

A Kernbergian Psychoanalysis of Pathological Narcissism in Todd Field's *TÁR* (2022)

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ABSTRACT

*Narcissism is a psychological phenomenon that is relevant these days. This phenomenon can be analyzed through characters in a film. The object of this research is the film *TÁR* (2022) by Todd Field, with a focus on the character of Lydia Tár. This research aims to analyze how the concepts of primitive defense mechanisms and grandiose self are represented by the character of Lydia Tár's behavior in accordance with Otto Kernberg's pathological narcissism theory. This research used a descriptive qualitative method by interpreting and analyzing each scene from the film, especially Lydia Tár's characteristics, dialogues, and behavior. This research found that Lydia Tár predominantly operates primitive defense mechanisms through splitting, as well as omnipotence and devaluation, while her grandiose self is most strongly represented through an inflated self-concept and a shallow emotional life. Based on these findings, it can be concluded that Lydia Tár is a person with a pathological narcissistic personality because she operates primitive defense mechanisms and represents a grandiose self in her behavior. This research also shows that Kernberg's pathological narcissism theory framework can be applied to research characters in a film.*

Keywords: *Lydia Tár, Otto Kernberg, Pathological Narcissism, Primitive Defense Mechanisms, Grandiose Self*

INTRODUCTION

As a contemporary literary work, film can be a means to reflect on various life phenomena. Film is a portrait that displays reality in society (Irawanto, as cited in Sobur, 2003). One of the phenomena that is currently relevant and an issue in society is narcissism. Narcissism is a psychological phenomenon in a person who has excessive self-love and feels more important and superior to others.

This phenomenon of narcissism can be found in the main character of a film called *TÁR* (2022) by Todd Field. The film received critical attention because Lydia Tár's character displayed a complex pattern of narcissistic behavior to analyze. *TÁR* (2022) tells the story of the journey of a maestro named Lydia Tár who will record Mahler's Symphony No. 5. The character of Lydia Tár can be further researched through the pathological narcissism theory approach of Otto Kernberg. In his book *Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism* (1975), Kernberg explained that a pathological narcissist has disturbances in themselves and also relationships with others, which is characterized by the concept of primitive defense mechanisms and also a pathological structure called the grandiose self (Kernberg, 2004).

Previous studies have examined the *TÁR* film with various approaches, but have not examined her narcissistic personality. There has also been research on narcissism in other films, but no one has yet used Kernberg's framework specifically and completely. This research on narcissistic personality in the character of Lydia Tár can fill the gap in analysis from previous

research, also have urgency and provide novelty in the use of Kernberg's pathological narcissism theory in the character of a literary work.

Based on the above explanation, this research aims to examine how primitive defense mechanisms operate in the character of Lydia Tár and how the character of Lydia Tár represents the grandiose self in accordance with Kernberg's theory of pathological narcissism. The significance of this study is to enrich the application of Kernberg's pathological narcissism theory in film studies and become a reference for future literary researchers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Film is a medium that displays moving images to convey a story in which there are various characters. A character is every individual who appears in the story (Stanton, 2007). These characters can be examined more deeply through a psychoanalytic approach. This research uses a psychoanalytic theoretical approach from Otto Kernberg called pathological narcissism. The main problem in pathological narcissists is disturbances in their self-regard, which is also related to disturbances in relation to other objects (Kernberg, 2004).

A pathological narcissist has a concept called primitive defense mechanisms, which is their self-protection. Primitive defense mechanisms consist of several operations. The first and most fundamental is splitting, a separation between "all good" and "all bad" from self and object images. Then, primitive idealization, the tendency to idealize external objects as completely good to derive the greatness of the object. Projective identification, externalizing and projecting the image of "all bad" and aggressive to other objects. Denial is consciously denying the experience of oneself without emotional attachment. Omnipotence and devaluation are the tendency to show omnipotence and devalue external objects that no longer provide satisfaction (Kernberg, 2004).

A pathological narcissist also has a self-structure called the grandiose self, which consists of various characteristics. First, an inflated self-concept, a self-concept of grandiosity and majesty. Inordinate need for tribute, a great need to be praised and admired. Shallow emotional life, a lack of capacity to empathize with others. Exploitative behavior, the tendency to exploit relationships with others to get what they need without feeling guilty. These two concepts do not work in isolation, but are related and can reinforce each other in a pathological narcissistic person (Kernberg, 2004).

Through the above theoretical approach to the *TÁR* film, this research will fill the analytical gap from previous studies. In terms of the *TÁR* film as an object, Melo (2024) researches the Triangulation of Desire using Anne Carson's theory, Karismawati (2024) researches the depiction of cancel culture, and Sanjaya and Marian (2023) examined the relationship between self-confidence and the visual composition theory of Gustavo Mercado. In terms of Kernberg's theoretical approach, S. and Purushothaman (2025) use the theory of Freud and Kernberg to examine the cycle of idealization and devaluation in romance, and the concept of grandiosity in general in the object of the film *Loki* and Her. Hartanto and Setiawan (2021) used Kernberg's theory to examine the symptoms of inflated self-concept, emotional life, and social functioning in Hitler's character in the autobiography *Mein Kampf*. Based on previous studies, there is a gap that is the basis and urgency in this research, as well as providing novelty, by examining the object of

the film *TÁR* (2022) through the theoretical approach of Otto Kernberg's pathological narcissism, through the concepts of primitive defense mechanisms and grandiose self. This theoretical approach will be able to reveal the behavioral patterns and characteristics of pathological narcissism in a more in-depth and systematic way.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research uses a descriptive qualitative method. The descriptive qualitative method is used to explore and understand individuals' meanings related to a problem (Creswell, 2018). The individual who is the object of the use of this method is the character Lydia Tár in the film *TÁR* (2022) by Todd Field. Data were collected from each scene in the film, with a focus on Lydia Tár. The research will analyze Lydia Tár's characteristics, dialogues, and behaviors through the lens of Kernberg's pathological narcissism theory.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The research found a total of sixty-five instances of data showing that Lydia Tár operated primitive defense mechanisms and represented the characteristics of the grandiose self as a pathological narcissistic personality. The findings are grouped based on five indicators of primitive defense mechanisms in the form of splitting, primitive idealization, projective identification, denial, and omnipotence and devaluation, and four indicators of grandiose self, namely inflated self-concept, inordinate need for tribute, shallow emotional life, and exploitative behavior. In this sub-chapter, the frequency of each indicator of pathological narcissism will be displayed. The frequency number in the table is the number of occurrences of data in the form of scenes, dialogues, and Lydia Tár's behavior identified for each of these categories throughout the film.

Table 1. The findings and frequency of each category of primitive defense mechanisms and the grandiose self in Lydia Tár

No.	Category	Frequency
1	Splitting	13
2	Primitive Idealization	7
3	Projective Identification	6
4	Denial	1
5	Omnipotence and Devaluation	10
6	Inflated Self-concept	11
7	Inordinate Need for Tribute	3
8	Shallow Emotional Life	11
9	Exploitative Behavior	3
	Total	65

Primitive Defense Mechanisms Splitting



Figure 1. (00:09:07) Tár was called Maestro in an interview with The New Yorker



Figure 2. (00:25:08) Tár refers to Eliot as a Robot

Lydia Tár shows that she operates splitting, which is the separation between the "all good" self-image and the "all bad" external object images. The "all good" self-image of Tár is the Maestro title that people mention to her. This was proven in The New Yorker; Gopnik, the host, referred to her as Maestro: "Thank you for joining us, Maestro, today." (Figure 1). Maestro is a term for people who are very good at music. At the opposite pole, the "all bad" external objects are people who are on a level below her, which she often refers to as Robots. Figure 2 depicts a time when Tár's colleague, Eliot Kaplan, wanted to see a bit of Tár's musical composition and notation. For Tár, Eliot did not have enough capacity in music and was at a low level, so Tár dubbed him a Robot: "There's no glory for a robot, Eliot. Do your own thing." Tár holds the title of Maestro as the self-image of "all good" and separates herself from the so-called Robots as an external object of "all bad" that has the opposite quality.

Primitive Idealization



Figure 3. (00:14:26) Tár acknowledged that Bernstein was a great musician



Figure 4. (00:08:11) Gopnik conveyed that Tár had a connection to Mahler as Bernstein, her mentor

Lydia Tár shows that she does primitive idealization, that is, by idealizing external objects as a representation of the completely good to obtain greatness from them. For example, in Figure 3, Tár acknowledged that Leonard Bernstein was a great conductor: "He knew the music, Mahler especially, as well, or better, than anyone." Tár praised Bernstein only to gain glory from Bernstein. Because by praising Bernstein as a completely good figure, it will also make her completely good, because Tár is Bernstein's mentee. This relationship also makes Tár's name associated with Mahler, a famous composer whose works have been recorded by many conductors to this day. As in Figure 4, Gopnik admits that Tár has a connection with Mahler because she is a mentee of Bernstein: "Like her mentor, Leonard Bernstein, Tár has a particular affinity for Mahler."

Projective Identification



Figure 5. (02:04:53) Tár is before the Orchestra Board to be questioned regarding Krista's death

Lydia Tár performs projective identification operations by externalizing the image of "all bad" and aggressive to external objects. Tár externalizes the "all bad" image and projects it to Krista Taylor, a former member of the Tár orchestra. Krista was depressed and died by suicide because of Tár. After the news emerged that Krista committed suicide, Tár, who was strongly suspected of being the cause of this incident, was called by the orchestra board for questioning. Tár does not defend herself with the facts, but instead frames Krista as having a psychological disorder and obsessing over Tár, which is precisely the opposite of Tár, who has a psychological disorder and is obsessed with Krista: "She was disturbed, I mean, she fixated on me." The image

of "all bad" and aggressive as a "disturbed" and "fixated" person is externalized and projected into Krista.

Denial



Figure 6. (02:27:03) Tár is called by her real name

Lydia Tár performs denial, which is that she consciously denies her identity in the past. Tár returns to her old home, where she lived as a child. An old house, small and simple, was very different from the house she had now. Then, Tár heard someone enter the house: her brother, named Tony Tarr. Tár called out to her brother from the top of the stairs, and Tony replied, "Oh. Hi, Linda. Sorry, Lydia." The first name mentioned by Tony proves that Lydia Tár used to be named Linda Tarr. However, she denied that she was Linda Tarr and changed her identity to Lydia Tár. Upon hearing Tony call her Linda, Tár showed no emotional reaction at all, as if nothing had happened and nothing was wrong with her.

Omnipotence and Devaluation



Figure 7. (01:08:20) Tár asks Francesca to delete all emails related to Krista



Figure 8. (01:49:40) Tár insults Francesca for quitting as her assistant

The operation of omnipotence and devaluation is also carried out by Lydia Tár. Figure 7, Tár shows her omnipotence by controlling and commanding Francesca, her personal assistant, to do

what she wants, which is to delete all emails related to Krista that are on her own emails and especially on Francesca's emails: "Delete it. And the rest." So that she would not be suspected of Krista's suicide case. Later, when Francesca can no longer give her satisfaction, because Francesca decided to resign from her job as Tár's personal assistant, Tár devalues Francesca by demeaning her as "Two-faced little bitch." (Figure 8). Tár feels that her image is threatened because she can no longer control Francesca, while Francesca knows many of Tár's badness that are hidden from the public.

Inflated Self-Concept



Figure 9. (00:11:48) Tár exaggerates herself

Lydia Tár shows that she has the characteristics of an inflated self-concept, which is a pathological structure possessed by a narcissist. She builds and develops her self-image through exaggerated and arrogant statements about herself. Tár said, "You cannot start without me. See, I start the clock. My left hand shapes, but my right hand, the second-hand, marks time and moves it forward." Tár wants to convey that she is a very important and irreplaceable figure. Tár is developing her concept to an unrealistic level. Tár stated that she was the one who started, marked, and moved time; she was elevating herself to a high position as a controller of time.

Inordinate Need for Tribute



Figure 10. (01:06:13) Tár is looking for any possible reference to herself

Tár shows that she has an inordinate need for tribute characteristic. Tár deliberately went to a magazine kiosk and looked for a magazine that contained articles about her. Then, from inside the kiosk appeared a man (Shopkeeper) who whistled, calling Tár while holding a magazine containing an article about her. Tár approached the man and took the magazine. This behavior shows that Tár needs praise from others. The shopkeeper who handed out the magazine with articles about her pointed out that Tár had done this many times and had made it a habit, even a necessity for her, because the shopkeeper of the kiosk knew exactly what Tár was looking for and needed.

Shallow Emotional Life



Figure 11. (00:40:48) Francesca tells Tár that Krista seems desperate, but Tár tells her to ignore it

Lydia Tár shows that she has a shallow emotional life with a lack of capacity to empathize with others. Tár consciously shows her indifference to the desperate Krista, even though they used to have a very close relationship. Francesca said that Krista sent another "weird" email, and asked how to reply to it. Tár coldly and casually replied, "Don't". Then Francesca explained again that from this email it felt like Krista was desperate. But still with an attitude of indifference, Tár replied, "Hope Dies Last". This phrase was not at all encouraging, but rather a satirical one. It has the meaning that hope is the last thing that humans have. So Tár wanted to convey that as long as Krista was alive, she shouldn't be desperate, so they didn't have to care about Krista at all.

Exploitative Behavior



Figure 12. (01:31:32) Tár exploits Gosia to hold an audition for a soloist

Lydia Tár has exploitative behavior by utilizing the people around her to meet her own needs. Tár used her orchestral team to make Olga Metkina (a woman she loved) a solo performer, in a recording of Mahler V. Tár asks Gosia, "But given how much is going to be asked of you with Mahler, I-I wondered if you'd be at all bothered if we were to hold auditions?" Tár looks democratic at first glance, but she, who is a Maestro and team leader, actually has a superior position to Gosia. So this question is more of a request that must be met. Gosia herself is in a position where she cannot refuse the request, as it would give the impression that she is selfish and does not care about the team.

Discussion

Primitive defense mechanisms and grandiose self are two concepts found in a pathological narcissist. These two concepts are not stand-alone components, but rather two parts that are intertwined. The grandiose structure of the self can run simultaneously and is also supported by

primitive defense mechanisms. The interconnectedness and running of these two concepts can be seen in Lydia Tár's narcissistic behavior pattern. An example of the synthesis between primitive defense mechanisms and Lydia Tár's grandiose self is clearly seen in the title *Maestro*, which she has as her inflated self-concept. In building and maintaining this "all good" self-image, Tár also carries out various primitive defense mechanisms, such as Tár who refers to other lower people as Robots, to separate them from herself, who is a Maestro (Splitting), thus further developing the concept of her self-image. Tár idealizes Bernstein to gain greatness and to strengthen her self-image (Primitive Idealization). Tár externalizes her bad image to Krista, so that her image remains "all good" (Projective Identification). Through the self-concept that she builds, Tár can cover up her past identity, which is not in accordance with the grandeur of the self-concept she wants (Denial). Tár seeks to control and devalue Francesca so as not to damage her own image (Omnipotence and Devaluation). In addition, the inordinate need for tribute also strengthens her inflated self-concept, "all good" because by getting praise from others, she further strengthens her image as a Maestro.

The synthesis that occurs in Tár's narcissistic behavior is in line with Kernberg's theoretical explanation that primitive defense mechanisms and the grandiose self are not two concepts that stand alone, but have attachments, mutually sustaining each other. Primitive defense mechanisms do not operate separately, but rather consistently sustain the pathological structure of the grandiose self intact. Thus, these two concepts of primitive defense mechanisms and the grandiose self together form the pathological narcissistic behavior that exists in Lydia Tár.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the findings and analysis of this research show that Lydia Tár in the film *TÁR* (2022) is a person with a pathological narcissistic personality because she represents primitive defense mechanisms and the grandiose self in her behavior in accordance with the pathological narcissistic theory of Otto Kernberg. These two concepts in pathological narcissism not only stand alone, but are related and reinforce each other. This research also shows that Otto Kernberg's theoretical framework of pathological narcissism can explain the psychology that exists in characters in a literary work. The pathological narcissistic behavior found in Lydia Tár in the film *TÁR* (2022) can be a reflection of the phenomenon of narcissism found in public figures in real life, especially in every individual who holds power, prestige, and has a certain status or title in their field. This research also fills the analytical gap from previous studies. Previous studies have focused on the causes of narcissism, types of narcissism, objects of relationships, or using the concept of primitive defense mechanisms and grandiose self partially or not completely. This research fills this gap by applying the two concepts in a complete, systematic, and interrelated manner to the five operations in primitive defense mechanisms and four characteristics in the grandiose self to examine pathological narcissistic behavior in the female protagonist, Lydia Tár, in the film *TÁR* (2022). Thus, this research contributes to the systematic and comprehensive application of the framework of pathological narcissism and includes a synthesis of both the concepts of primitive defense mechanisms and grandiose self. Based on the findings and limitations of this research, the researcher proposed several suggestions for future researchers.

First, this research is limited to an analysis of the representation of pathological narcissism when the main character is still in her narcissistic wholeness, so it has not examined how the process of narcissistic collapse occurred after the collapse of her career. Subsequent research can examine these phases by focusing on the collapse of narcissistic structures and how narcissistic rage in these characters is caused. Second, the theoretical scope of this research is limited to the theoretical framework of Otto Kernberg's pathological narcissism. Therefore, the next researcher can analyze the character of Lydia Tár through another psychoanalytic framework, or with a primary focus on the narcissistic theory of Heinz Kohut, to expand the analysis and interpretation of the psychological attachment to the character of Lydia Tár.

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