film's greatest strength lies: it achieves the texture of social realism associated with classical British realist cinema without suffocating the magical dimension. At the same time, this magical space does not offer a resolution to the

social problems depicted. Instead, the two modes coexist in a strange, symbiotic relationship, generating a liminal space in which the protagonist's coming-of-age process can unfold.

#### **IV. Processing Questions**

- How did you feel while watching the film? How did you feel at the end?
- What emotions did the film evoke in you?
- How realistic did you find the film? Was there a moment when reality seemed to be disrupted?
- Could you identify with any of the characters? If so, why?
- What role does family play in Bailey's life? Does it support her, or does it hinder her?
- What might the bird symbolise in the film?
- Do you think Bird is a real person, or a projection of Bailey's inner world?
- The actress playing Bailey shows little emotion in her performance. What might this suggest about the character's emotional world?
- Do you think the film is primarily about social issues, psychological processes, or both?
- If you had to summarise the film in one word, what would it be?

# Immaculat (2021)

Translated by Kornelia Kincses

## 1. The Plot

The protagonist is an 18-year-old good-hearted girl from a middle-class family. University lies ahead of her, but because of her first love - an older, troubled boy - she becomes addicted to heroin. When the boy is sent to prison, Daria's mother sends her to a rehabilitation centre so she can get clean and the family can get their "old" girl back.

In the rehabilitation center's closed and rigid world, Daria finds herself in a completely unfamiliar environment. Most of the patients are hardened, rough older men. Daria immediately stands out among them because of her youth, politeness, naivety, and unwavering loyalty to her boyfriend in prison.

Her innocent and pure nature paradoxically protects her from aggressive sexual advances. Instead of becoming a victim, the patients see a reflection of their own lost innocence in her, and they become her protectors. As the girlfriend of the man at the top of the hierarchy, Daria gains an untouchable status and is treated with a certain privilege.

Daria, once an insecure teenager searching for her identity, suddenly becomes the centre of attention. She immensely enjoys the fact that everyone tries to protect and indulge her, craving her attention in return. The adoration and privilege become as intoxicating to Daria as heroin itself.

When a new young patient arrives at the centre — someone sent there by Daria's boyfriend — the balance of power begins to shift, and Daria is forced to confront her suppressed desires. A wild and increasingly open competition for her soon begins.

The once protective environment quickly becomes suffocating and toxic. Daria realises that the "immaculate" image these men have imposed on her is a prison: they project their own expectations and frustrations onto her while slowly depriving her of her own will and freedom.

The film culminates in a stage where Daria no longer has to fight only her addiction, but the suffocating micro-society surrounding her. In order to heal and grow up, she must destroy the image of herself as "immaculate." She does this at the end of the film by entering into a sexual relationship. She must break free from the control of these men, and find her own independent path. In the final scene, we see Daria walking out of the center, and for the first time, we sense that she may truly be capable of finding her independence.

## 2. Psychological Analysis of the Characters

### 2.1 Daria: Cross Dependency and Stuck Individuation

The psychological kernel of Daria's character stems from her lack of identity and her pathological dependence on others.

- **Cross-dependency:** when Daria enters the rehabilitation facility, she must confront the physical withdrawal symptoms of heroin addiction. Academic literature suggests that, in the early stages of recovery, patients often replace the dopamine stimulation of the central nervous system's reward centre with another compulsive behaviour or external stimulus (Sussman et al., 2011). In Daria's case, this new "drug" is the special attention and VIP treatment she receives from the men around her.
- **Lack of Individuation:** according to Erikson's (1968) developmental theory, the main task of adolescence is separation from parents and external authorities. After leaving an abusive and dependent relationship with her boyfriend, Daria enters another controlling environment, causing the development of her autonomous personality to become stalled. She experiences her identity through the role of the "immaculate idol" assigned to her by these men.

### 2.2. Spartac and Costea: Projection and Saviour-complex

The group dynamics among the experienced, dominant men in the closed psychiatric ward are also highly complex.

- **Projection:** it is very common in group therapy settings for members to project their own suppressed or lost aspects onto another member (Yalom & Leszcz, 2020). The men do not see Daria as a real young woman capable of making mistakes, but rather as a symbol: the embodiment of their own lost innocence and "purity." They believe that by protecting this purity from the filth of the world inside the facility, they can achieve absolution for their own sins.

When lower-status patients try to approach Daria, the "protectors" immediately tell them off with the phrase: "Leave her alone, she is actually sick."

Although this may appear to be empathy, it is in fact a form of codependency and a way of maintaining their status within the group. By assigning Daria the role of someone special who must be protected, they deceive themselves: they become "just" drug addicts, while the girl is framed as the "real victim." Through this narrative, they isolate Daria from the others, ensuring that she remains trapped within their web and allowing them to preserve their roles as protectors.

- the behaviour of the men can be accurately described through Karpman's Drama Triangle theory (Karpman, 1968). At first, they assume the role of the **Rescuer**, protecting the vulnerable girl. However, the role of the **Rescuer** inherently depends on the existence of a passive **Victim** who can be controlled. The moment Daria begins to assert her independence and starts flirting with the young boy, they immediately shift into the role of the **Persecutor**, and their apparent care transforms into controlling accountability.

The Drama Triangle is one of the most widely known concepts in transactional analysis for describing psychological games. According to the model, members of toxic relationships assume one of three roles and frequently switch between them.

**The Victim:** feels helpless, oppressed, and like a victim of circumstances. They avoid taking responsibility for their own life and constantly wait for a rescuer.

**The Rescuer:** desperately wants to help the Victim, but does so in a way that keeps the Victim dependent and helpless. The Rescuer needs to feel needed.

**The Persecutor:** criticises, blames, controls, and enforces rigid rules. They are often perceived as the source of the Victim's suffering.

On the psychiatric ward, sweets are treated as a form of currency or treasure. Spartac gives Daria a bar of chocolate. It initially appears to be a kind, substitute paternal gesture; however, it quickly turns into coercive pressure when he forces Daria to eat the entire bar immediately, despite her objections that she is unable to do so.

Here we can see Stephen Karpman's Drama Triangle in action. The man initially takes on the role of the Rescuer by offering a luxury item to the girl. When Daria asserts autonomy by refusing to eat the entire bar, he shifts into the role of the Persecutor. Care is transformed into a mechanism of control and punishment, conveying the message: "You will only accept as much as I want, how I want, and when I want you to."

### 3. The Psychological Analysis of the Relationships

When the patients—especially Spartac and Costea—make Daria an untouchable, "pure" idol, they are not truly respecting her as a person but rather projecting their own idealized constructs onto her. This pedestalisation gradually reveals a darker, more controlling and potentially abusive dynamic underlying the process.

#### 3.1. The Dimensions of Objectification in Practice

According to Martha Nussbaum's (1995) theory, objectification has seven distinct dimensions. The men's behaviour in the film reflects several of the most central ones:

- **Denial of subjectivity:** The men are not genuinely interested in Daria's feelings, fears, or the reality that she is a traumatised eighteen-year-old experiencing withdrawal symptoms. Instead, they use her presence to satisfy their own need for moral reassurance or "absolution."

- **Possessability:** Although their actions may appear protective, they effectively treat Daria as a possession. They decide who she can speak to, what she can do, and react to one another as if they are defending a territory or safeguarding their “ownership” of her attention.
- **Denial of autonomy:** The condition for their so-called protection is obedience. Daria’s independence is gradually erased, as the men restrict her ability to make her own decisions, particularly regarding her relationships and interactions with others.

## 3.2 The Trap of the Benevolent Sexism

### 3.2.1 The Phenomenon

Glick and Fiske (1996) developed the theory of ambivalent sexism, which suggests that the oppression of women can occur not only in an overtly hostile form but also in a more subtle, so-called “benevolent” form. Benevolent sexism is based on the belief that women are pure, fragile, and morally superior, and therefore need men’s protection and guidance.

The main characteristics of the phenomenon:

- **Overprotective paternalism:** It implies that women are unable to cope with the challenges of the world on their own.
- **Complementary gender roles:** It portrays women as caring and emotional, while expecting them to be passive and dependent.
- **Conditional respect:** Women are granted a pedestalsed status only as long as they conform to traditional expectations.

On the psychiatric ward, the men use this dynamic in practice: they present themselves as caring gentlemen, offering special treatment to Daria. However, this behaviour ultimately reinforces male dominance, as the “reward” of protection is conditional. Daria receives it only as long as she fits the traditional role of a passive and helpless woman.

### 3.2.2 The Tickling: The Violation of Bodily Autonomy

There is an apparently innocent and playful scene in which the men begin tickling Daria. At first, she laughs and plays along, as if they were only children at play. However, after a point, the tickling becomes aggressive, turning into a display of physical dominance. Daria’s laughter shifts into a strained expression and helpless, involuntary movements.

This is one of the most uncomfortable visual metaphors of “benevolent sexism” and objectification. The men appear to be merely playing with their protégé, but in reality they are demonstrating their physical and social power. The scene highlights their control over Daria’s body: they decide when the “game” begins and when it ends.

Daria's subjective experience—such as feeling that it has become too much or even painful—is entirely disregarded, as her subjectivity is effectively denied.

### **3.3 The Madonna - Whore Complex**

#### **3.3.1 The Phenomenon**

The film's tension is ignited by Daria's emerging sexuality, which—when interpreted through psychoanalytic theory—activates the Madonna–Whore complex in the male patients, a concept associated with Sigmund Freud. As long as Daria remains asexual, childlike, passive, and “immaculate,” she is treated as the saintly Madonna figure who must be protected and respected. However, once she begins to flirt and express natural sexual desire, the men immediately feel threatened. Within their worldview, a woman can exist only as either a pure saint (the Madonna) or a morally corrupt figure (the “whore”). As a result, Daria's expression of ordinary human and sexual agency provokes anger and aggression in them. Their punishment and controlling behaviour are, in fact, projections of their own frustration at her refusal to remain confined within the sterile and idealised role they have imposed upon her.

#### **3.3.2. The Price of the Phone Call**

When Daria arrives at the facility, she desperately wants to call her boyfriend in prison. Spartac—a physically imposing man with a criminal record who occupies the top position in the ward's hierarchy—offers to get her a phone, but in exchange he wants “only” a kiss. Daria, out of naïve yet unwavering loyalty, refuses. Spartac is surprised by her response.

This moment lays the foundation for both the projection dynamic and the Madonna–Whore complex. Daria's refusal immediately elevates her to a position of moral superiority in Spartac's eyes. Rather than reacting with anger, he becomes stunned by what he perceives as the girl's “purity.” From that point onward, Daria ceases to be seen as a vulnerable teenager struggling with addiction and instead becomes a symbol of innocence—an “immaculate” idol who must be protected from the others.

### **3.4. The Individuation and Setting Boundaries**

From this perspective, Daria's rebellion and separation at the end of the film represent far more than a simple conflict. In order to regain her psychological integrity and sense of bodily autonomy, she must deliberately dismantle the myth of her own “immaculacy.” Paradoxically, her healing begins only when she becomes willing to tarnish this idealised image by acknowledging and embracing her own autonomous desires, sexuality, and imperfections.

# Sonne (2022)

Translated by Kornelia Kincses

## The plot

At the centre of the story are three teenage girls from Vienna: Bella, Nati, and Yesmin. Yesmin is Kurdish and lives in a Muslim family, following the traditions and expectations of her culture, while also sharing the typical lifestyle of Western teenagers with her friends. One day, the girls record themselves singing *Losing My Religion* by R.E.M. while wearing hijabs, and upload the video to YouTube.

Unexpectedly, the video becomes very popular within the local Muslim community. The girls suddenly begin receiving invitations to perform at weddings and religious events.

While Bella and Nati, who are not Muslim, enjoy the attention and perceive the situation as exciting and exotic, Yesmin gradually becomes uncomfortable. She is the only one who fully understands the religious and familial significance of what they are doing. Her intention is to demonstrate that a woman wearing a hijab can still dance, sing, and express herself freely.

Their sudden popularity and the distorting effects of online visibility begin to undermine the girls' relationship. Bella and Nati gradually begin to "sell out" to the role created for them, while Yesmin becomes increasingly alienated both from her friends and from her own community. As a result, she comes to feel like an outsider.

The girls attempt to balance their authentic identities with their online personas, while simultaneously navigating the tension between traditional family values and the liberal lifestyle of a large city. By the end of the story, the initial playful rebellion gives way to melancholy, highlighting how online fame can ultimately lead to even greater isolation and loneliness.

Throughout the story, the dynamics within Yesmin's family are also explored, including the relationship between her mother and father, as well as the father–daughter and mother–son relationships. There is constant conflict between the parents regarding the children's behaviour; however, both display clear bias toward their favourite child, which becomes an additional source of tension within the family.

## Psychological Analysis

### 1. Identity Diffusion and Cultural Hybridity

The character of Yesmin experiences one of the most complex stages of adolescent development: the identity crisis, which is further intensified by the challenges of transcultural life.

Yesmin simultaneously tries to meet the expectations of her traditional Muslim family while also embracing the lifestyle of a liberal teenager living in Vienna. According to

Berry's (1997) acculturation model, this situation often leads to conflict when the values of the majority society and those of the original culture diverge sharply. The result is a form of bicultural tension, which becomes evident in several scenes throughout the film.

Based on Berry's (1997) model, immigrant adolescents may adopt four different acculturation strategies: assimilation, separation, marginalisation, or integration.

Yesmin's original intention is integration: to demonstrate that wearing a hijab, following tradition, and participating in pop culture through dancing and singing can coexist with integration into the majority society. The central drama of the film lies precisely in the fact that her environment does not allow this hybridity to exist comfortably. Her friends, Bella and Nati, push her toward assimilation by treating religion as a kind of aesthetic "set" or performance, while the expectations of the religious community encourage separation from mainstream culture. As a result, Yesmin gradually slips into a state of marginalisation, in which she feels that she no longer truly belongs to either group (Berry, 1997).

The girl's intention in wearing the hijab is to show that religious symbols and modern forms of self-expression, such as dancing and singing, can coexist. However, this experiment ultimately ends in failure because of her friends' superficial attitude and the community's reaction, both of which intensify her sense of alienation.

Bhabha's concept of the "third space" (1994) accurately describes the experimental field that the girls create through the video. This is a transitional space in which cultural meanings can be reinterpreted and renegotiated. For Yesmin, the hijab is not a symbol of oppression, but rather a part of her identity that she seeks to combine with modern forms of self-expression. However, her friends' cultural appropriation of the hijab—as an exotic aesthetic prop—and the conservative reaction of the community ultimately close off this "third space." Yesmin's alienation therefore becomes a psychological response to society's inability to accept her complex and hybrid identity.

Based on Erikson's theory (1968), Yesmin stands at the boundary between identity formation and role confusion. Because she is unable to find complete understanding either among her friends or within her own community, she develops a growing sense of not truly belonging anywhere.

According to Erikson's theory, the main developmental task of adolescence is identity formation versus role confusion. In Yesmin's case, this confusion is intensified because she must not only bridge the gap between childhood and adulthood, but also reconcile two fundamentally different value systems: the traditional Kurdish-Muslim culture and the liberal Western lifestyle. When the girls gain popularity through their YouTube video, Yesmin does not experience uncomplicated joy or success. Instead, she enters a state of identity diffusion, as both her friends and the Muslim community impose contradictory expectations and roles upon her.

## 2. Digital Narcissism and the Distortion of Self-presentation

The film highlights how social media transforms interpersonal relationships and self-image.

According to Boyd's concept (2014), the unexpected success of the YouTube video results in "context collapse": the girls' private activity, singing out of boredom, suddenly becomes the subject of public attention and religious events.

Based on Boyd's theory, one of the fundamental characteristics of social media is "context collapse". This occurs when content originally intended for a specific audience is suddenly transferred into an uncontrollable and much broader environment—such as the global publicity of YouTube and the scrutiny of a conservative religious community.

The girls lose control over their own narrative. What once began as an inside joke becomes, in the eyes of the Muslim community, a political and religious statement. This sudden visibility forces them onto a path in which their actions are increasingly shaped by the expectations of viewers rather than by their own inner needs and intentions.

As a result of their success, Bella and Nati begin to view both themselves and their culture as tools for gaining popularity, gradually commodifying their own identities. According to Fredrickson and Roberts, this process of self-objectification can create a split between the individual and their authentic emotions, as self-perception becomes increasingly shaped by external feedback such as likes, attention, and audience expectations.

According to Fredrickson and Roberts's objectification theory (1997), women often internalise the external gaze and begin to perceive and treat themselves as objects.

We can see through Bella and Nati's characters how they drift away from their authentic emotions and beliefs in pursuit of fame. For them, the hijab and the religious context become merely tools for content creation, used to gain likes and attention. This reflects a form of digital narcissism, in which the value of the self-image is shaped primarily by external feedback such as likes and views.

The girls are constantly balancing between their constructed online personas and their authentic selves. This duality gradually erodes their friendship, as digital success becomes more important than genuine loyalty and emotional connection.

The film vividly portrays the gap between the girls' constructed online personas and their authentic selves. If we apply Erving Goffman's (1959) theory of self-presentation to the digital era, it becomes clear that the girls are engaged in a constant performance. In front of the camera, they appear happy, confident, and united; however, behind the scenes there is tension, confusion, and growing alienation. Yesmin is the only one who truly suffers from this duality. Unlike Bella and Nati, she cannot—and does not want to—commodify or "sell out" her culture. From a psychological perspective, she experiences the most severe internal conflict, as the

tension between online fame and her authentic identity becomes increasingly irreconcilable.

At the same time, social media algorithms reward provocation and “exoticism,” encouraging the girls to perform their roles in progressively more exaggerated ways. This dynamic gradually overrides their original friendship: they are no longer connected to one another as individuals, but rather through the maintenance of their online “brand.” Once preserving this brand begins to conflict with their genuine emotional needs, their social support system collapses, ultimately leading Yesmin into profound isolation.

### **3. Dysfunctional Family Dynamics and Triangulation**

One of the deepest psychological layers of the film is Yesmin’s family background, where immigration-related stress and generational conflict intersect with a dysfunctional family structure. Rather than functioning as a supportive environment, the family becomes a persistent source of tension. According to Murray Bowen’s family systems theory (1978), tension between parents is often displaced onto a third party—typically a child—in a process known as triangulation. In the film, the ongoing conflict between the mother and father increasingly revolves around the behaviour of their children.

According to the theory, triangulation occurs when anxiety within a two-person relationship—in this case, the parents’ relationship—becomes too overwhelming, leading them to involve a third person in order to reduce emotional tension. The parents’ constant arguments are not resolved directly between them; instead, the conflict is channelled into disputes over child-rearing and the children’s behaviour, particularly Yesmin’s sudden online fame. As a result, the children become the emotional “lightning rods” for unresolved parental tension and relational frustration.

Strong alliances can be observed within the family structure: the father aligns closely with his daughter, while the mother forms a similarly strong bond with her son. This type of partiality undermines the unity of the parental subsystem and becomes a constant source of tension. According to Minuchin (1974), families organised around such unstable boundaries are often incapable of healthy conflict resolution, which further burdens the emotional development of the children. Moreover, the unresolved conflict between the parents gradually extends into the relationships between the adolescent siblings as well.

Minuchin’s structural family therapy approach emphasises the importance of maintaining clear boundaries between family subsystems, particularly between parents and children. In the family model presented in the film, however, these boundaries collapse. A strong alliance between the father and daughter, and another between the mother and son, creates what Minuchin describes as a cross-generational coalition. Such coalitions weaken parental unity and destabilise family hierarchy. When the father consistently sides with the daughter against the mother—or vice versa—parental authority begins to erode, and the child is forced into the role of emotional supporter or decision-maker, responsibilities that are inappropriate for their developmental stage.

This dynamic prevents Yesmin from developing a healthy sense of autonomy. While in the outside world she is treated as a rising online star, at home she must navigate a dysfunctional emotional system that further intensifies her isolation and inner conflict.

According to Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy's contextual therapy, families are structured around invisible systems of loyalty and obligation often referred to as "loyalty binds." Yesmin lives within a profound loyalty conflict: she wants to fulfil the expectations of her father, who is proud of her success, while simultaneously feeling the disapproval of her mother and the pressure of traditional values. This divided loyalty—between modern self-expression and the preservation of traditional family harmony—creates an emotional stalemate. Because of the constant conflict within the family, Yesmin lacks the "secure base" described by John Bowlby (1988), which could otherwise help her process the emotional strain and identity confusion associated with sudden fame.

The family is also characterised by a high degree of emotional reactivity. According to Murray Bowen (1978), emotionally reactive families tend to respond impulsively to tension rather than reflectively engaging with one another's feelings. In the film, conversations frequently escalate into accusations and defensiveness, making genuine intimacy and emotional understanding nearly impossible. As a result, home becomes not a place of relief or safety for Yesmin, but a source of intensified stress that contributes directly to her melancholic isolation at the end of the film.

#### **4. Loneliness and Melancholy in the Shadow of Success**

The story arc progresses from an initially carefree rebellion to profound isolation. The paradox of the girls' success lies in the fact that, while they are publicly celebrated at weddings and community events, the trust and intimacy between them gradually disintegrate. In psychology, it is well established that the absence of meaningful social support increases the risk of depression and melancholic states (Cohen & Wills, 1985). This occurs because the protective "buffering effect" of social support—which normally helps individuals cope with stress and emotional pressure—begins to collapse (Eagle et al., 2019).

According to Cohen and Wills's (1985) foundational theory, social support is not merely an additional source of emotional comfort, but also a protective buffer that shields individuals from the harmful psychological effects of stress. At the beginning of the film, the friendship between the three girls functions as this protective buffer. As long as they remain united, the scandal surrounding the video and the tensions within Yesmin's family remain psychologically manageable. However, once fame and the corrosive effects of online exposure begin to damage their relationship, Yesmin loses this source of protection. With the buffering effect gone, external stressors—such as social pressure, cultural conflict, and family tension—begin to affect her mental health directly and far more destructively.

Although the girls are celebrated by crowds and admired by their audience, Yesmin experiences the paradox of "successful loneliness." Research by Eagle and

colleagues suggests that social isolation depends not on the quantity of social relationships, but on their quality. In Yesmin's case, her friends remain physically present, yet they no longer understand her emotionally. This form of perceived isolation is considered a significant risk factor for depressive symptoms and melancholic states (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009).

According to the film's conclusion, internet fame does not resolve loneliness; rather, it intensifies it. For Yesmin, success does not bring validation or belonging, but instead results in her gradual exclusion from both her community and her circle of friends.

One of the film's most important messages is that online "followers" and virtual validation cannot replace genuine social support in real life. For Yesmin, success does not bring affirmation or belonging, but rather loss and alienation. While Bella and Nati increasingly compromise their authenticity in pursuit of fame, Yesmin is left alone with the emotional burden of cultural and religious expectations. This form of isolation within a transcultural space—where the individual no longer fully belongs either to their original community or to the new social environment—ultimately leads to the profound melancholy and loneliness that Yesmin experiences at the end of the film.

At the end of the film, Yesmin embodies what Berry (1997) describes as the most painful form of marginalisation. From a psychological perspective, rootlessness constitutes a chronic state of stress in which the individual's emotional and psychological resources gradually become depleted. The playful rebellion at the beginning of the story ultimately transforms into melancholy, as Yesmin realises that fame did not build a bridge between her two worlds, but instead isolated her from both of them.