

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?