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FREUDIAN NARCISSISM IN CROSS-MEDIA STORYTELLING:
The Curious Case of Nujeen Mustafa.

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Abstract

The importance of storytelling in the 21st Century's media is indisputable. Facts alone do not satisfy our desire for identity. Only stories can provide us with a sense of identification and belonging. However, stories can also exacerbate our emotional and narcissistic response; and this is precisely what post-truth storytelling is all about: fact-devaluation, appeal to the emotions, extreme partiality and aggressive rhetoric. Based on Freud's theory of narcissism, our research article proposes an objective and interdisciplinary model from which we can recognise, depict and analyse narcissistic patterns in today's cross-media storytelling. In effect, this will help us to better understand the story of the refugee Nujeen Mustafa, which seems to illustrate so well our explicit and implicit dynamics of self-love.

Resumen

La importancia del 'storytelling' en los medios del siglo XXI es indiscutible. Los hechos por sí solos no satisfacen nuestro deseo de identidad. Solo las historias pueden proporcionarnos un sentido de identificación y pertenencia. Sin embargo, las historias también pueden exacerbar nuestra respuesta emocional y narcisista; y esto es precisamente lo que ocurre en el 'storytelling' de la posverdad: devaluación de los hechos, apelación a las emociones, parcialidad extrema y retórica agresiva. Basado en la teoría del narcisismo de Freud, nuestro artículo de investigación propone un modelo objetivo e interdisciplinario a partir del cual podemos reconocer, representar y analizar padrones narcisistas en el 'storytelling' de los medios actuales. En efecto, esto nos ayudará a comprender mejor la historia de la refugiada Nujeen Mustafa, que parece ilustrar tan bien nuestras dinámicas explícitas e implícitas de amor-propio.

1. INTRODUCTION

Human perceptions are grounded on emotions and identification processes rather than facts and figures. Those who work in the culture and entertainment industries and media are well aware of this reality. Indeed, it is one of the main reasons why storytelling has taken over the early 21st century, consequently reinforcing subjectivity and emotion over objectivity and facts. But how far can this go? Given the post-truth environment that we are living in, can we still distinguish between simple, credible news stories and biased, deceitful and manipulative ones? In other words: How can we tell the difference between subjectivism and narcissism in contemporary media storytelling?

We begin by contextualising this problem by taking as a reference the European migrant crisis and the curious case of Nujeen Mustafa – a teenage Syrian refugee who arrived in Europe in September 2015 and soon became a viral phenomenon. Taking into account Freud's influence in modern culture and the interdisciplinary nature of his psychoanalytic approach, we then suggest the Freudian concept of narcissism as a hypothetical model through which we can recognise, depict and analyse narcissistic patterns and dynamics in cross-media narratives.

Bearing in mind the need to test our hypothesis, we then proceed to examine how certain types of cross-media contents (news stories; jokes; stock characters) fit into the Freudian model, on different levels and with different specifications. Once more, throughout our analysis we will make constant references to the case of Nujeen, for she can easily recognise even the subtlest nuances of explicit prejudice, based on her experience as a refugee. But of course, there are also other implicit, camouflaged narcissistic traits which are much harder to perceive. Furthermore, by reinterpreting a peculiar Freudian insight, we will finally see that not only can 'minor differences' exacerbate objectification and aggressiveness, but so too can 'minor similarities'.

2. METHODOLOGY

In order to address these questions, we have adopted combined qualitative methods, according to three specific objectives:

1.1. Based on critical hermeneutics, we first contextualise the relationship between storytelling, emotionalism, subjectivism and their potential exacerbation, which leads to our research problem: What interdisciplinary criteria/model can we use to effectively recognise, describe and analyse narcissistic traits in cross-media narratives? We then suggest the Freudian concept of narcissism as a reasonable hypothetical model due to its coherence and comprehensive nature.

1.2. Subsequently, we extend our hermeneutical analysis with a comparative analysis. In this way, we aim to examine different types of cross-media content and see how they fit Freud's model of narcissism, on different levels and according to different specificities.

1.3. Furthermore, throughout our analysis we continually refer back to the case of Nujeen Mustafa, as a representative illustration of points 2.1. and 2.2.

By the end of this research article we aim to have demonstrated how the Freudian concept of narcissism is still of major interdisciplinary relevance today, since it has proven to be a highly adequate model for analysing this phenomenon in cross-media narratives.

2. CONTEXTUALISATION OF THE PROBLEM

Before approaching our research problem, we must first consider three common insights regarding contemporary society and its correspondent narratives:

- Facts about people (e.g. biographic events, ethnicity) stimulate our empathy towards them (identification) because they provide them with a personal story (identity);
- We are living in the age of identity, which is effectively portrayed by storytelling;
- There is generally a narcissistic element in post-truth media reporting/ stories;

These insights are not new to social sciences and humanities, of course. The following points (3.1 and 3.2) only substantiate what can be perceived by our ordinary experience as citizens of the 21st Century, particularly in the western world. However, they lead us to realise why it is so important these days to identify and analyse narcissistic patterns and dynamics in media storytelling.

2.1. Facts, Stats and Stories

On September 2, 2015 a group of Syrian refugees from Aleppo arrived in Lesbos. Among them was 16-year-old Nujeen Mustafa. Based exclusively on statistical facts, nothing would distinguish her from any other asylum applicant in the EU-28, among over 5 million who had arrived since 2008, including approximately 1.5 million teenagers (Eurostat 2019a). Did the EU make the right decision by approving her application?

Short-term statistics are not very encouraging; they might even suggest that migrant integration has been a failure. According to the Eurostat (2019b), between 2015 (Q3) and 2017 (Q3), non-EU-citizens not only showed the lowest employment rates (53.7% to 54.6%) but also the lowest growth (0.9%), when compared to nationals (66% to 68.1%) and mobile-EU-citizens (70.5% to 73%). Likewise, non-EU-citizen unemployment rates reached 19.5% in 2015 and 16% in 2017, still more than 8% above other groups. And as far as precarious or less well-paid jobs are concerned (temporary, part-time), non-EU-citizens proved once again to be the most vulnerable group of all (*ibid*).

Notwithstanding, if we approach this matter with a view to the long term, other statistical facts emerge. For instance, the long-term unemployment rate (as a percentage of total unemployment, *ibid*.), is actually lower for non-EU-citizens (44.2%) than for nationals (45.8%); and since 2015 it has decreased 4.5% among this first group, as compared to a smaller decline (3.1%) among the second (*ibid*.). Also, non-EU-citizens are comparatively proactive entrepreneurs (Juchno & Agafitei 2017:24), as they share with nationals (28.8%) almost the same rate of self-employed employers (28.4%) – business owners with at least one employee – clearly above mobile-EU-citizens (23%).

In light of this, based exclusively on numbers, we may find several reasons both against and in favour of Nujeen's asylum approval. But of course, she is not a number (Young-Powell 2017), and this apparent cliché is far more relevant than it seems, as will become apparent from looking at facts of another kind. Not merely statistical facts, but facts about the people behind the stats and their fascinating lives (Mustafa & Lamb 2017:17). Therefore, let us also add a few facts of the latter kind about Nujeen herself: She is the youngest of her nine siblings, and the

only one born with cerebral palsy. Back in Aleppo, the building she lived in did not have an elevator. Since she was unable to use the stairs, she was confined to living indoors. Instead of going to school she spent infinite hours watching cable television, from Disney cartoons to science documentaries, comedy shows such as *Mr. Bean* and soap operas, such as *Days of Our Lives*. This is how she learned English, which she speaks far better than all her family and friends (O'Connor 2015; Gianatasio 2018). In other words, her unfortunate disability and peculiar social conditions led her to become fascinated by our beloved pop culture.

We are certainly less reluctant to welcome Nujeen as a new EU citizen now, after reading these facts, and everybody knows why. We just gave her a unique identity. She became someone who we can empathise with, a protagonist onto whom we can project our own emotions, fears, hopes and dreams. This is exactly what happens when we tell a story, and is the reason why storytelling has spread across all media narratives today – for identity is the key-concept of the early 21st Century.

2.2. Identity, Storytelling and Narcissism

The World Wide Web became a tool for bringing together the small contributions of millions of people and making them matter (Grossman 2006). Since then, millions of human identities have been taking over the communicational spotlight of our times, whether in entertainment, opinion or the news industry. Furthermore, the 2010's was a decade of identity politics reinforcement, revival and revisionism. New citizen activism explored the confluence between digital and public spaces, consequently favouring the pragmatic dissemination of subjectivist approaches to world politics (Critical Theo-ry, Socio-Constructivism, Feminist/Gender Studies) as well as their academic antipodes (critiques of Post-Modernism/Neo-Marxism). Political movements from both sides have explored this antagonism among international and intranational political tribes (Chua 2018), thus increasing social conflicts which continue to hinder minority and migrant integration. Interestingly though, these conflicts occurred at a time when a new transcultural youth (Suárez-Orozco 2008:111-120) fused peculiar trades of different global cultures as means to create their own distinctive personal identities.

Much has changed in the media world, particularly in news reporting, analysis and opinion. Plain facts have lost their objective value as they have become increasingly dependent on the subjective narratives through which they are told. As preparation for the coming decade, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) published a guide on how to make data meaningful, "(…) a practical tool to help managers, statisticians and media relations officers use text, tables, graphs and other information to bring statistics to life using effective writing techniques" (2009:v). The art of storytelling has therefore become the main vehicle to effectively illustrate the identity crisis we are living in, since it has taken over almost all forms of media narratives, from present day citizen journalism (Boa-Ventura & Rodrigues 2008) to future big data discourse automation (Veel 2018).

Notwithstanding, as our quarrels over identity graciously intertwine with the proliferation of storytelling, it is mainly the subjectivist aspect of these narrative dynamics that concerns us the most. This is, on the one hand, because subjectivism has been an eminent driving force behind post-factual reporting, fake news and false data dissemination

(Prado 2018:1-14), which severely affect our perception of society. On the other hand, it is because narcissistic traits are highly associated with the current post-truth environment (Peters 2017; Thurston 2018; Hannan 2018), particularly on social media (Buffardi & Campbell 2008; Bergman, Fearrington, Davenport & Bergman 2011; Hannan 2018). And naturally, these latter reasons are extremely worrying. Regardless of what we specifically mean when we use the term Narcissism, whether referring to its mythological roots, literary/historical characters, popular conceptions or psychological/psychiatric definitions, it is always directly related to traits such as grandiosity, the need for admiration, a sense of entitlement and manipulative behaviour. In a word, aggressiveness.

In order to finally understand the disquieting abundance of verbal and emotional aggressiveness in post-truth media storytelling, we should be able to identify and analyse its narcissistic patterns and dynamics. Considering the variety of its cultural and interdisciplinary touchpoints – from mythology to psychology – we therefore propose the Freudian concept of narcissism as a model from which we can address this problem.

3. NARCISSISM IN FREUDIAN PSYCHOANALYSIS: PATTERNS AND DYNAMICS

In Freud's perspective, the mother's breast represents all sources of pleasure which the infant does not yet distinguish from his own ego. He cannot always be satisfied though, so he starts to cry. Here is when the idea of the 'other' first emerges, as whenever he cries his mother provides him with whatever pleases him again (affection, more heat, less heat, water). Nonetheless, the ego still tends to associate good pleasurable things with itself. Thus, when the infant can no longer see his

mother as a mere extension of his own body (Freud 1962:13-14), as an alternative, she becomes his property (Freud 1989a:138). But this is precisely when a shocking event suddenly interrupts his life as he finds that she has transferred her love and care to a new arrival (*ibid.*). The father is, therefore, his first competitor, and a very traumatic one, for he is the strongest, most powerful and menacing opponent the child has ever seen. In this context, Freud introduces the anxiety of castration as the child's primary trauma (Oedipus complex); consequently triggering two major defence mechanisms which will shape his psychological structure:

- Repression: to avoid the father's punishment he represses his desires for the mother and enters the latency stage (until puberty).
- Introjection: to deal with his fear of confronting the father – which is so traumatic that it cannot be solved by simple repression – he instinctively makes way for a stronger defence mechanism. That is, he absorbs (introjects) his parent's main psychological features and moral values, namely the ones which impressed him the most.

This introjection process happens by way of a series of unconscious (Id) object-choices. Unable to fulfil his desires and fearful of being punished, the child identifies with his first others/objects (parents, one of them especially), assimilating parts of their character and of what he perceives to be their moral principles and sexual taboos (incest being the major one, of course) – in other words, the rules of how not to be 'castrated' by the 'other' (family, and later, society itself). This introjected figure who personifies the moral conscience is what we call Superego (Ego Ideal). It is the heir of the Oedipus complex

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(Freud 1989b:37-38), and it corresponds to our ideals. The Ego Ideal provides us with religion, morality, social guidance (*ibid.*) and everything else we idealise as being the most noble and elevated in human nature (*ibid.*). Even the commandment "Love thy neighbour as thyself" is nothing but a Super Ego defence structure, although it is certainly the strongest one against human aggressiveness (Freud 1962:90). It reverses the direction of aggression by turning it against the ego, thus favouring civilised society over the interests of the self. This means that no one is born generous. It is the Oedipus event that forces us to recognise the rights of the 'other', according to the terms of the unconscious armistice agreement we signed the day we introjected our ideal beliefs and moral standards. So, what is narcissism according to Freud? He distinguishes two types, plus a peculiar phenomenon which may aggravate them:

- Primary Narcissism. It is the earliest form (described above) ruled by the principle of pleasure. Usually the Oedipus complex is overcome by repression (latency stage) and the introjection of the Super Ego. To some extent we all preserve this kind of natural narcissism throughout our lives, which allows us to face the difficulties and challenges of life without sacrificing our sexual instincts (in Freudian terms, our relationship with others). This means that we still preserve its usual patterns and dynamics. For instance, as adults we still tend to identify good pleasurable things with ourselves and bad unpleasant things with others (pattern) using projection as a common defense mechanism (dynamic).
- Secondary Narcissism. When the Oedipus complex is too traumatic and cannot be overcome, the Ego feels that it

has no other option but to radically identify itself with the Ego Ideal. Rather than introjection, it resorts to radical identification as a desperate defence mechanism. Giving up all its sexual interests, it is no longer able to love the 'other'. Just like Narcissus captivated by his own reflection, it engages in a perverse self-referring dialogue: "Listen, you can love me instead – I am just like your object" (Freud 1989b:30). Nonetheless, how could this Oedipal Narcissus love himself with all his defects and limitations? He must be a lovable one, not some false prince rejected by his own mother, but a perfect king, an Ideal Ego. In other words, secondary narcissism is mainly an exacerbation of an ordinary event (Freud 2010c:180). But of course, this also implies the correspondent exacerbation of previously natural patterns and dynamics, leading them to their most radical and aggressive forms: such as extreme repression, projection, idealisation and devaluation.

- Narcissism of Minor Differences. Inspired by the British anthropologist Ernest Crawley, the first time Freud used the expression 'Narcissism of Minor Differences' was in his paper *The Taboo of Virginity* (1917), where he exposes Crowley's 'Taboo of Personal Isolation' – the notion that every individual, having his own idiosyncratic space, generally becomes more aggressive with the ones with whom he shares most in common, and precisely because of small differences (Freud 2013:292). To a great extent, history only confirms this, for the most lasting and irreconcilable rivalries are in fact between neighbours, e.g. English vs

French, Danish vs Swedish, Germans vs Dutch, Portuguese vs Spanish, Israelis vs Palestinians, et cetera.

- In this way, if we are to consider the Freudian model to be valuable and effective as an academic tool to address our research problem, we should be able to distinctly identify narcissistic traits in cross-media storytelling according to the aforementioned grades, patterns and dynamics.

4. NARCISSISM IN CROSS-MEDIA STORY-TELLING: EXPLICIT TRAITS

When asked if she felt the need to prove she is not a problem, the young girl from Aleppo, Nujeen Mustafa, stated: "Yes, you feel like you're in a constant test. (…) You feel guilty until proven innocent." (Young-Powell 2017). This is indeed symptomatic of the complex political circumstances we have been living in since the migrant crises emerged. Back in 2015, when Nujeen arrived in Germany, the majority of local voters still believed that welcoming refugees was an opportunity for their country (Nardelli 2015); unlike roughly a third of voters in Britain, Italy, Denmark and Spain, and a fifth of voters in France and the Netherlands who believed it was not (*ibid*.). In effect, most Europeans do not feel that their respective countries have the economic means necessary to welcome refugees, because they already have too many immigrants and cannot cope with welcoming more (*ibid*.). In addition, this social perception has been further aggravated ever since, as has been reflected in populist vindications, electoral demands and the ensuing results (Henley 2018). But why do migrants seem to make Europeans so anxious? Can this reaction be explained from a Freudian perspective?

According to Freud, alterity has probably been the main cause for anxiety ever since our childhood. The 'other' might be pleasurable and comforting (e.g. the mother) but also a painful, menacing or a very unpleasant external source (Freud 1962:14) – e.g. a sharp object, a scary clown on the TV, a jealous sibling. After all, the most defining trauma of our lives, the Oedipus complex, results precisely from the encounter with an intimidating 'other' (the father). Therefore, from this point of view: How could Europeans not be anxious about welcoming 5 million 'others' – especially those whose axiological frames (provided by their Super Ego as a means of collective survival), seem to have completely failed? How could our Egos ever benefit from such a fragile group of 'others'?

This certainly is unfair and extremely prejudiced. But our psychological structures are deeply rooted in prejudices; i.e. long-term accumulated instinctive and unconscious mechanisms, experiences and shared perceptions, not in fairness and selfless generosity. Morality to Freud is exclusively grounded in survival, and from a perspective of survival, helping others is frequently a risky business. People in need might take advantage of our kindness (victim playing, manipulation), become dependent on us instead of changing their ways (secondary gains; Freud 2014:22-23), or even contaminate us with whatever is causing their misery – e.g. in the Bible, lepers could no longer be part of the community, they would be put aside as the impure 'other' and called 'unclean' (Mt. 8:1-4; Mk. 1:40–45, Lk. 5:12–16); for societies generally tend to choose pragmatic self-defence over generosity.

Nonetheless, could we ever face the unvarnished truth about ourselves? How much truth can a spirit endure, how much truth does it dare to hear? (Nietzsche 1997:20). Unable to recognise our cold-hearted pragmatism

towards the 'other', we use sublimation as a defence mechanism in order to convey our narcissistic need to preserve ourselves from a painful self-perception. Therefore it is not surprising to notice how, according to the aforementioned news report (Nardelli 2015), most Europeans feel it is a humanitarian duty to help refugees (general moral principle) – but not in their own countries (concrete application). In any case, neither of these self-preserving patterns and dynamics exceed ordinary human narcissism. They are part of our instinctive egocentrism, the natural heir of Primary Narcissism, which is reflected all across our cultural industry and is generally acceptable. We frequently use the 'other' as an explicit object of humour, from stand-up comedy stereotypical jokes (e.g. Ricky Gervais, Russell Peters) to mischievous Youtube pranks (e.g. the famous Jalal Brothers); which sometimes might be of poor taste or offensive, though certainly not pathological in a Freudian sense. Our pop culture has always portrayed stereotyped fictional objects (caricatures, stock characters), on whom we project our negative emotions such as anxiety, distrust, indignation, fear of ridicule/rejection, shame or destructiveness. For instance, the way American cinema has depicted Arabs across the 20th Century is a typical illustration of these kinds of dynamics (Shaheen 2003).

However, the post-truth environment has seriously aggravated this phenomenon, especially in news reporting and storytelling. Living as we are in the midst of endless diatribes between mainstream *and* alternative media, fact devaluation and extremist viewpoints are generally compensated with likes, comments, shares and other forms of user-producer interaction. Demonisation of the 'other' has become commonplace and this explicitly reflects how so many sites have been characterising emigrant communities in the EU and the current migrant crises. Apart from spreading fake news (Çavuş 2018), a vast number of these sites and Facebook pages typify immigrants as the perfect fetishistic object for our darkest projections (Awan 2016).

Naturally, our research does not intend to judge their political motivations or even their constitutional legitimacy. But it is our objective to point out how cherry-picking the worst characteristics of 'others', while completely ignoring their slightest qualities, perfectly corresponds to a drastic reinforcement of primary narcissism. In effect, "(…) hate is older than love, it derives from the primordial rejection of the external world (…) by the Narcissistic Ego" (Freud 2010a:57). All these explicit patterns and dynamics evolve in direct proportion to exacerbated self-love. Both far-left and far-right pages/channels (e.g. Antifa International, Redneck Revolt, Breitbart, Infowars), known for their peculiar aggressive posting, reporting and storytelling, embrace their own political movement as an object to themselves (Freud 2010c:180), so extinguishing the perception of the 'other' as a relevant autonomous counterpart.

Social media has redefined our political and ideological debate, drastically increasing the hostility between parties, movements and voters, not only in America but also in Europe. From 1970 to 2010 the most successful European parties generally adopted moderate, empathic and inclusive visual identities to persuade their voters. For instance, Germany's Christian Democratic Union (CDU-CSU) is still represented only by letters in blue and/or red, and a rampant lion which stands for rather generic values such as courage and nobility. Likewise, European Socialist parties use red colours and/or a rose, symbolising the diversity of languages and cultures sharing the same democratic ideals. And even

most right-wing populists also adopt some contention and vague symbolism in their visual communication; apart from Le Pen's National Rally, of course, which still uses the red-white-and-blue flame (a former Nazi collaborationist reference). However, something has definitely changed in the 2010s as populism has introduced a new political brand of voice. On the one hand, populist parties have reinforced self-references regarding either their own movement, party, region or country; even positioning themselves above political spectrums as they claim to represent the people as a whole – e.g. "Prima el Nord" (Liga Nord), "Neither Right nor Left. French!", "in the name of the People" (Rassemblement National). On the other, they severely condemn those who are not part of their ideological movement or are considered 'unwelcome others' – e.g. "Roma Ladrona (Rome, the big thief)" (Liga Nord), "Islam is not at home here" (Freedom Party of Austria).

Thus, post-truth politics and its highly confrontational media reporting/storytelling has established a peculiar relationship with the Freudian concept of Secondary Narcissism. It fits the main pattern like a glove: the objectification of the 'other' in direct proportion to self-love. As a result, all explicit behaviour between belligerent counterparts can be better understood considering its correspondent dynamics, such as severe projection and devaluation. Moreover, the Freudian model also helps us to understand another specific phenomenon, which generally comes as an exacerbation of the narcissistic patterns and dynamics we have described: integrated immigrants voting against immigration. This fact has been unequivocally demonstrated (Strijbris & Polavieja 2018), even though it might seem contradictory or almost inexplicable. Once again, though, if we take the Freudian approach as a reference, this appar-ently inexplicable phenomenon becomes clearly perceptible as a form of Narcissism of Minor Differences.

5. NARCISSISM IN CROSS-MEDIA STORY-TELLING: IMPLICIT TRAITS

The index of the collected works of Sigmund Freud does not contain 'generosity' as an entry and the word does not even appear in psychoanalysis textbooks (Akhtar 2013:75). From the Freudian Ego point of view, the 'other' can be either a source of pleasure or pain, love or hate. But mostly, it is the object through which the ego defines itself, building its own identity. Therefore, others can be extremely useful as instruments of psycho-emotional dialysis. Instead of recognising our own defects we project them onto others – just as Dorian Gray and his portrait. This is why secondary narcissism, i.e. the intense exacerbation of self-love is directly proportional to aggressiveness.

However, there is another side to this coin. Until now we mostly described explicit negative emotions towards the 'other', such as suspicion, distrust, indignation or even hate. But are we not forgetting about love? In his *Contributions to the Psychology of Love* (2013), Freud explains the dynamics of eroticism and overestimation based on the psycho-sexual transition between the Oedipus event and puberty. That is to say the Latency Stage throughout which sexual reality is repressed giving place to fantasy (*ibid.*:273). In effect, fantasy plays an essential role in the broader experience of love, as so many poets and novelists have illustrated over the centuries (*ibid.*:260). But there is a peculiar kind of overestimation that can frequently be related to secondary narcissism: Idealised Love.

As we have seen above, secondary narcissism occurs when the infant is unable to

overcome the Oedipus trauma, for it is too much for him to handle. He feels extremely weak and worthless, absolutely incapable of meeting his parents' expectations and moral standards. Thus, instead of introjecting the Super Ego he simply identifies with it. In order to maintain an immaculate perception of himself, the ego maintains an instrumental relation with the other according to a pattern of psycho-emotional dialysis (the 'other' as an object of moral purification). But there is another pattern the Freudian narcissist might engage in, perhaps a subtler and more ingenious one, which, rather than causing disgust or meeting with social disapproval, might even cause praise and admiration. Instead of using the 'other' as his devalued mirror, he prefers to overestimate him to the highest degree. He overvalues the qualities of the 'other' in order to incorporate them as an object in his own self. This is what happens in idealised love (Freud 2010b:33-34). Idealisation is, therefore, the reverse side of devaluation. Although it is generally perceived by society as radiant, luminous and virtuous, it is certainly no less narcissistic.

We have already established a parallel between media narratives and the explicit behaviour of the Freudian Ego in defending his narcissistic self-interests. Now a new question arises: Can we establish a similar parallel with regard to another kind of narcissistic trait (idealisation), which necessarily involves much more concealed, implicit behaviour? To answer this question, we have once again resorted to the curious case of Nujeen Mustafa. In effect, it perfectly illustrates how implicit narcissistic patterns and dynamics can also spread across contemporary media, contributing to a deceptive and illusionary post-truth environment.

Let us start by remembering who she is and why she caused such an impact on us:

Nujeen is a disabled 16-year-old Syrian girl, who is extremely pleasant and empathic and has an extraordinary shining energy. Especially for someone so young who has had to face such a traumatic experience as a refugee: "(Her) shy laugh and excited optimism – and her matter-of-fact description of the terror of civil war – had already made her stand out amid the media coverage of the Syrian refugee crisis" (Walters 2015).

Shortly after being discovered by reporters, her story rapidly invaded the news and entertainment shows. But what really mesmerised us, Western spectators, was when she told an ABC journalist how she came to speak English so well; i.e. by watching the soap opera *Days of Our Lives*. In her words: "That's a great show (...) But they killed the main character that I loved!" – Mr. Scott's character, E.J. DiMera, had indeed been killed off (Mackey 2015). It did not take long for Nujeen to become a viral phenomenon, thus attracting one of the wittiest celebrities in American Television, John Oliver. In his *Last Week Tonight* show, Oliver even decided to invite the soap opera's character (EJ DiMera) and his loving fictional partner (Sami Brady) to do a comedy sketch. As expected and obviously deserved, Nujeen was mentioned in the clip as an example of courage. Nothing can be harder than traveling from Syria to Germany, said E.J.: "There are some amazing people coming through that border. This amazing 16-year-old girl, Nujeen Mustafa, she's our kind of people" (Walters 2015; Mackey 2015).

In fact, it is almost impossible not to like her. But to what extent is this just an illusion? Is Nujeen really our kind of people? Can her upbringing, her sociocultural context back in Syria and her experience as a refugee be even remotely compared to our own? The only things in common between her and us

seem to be human nature and loving pop culture. Naturally, this first characteristic alone is probably enough for her successful integration, while the second can be taken as a complement – but is it enough for us to immediately possess her as a flag for our finest western ideals, such as tolerance, multiculturalism or democracy? In other words, do we actually care about this Syrian girl? Or are we just using her as an excuse to keep perceiving ourselves as tolerant, multicultural and democratic egos – just as our western Superego wants us to be?

The authenticity of our attitude towards Nujeen can be evaluated by two criteria. The first relies on actual tolerance: How would our right-wing movements react if this innocent Syrian girl started wearing Muslim symbols and quoting the Quran? Likewise, what would our progressive movements say if she suddenly decided to become a pro-life or anti-gay activist? Presumably, we all know the answers to these questions. The second criteria concerns the test of time: more than four years have passed since Nujeen became a viral phenomenon and a mainstream media sensation. Today, she seems to have been discarded – only a few videos about her were posted on Youtube in 2018 and 2019 – although she might be recovered as a symbol (in a movie, another documentary or book), since the migrant crisis is far from being over. On the other hand, according to the latest episodes of *Days of Our Lives* (S53), E.J. DiMera was found still to be alive as the soap opera keeps surprising us with unexpected plots and twists. Perhaps E.J. was right after all, Nujeen might be precisely his kind of people, a fictional character. In this case, not in a soap opera but for news reporting and cross-media storytelling.

In this way, the contemporary post-truth environment we are living in does not exclu-

sively manifest itself in explicit, but rather implicit narcissistic traits, which also establish a peculiar relation to Freud. Specifically, implicit traits can be better understood considering his concepts of overestimation and idealisation. Defining herself as a fan of our beloved pop culture, Nujeen has touched our emotional g-spot. After all, pop culture is the social fantasy we have been using to define and recreate ourselves as post-modern individuals, at least since the 1950s. It is the core of our imaginary authenticity, the visible and surely the brightest side of western consumerism and the magical source of our constant self-adulation – that is to say, the mythical fountain, where late contemporary Narcissus found his Ego Ideal.

Consequently, we would not dare to cherry-pick Minor Differences as an excuse to project negative feeling towards Nujeen. But instead, we engage in a new kind of behaviour we might call Narcissism of Minor Similarities. Dismissing all major differences, we cherry-pick a few superficial pop-cultural affinities between her and any postmodern European or North-American. Hence, we can absorb her exceptional qualities (courage, determination, positive thinking), as if they were our own. According to the Freudian model, we may find an implicit narcissistic pattern behind our shallow kindness. Our media coverage and correspondent storytelling seems to have transformed her into a fictional 'ideal other' – i.e. an auxiliary bond attaching us to our western Super Ego (Freud, 2010b:34). Far from being generous, we are probably resorting to defence mechanisms and dynamics, such as idealisation, so as to convert her into a fetishistic object of self-love. And that kind of love, of course, would be just the other side of aggressiveness.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The increasing prominence of storytelling in contemporary cross-media narratives has been accompanied by post-truth subjectivism (e.g. fact-devaluation; lack of objectivity; appeal to the emotions). This escalation of subjectivism has manifested itself in a highly confrontational environment, which is often described as narcissistic, especially in social media. Hence, in order to better understand our post-truth diatribes, we need to elaborate or adopt a model from which we can depict and analyse narcissistic traits in today's media narratives and their relation to aggressiveness. Given its interdisciplinary nature, we have selected the Freudian model as a hypothesis to address this problem:

- Primary Narcissism, as described by Freud, provides us with a reasonable explanation for why societies tend to choose pragmatic self-defence over generosity. Even after the Oedipus event, almost all of us still preserve a mild narcissistic predisposition. This becomes apparent in our culture and entertainment industries whenever we project negativity onto others (e.g. stereotyped fictional characters, jokes, caricatures), as a means to continually identify ourselves with good, pleasurable, noble western values (e.g. Cowboys vs Indians; American heroes vs Arab terrorists). Although these patterns and dynamics may be naïve, simplistic or sometimes offensive, they merely express natural and generally accepted social instincts.

- The Freudian model can also explain why post-truth reporting and storytelling, often delivered by far-left and far-right Internet channels, sites and pages (e.g. Antifa, Infowars), are perceived by the mainstream audience as being partial, rude, conflictive or even insane. For this phenomenon shares a major pattern with Freud's Secondary Narcissism, which is the explicit objectification/demonisation of the 'other' in direct proportion to self-love. In effect, this pattern can also apply to self-glorification as it is frequently adopted by populist parties (Liga Nord, National Rally), even though they seem to have gained the voter's confidence in many European countries.

- The objectification of the 'other' is explicitly manifested in dynamics such as extreme projection and devaluation. After all, as a refugee, Nujeen Mustafa has felt on her own skin the negative effects of social prejudice and distrust. However, her case illustrates particularly well another pattern of objectification which is harder to detect and recognise; for it usually manifests itself in implicit, subtle ways, although they are no less narcissistic. Having declared herself to be a huge fan of our beloved pop culture, she became a viral phenomenon across the Internet and mainstream media. By means of intense overestimation (idealisation) we seem to have transformed her into an 'ideal other', i.e. a fetishistic source of self-adulation.

- Finally, we noticed how the peculiar phenomenon of Narcissism of Minor Differences can be applied nowadays to the apparently contradictory attitude of integrated immigrants voting against immigration. However, we have reinterpreted this Freudian concept to better understand the dynamics of our own process of overestimation regarding Nujeen - for we have based

our 'idealised love' for her (which is in fact 'idealised self-love') on an unrealistic process of cherry-picking small affinities between pop-culture fictional characters, Nujeen and us; and this is what we may call Narcissism of Minor Similarities.

In this way, according to our interpretation, the Freudian model has proven to be not only a useful tool, but a highly effective one, to select, depict and analyse narcissistic patterns and dynamics in cross-media reporting and storytelling, especially given our post-truth environment.

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FROJDOVSKI NARCISIZAM U MEĐUMEDIJSKOM PRIPOVIJEDANJU:
Čudesni slučaj Nudžin Mustafe

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Sažetak

   Neosporan je značaj pripovijedanja u medijima 21. vijeka. Činjenice, same za sebe, ne zadovoljavaju našu potrebu za identitetom. Samo priče nas ispunjavaju osjećajem prepoznavanja i pripadanja. No, priče mogu i pogoršati našu emocionalnu i narcisističku reakciju; i upravo o tome se radi u pripovijedanju u ovom vremenu post-istine: umanjivanje vrijednosti činjenica, izazivanje osjećanja, izuzetna parcijalnost i agresivna retorika. Zasnovano na Frojdovoj teoriji narcizma, naše istraživanje predlaže objektivni i interdisciplinarni model uz pomoć kojega možemo prepoznati, oslikati, i analizirati narcisističke modele u međumedijskom pripovijedanju današnjice. U suštini, ovo istraživanje pomoći će nam da bolje razumijemo priču izbjeglice Nudžin Mustafe, koja, čini se, odlično ilustruje eksplicitnu i implicitnu dinamiku ljubavi prema samom sebi.*