

# Black Eyes: One man's struggle against the fascination of "not being"<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

A study of the process of individuation within Nikita Mikhalkov's film *Black Eyes* (1987), considering marriage and family relationships. The author explores the theme of incest from the Jungian point of view of diving deep within oneself to retrieve the most valuable treasures of the human being. This journey is often doomed to failure and to remaining in an infantile ego stage, weakening the hero and transforming him into the "lover child". The process of individuation requires a constant struggle against the allure of dissolving into the whole, the siren song that destroys so many heroes. Aspects of the myth of Narcissus are used to deal with the theme of marriage as a relationship of otherness. The necessary confrontation with the shadow, a crucial moment in life, is focused on. ■



**Keywords**  
matriarchal complex, patriarchal order, hero buffoon, puer x puella, anima, Self, individuation process.

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## Black Eyes: One man's struggle against the fascination of "not being"

"In the morning of life, the son turns painfully away from his mother in order to rise to the height destined for him."

C.G. Jung

### Introduction

*Black Eyes* is the narrative of the life of Romano, a middle-aged Italian man. The film begins with him telling his story to another man of similar age and Russian nationality, in a painful confrontation with his shadow. Through the dialogue and the gaze of the other character, he is confronted with the vision of his tormented soul, abandoned in its longing for expression. Romano was born into a humble family, he was the youngest child, the only one to go to university. His parents sacrificed themselves so that he would have the chance of a better life. Invested with his father's desire, Romano made plans for a monumental architectural work that would make him a celebrity.

When he was a student, he met Elisa, the daughter of bankers and the sole heir to an immense fortune. They believed in building a life according to their own values, different from their family model: "At first we thought that dreams were enough, but little by little we became comfortable, and feelings became a habit". Romano's words, describing the circumstances of his marriage to Elisa at the head of the family business after her father's death.

### Sabaticka and Buffoon

Symbols used defensively by Romano, masks to hide the enormous emptiness of his life from himself and from everyone else.

Sabaticka — Russian word meaning little dog. The vain mayor tells us about its symbolic meaning in the movie: "Dogs warm our souls."

Romano had the place and function of a Sabaticka with Elisa, the owner of the mansion and the fortune. Buffoon — a mask that allows Romano a minimum of rebellious expression. The buffoon is directly linked to the Trickster; the greater the oppression experienced and the fixation on a matriarchal complex, the more difficult it is for an effective hero to emerge and bring about transformation. The buffoon makes life more tolerable; his goal is the pursuit of pleasure; he disrupts the patriarchal order with antics.

### Elisa — family, power, marriage

Elisa has the power that money gives her. She owns the mansion and undoes her husband-buffoon's orders, telling the servants: "Don't do anything unless I tell you to!". She scolds her mother affectionately, but repeats a long-standing chant with her: "How could you marry such a mediocre, self-interested man who was lucky enough to marry a rich woman? He's nothing but a buffoon!"

Elisa is having fun with her friend Tina, both of them in tune with their contempt for their husbands' manhood, but charmed and enchanted by them as they represent pet dogs: "Mario, who's Mario? Romano, who's Romano?". They laugh together, delighted at the joke of not knowing their own husbands.

However, it seems that the buffoon has fulfilled his creative task, destroying, or at least helping to bring down, all that power. Elisa, realizing she's bankrupt, blames Romano: "You're responsible, in your complacency and lack of interest, you've never done anything. Your only work, begun thirty years ago, never got off the drawing board." Elisa snaps and shows him a drawing, an architectural plan placed in a frame. Romano is woken up by his wife's screams and is annoyed, asking her to

stop shouting so that the others don't hear. He says he doesn't feel well, he's been very tired, he gets up and goes to the bathroom to wash his hands — Pilate's gesture. Elisa is still furious: "You've always lied to me.". Romano is visibly upset, he has been roused from his childish slumber, his complaints of illness and tiredness have not been heeded, he replies with a grunt: "How can you say that, Elisa?". Elisa bursts into tears and runs into the bedroom, locking the door. For a moment, Romano is really shaken and tries to break down the door, but now it's her, the *puella*, who refuses the confrontation. At this point, Tina appears, with the function of reinforcing the defensive pattern. "Romano, what are you doing?". Refreshed, Romano replies: "I'm measuring the carpet." And Tina, complicit: "Mario, come here. We need to measure the carpet," and, then, at that moment, there are three buffoons who act committed to pathological stagnation. They hold each other's arms and, indifferent to Elisa's audible cries, with ridiculous jumps they measure the carpet.

### **Buffoon — water station, Anna and love**

Romano leaves for a healing station, where he continues to play, to make love, to break the clinic's rules, going on nightly benders and, very much in keeping with the situation, to play at being ill. Tina goes to visit him, out of a need to keep abreast of everything that is happening with her friend's husband. Romano tells her that he's sick in the legs and can barely walk, and she, always willing to help him in his defensive games, calls Mario and the two of them pretend to help Romano get around. It was Tina who, attentive to everything around Romano, first noticed Anna's brilliance and said to him: "This time it's serious." Anna possesses the glow of numinous experience, coming through love, the archetype of the Self, always present, providing the chance of transformation in an attempt to bring the ego back to the process of individuation in order to realize a life that is an expression of the Self. When he is left alone after the farce

of his leg illness, Romano turns around and sees Anna by his side, who tells him: "Let me help you, I'm strong."

Romano accepts Anna's help and, as another joke, tells her that one of his ancestors, who suffered from the same illness, was cured by a Russian girl. He asks her to say a word in Russian, any word, the dog barks and Anna says: "Sabaticka". Repeating the word Sabaticka, Romano lets go of her, walks over and shouts: "Miracle!". Anna, frightened to death, lets out a cry of horror and runs. Romano realizes that he has fooled someone who is gullible and naive, runs after her, falls and hurts himself. Meanwhile, everyone in the clinic screams in horror, contaminated by Anna's feelings. What was beginning to happen between Romano and Anna transcended the personal, reaching the collective because it carried the force of the archetype.

The reunion takes place during the meal and is marked by a new collective emotional explosion, like the first violin of a symphony. Anna is joined by everyone in a hilarious fit of laughter. Romano now uses a cane, his "sick" legs, symbol of a flawed structural base, bear the mark of a bruise, and the presence of the woman next to him begins to destroy his false narcissistic mirror. From that moment on, Romano easily gets closer to Anna. The viewer sees the transformation of the character, who becomes a kind and charming person, his jokes are genuine joy, his aim is to cheer up Anna's sad black eyes. In one scene, her hat is blown away by the wind and falls into the pool of healing mud. Romano, who is dressed entirely in white, enters the pool, retrieves the hat, brings a flower out of the mud and gives them both to Anna. Symbolically, the pool of black, healing mud could signify the alchemical state of *Putrefatio*, the beginning of the *Opus Alchimicum*. Romano would have to leave his defenses in that pool to come out renewed, a true baptismal act. Everything indicated that this goal had been achieved, even though Romano is only up to his waist in dirt — he brings out a beautiful white flower from the

mud. The next scene corroborates this deduction, because we see a happy couple, sheltering in a bower while a heavy rain falls, redemptive water that washes away the sins of the world.

In the evening, when Romano is looking for Anna, he finds Sabaticka, the dog, alone; instinctively, he takes him to his mistress. He finds her crying copiously and, in this state, she reveals that she had never thought she could be as happy as she had been that day and thanks him for her happiness. Romano listens and lovingly calms her down. He begins to kiss her and takes her to the bedroom.

The next scene takes place in Anna's bedroom; after love making, we see her lying down, singing a lullaby while her fingers are wet with tears, drawing pictures on the wall; Romano sitting at the table, eating a piece of watermelon. For a moment, now face to face, they both look at each other in the eye; at this moment, an encounter of love could indeed happen, but he returns to the watermelon in an attempt to fill his affective void and reworks his defenses by recounting the funny things that happened at the clinic that morning. She keeps quiet, she's also a *puella*, her defense is escape, running away from a life of her own and from love. She leaves Romano a letter written in Russian, she just can't escape her suffering and maybe that's why she has a better chance of transformation than him, who no longer feels it. Romano can't read the letter written in Russian and denies his presence in Anna's room by handing the chambermaid a gold coin. In fact, he loses the treasure of an encounter that could have been transformative.

### The hero's dawn — his journey

Time passes and Romano, who has returned home, can't forget Anna. A few months later, he gets someone to translate the letter in which she tells him that her mother died when she was still a child, that her family is very poor, that her father, who is an alcoholic, is always ill, and that she made a loveless marriage in order to help her father and a brother. She goes on to say that

she ran away from love, that she always thought she would never experience it, but that, when she met Romano, she realized that she, too, was a person with the ability to love and to be happy. As she was committed to other people, she ran away. The translator, moved, asks Romano who the letter is addressed to and he says it's addressed to a male friend. The girl asks what happened to his friend and Romano replies: "He died of cold in Russia". In fact, up to this point, Romano has been freezing to death, without the warmth that comes from a loving heart. But when he realizes that he is loved, he decides to go and find love.

Using the pretext of making unbreakable glass in Russia, Romano leaves for Russia. He needs a permit to get to the town where Anna lives; he travels carrying the glass in his hands, from one corner to another, animated by the Hero's energy in the face of his mission. As soon as he gets his visa, he discards the glass and throws it into a stream. As a symbol, the glass he is carrying could indicate an unbreakable resistance. He discards it to continue his journey, but it remains intact in the water of his unconscious. When he arrives in Anna's town, to his surprise, he is greeted as a true hero, one who has come from afar to bring progress. They greet him with vodka, music, dancing, flowers and hugs. They carry him in their arms and get him drunk, honoring the hero who is ready to carry out the task.

In the evening, refreshed after a nap, he prepares for a reception in his honor at the mayor's house, at which point Konstantin, an ecologist, appears and talks to Romano about the balance between nature and progress, concerned about the possible ecological damage to the region's forests and rivers caused by the establishment of the foreign industry. Konstantin, a symbol of the harmony needed for real growth, is removed by the local authorities, who consider him to be against development, after which Romano is sent to the home of his important host.

The mayor, a ridiculous and vain man, sees in his guest the possibility of personal gain and

takes him to his library, full of his family's old objects. Instead of books, it's a kind of family museum. He talks non-stop about himself; at one point, the camera focuses on a cup of tea, with Anna's glare, and then it's Romano who notices the cup. Spectator and character are united in the same emotion. At any moment, Anna could walk through that door. It's the possibility of receiving the miracle of renewal, through the numinous experience of the ego attuned to the Self.

We don't see the scene of the reunion, but rather Anna rushing out of the door, holding a tray with glass tumblers that are about to fall over. Possibly like her defenses, built up at the cost of so many sacrifices, at breaking point. Then her husband appears and scolds her for behaving so strangely. Not only has she gone pale when greeting a stranger, but she is carrying a tray like a servant and he is worried about what people will think of him. The values accepted in Anna's marriage to the mayor are those of a dissociated persona, a superficial image. Anna's husband leaves and Romano comes to meet her. A quick conversation takes place between the two, she begs him to leave and runs away, he follows and finds her in an oratory, praying, still with the tray in her hands. The chase continues until they both end up at the back of the house, in an animal shelter. Then Romano snatches the tray with the glasses out of Anna's hands and throws it into a pile of feathers, the two of them hug and he says: "I can't live without you." Anna replies: "Neither can I." Oaths of love and promises are exchanged, he pledges to return to Rome, tell Elisa everything and come back for Anna while she must tell her husband everything and wait for Romano.

### **The return — lullaby**

Returning to the hotel where he is staying, Romano is surprised to find Konstantin waiting for him. The ecologist has brought his daughter, who is fast asleep. Romano commits his second *faux pas*. In the first, he referred to Elisa as dead and now he says: "I also had a daughter."

Neither Elisa nor her daughter died, but it is true that Romano lost them because he failed to establish a true relationship with them as whole individuals, me x other, creating a field for Love to sprout, in fact, he never had them. Konstantin is relieved to learn that the industry was just a pretext and offers to help him leave, he arranges for a cart to take him to the station. The way is through green meadows, it's dawn, Romano is happy, he thinks it's the dawn of a new era, cheerful gypsies appear, sing and have fun; Konstantin speaks of nature as man's true home, the home beyond the gate. He suggests the beauty of a relationship structured around the dynamism of Alterity, the dialectics between the Human Being and the World, between the Self and the Other. However, Romano's life is ruled by a lack at the matriarchal level. He listens to the lullaby his mother used to sing when he was a child and falls asleep next to Konstantin's daughter. The hero falls asleep. Both he and Anna are carried away and subjugated by the fascination exerted by the memory of the first love of human life, that feeling that often, in adulthood, makes the ego return to a state of being contained and indiscriminate in the mother's womb. She, after love, plays with her tears while singing a lullaby; he, after a heroic move, listens to the song and falls asleep next to the child, a symbol of an infantile anima that corresponds to Romano's ego. Romano's ego is, after all, dominated by the archetype of the *puer*, the child who refuses to grow up, denies the female anima, who he bothers, instigates and messes up, to awaken the hero who falls asleep before the task is completed, in the great round, stupendous breast of the great castrating mother who keeps her loving children in her womb.

Arriving at Elisa's family villa, he finds a pandemonium. The house has been put up for sale and is being emptied, people interested in buying it are showing up. It's bankruptcy. The first meeting is with Tina and Romano says to her: "Sabaticka. I'm going to surprise you today." He still thinks he's a hero, he thinks these are his

last moments as a pet dog, but, when he sees Elisa, he immediately starts justifying himself with lies about Anna's letter that Elisa found. At that moment, she finds herself stripped of power, money and defenses; for the first time in her marriage, she has the courage to ask for the truth. She says: "Now we are as you wanted us to be thirty years ago." And she asks: "Tell me the truth, for once in your life." But it's too late for that marriage. Lies have remained between them for too long. Romano asks her what she wants to know, she replies: "Do you love a woman in Russia?" The camera focuses on the actor's expression; it's clear that he's trying hard to be sincere and that he feels defeated when he says: "No." At this point, Elisa is back to her old self. She finds a record that Romano has brought with the music of the Russian gypsies and puts it on the record player. The camera focuses on Romano from behind, he's stiff and tense, but the music plays and the movements start slowly, until they become a dance. We hear the melody and the laughter of both husband and wife, accomplices in a stagnant marriage, in an unrealized work.

### **The myth of Narcissus and Echo**

Narcissus dies because he only looks at himself; in its pathological aspect, the myth tells us about the danger of confusing the Image with the Soul or the persona with the Self. The mayor's husband shows portraits and says: "*C'est moi, c'est moi, encore moi*". He dedicates his whole life to satisfying needs that do not meet the true human longing to be realized according to archetypal roots.

Echo dies because she only looks at Narcissus; the myth warns us of the danger of not recognizing the Sacred in ourselves, projecting our reason for living onto others. Anna tries to die, but escapes; suffering connects her with her soul and gives her the chance to fulfill her lack.

In the myth, at some point, a meeting takes place. After death, Narcissus is reborn in the flower that Persephone picks and fulfilling, through

this act, her destiny as queen of the underworld, a place of shadows where the memory of humanity lies, and as princess of spring on the surface of the Earth, where the energy of the shadows coagulates into creative acts, flowers and fruits.

Narcissus symbolizes the creative capacity to look at oneself. Echo symbolizes the creative ability to look at others. The penetrating gaze at oneself encounters the other, just as much as the penetrating gaze at the other encounters the self. This exchange is inevitable in any authentic movement, inwards or outwards, in equalities and differences. There is no solitude, only dissociation.

Romano, who sought so much for his own well-being, never actually saw himself. Anna, who was always so demanding and devoted to the other, never actually saw the other. Love can always work miracles. The encounter between the two made the task of transformation feasible but lacked the energy for the last stage of the *Opus*, the *Coagulatio*. The springtime of flowers and fruits was not made possible.

### **The interlocutor — shadow, senex**

The film begins and ends with a dialog between two men: the Italian Romano, around sixty years old, aged and bitter, with a face that may have been beautiful in the past, but which today shows traces of decay and mistreatment, and the Russian, a man of the same age who has never been handsome and yet is happy. Newly married, he believes in love, his eyes shine with happiness when he talks about his beloved, with indignation at Romano's disbelief and bitterness, and with compassion at Romano's failure. A symbol of the shadow with which the ego inevitably clashes, the Russian interlocutor takes love and unfulfilled happiness to the unconscious. It's too late, Romano has lost everything, even his marriage: "I had and lost everything." The late confrontation brought depression and bitterness: "Only three things were worth it: the first night with Elisa, the lullaby my mother sang and the meadows of Russia." Romano is a disbelieving

drunkard, a sloppy ship's waiter, getting older and more bitter every day. He hands over the buffoon's whistle to the Russian, who is no longer any use. The ego, dominated by depression, hands over its defenses to the unconscious, to the shadow. The transformation takes place from

*Puer to Senex.* The decadent and bitter old man at the end of his life has not completed his task. Wisdom, the prize of a life fully realized, has not been attained. ■

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## Resumo

### *Olhos Negros: A luta de um homem contra o fascínio do “não ser”*

*Estudo sobre o processo de individuação no filme Olhos Negros (1987) de Nikita Mikhalkov (Itália-Rússia-Estados Unidos, 1987), considerando casamento e relações familiares. A autora trabalha o tema do incesto de acordo com a visão junguiana do mergulho ao interior de si mesmo para o resgate dos tesouros mais valiosos do ser humano. Essa viagem está, muitas vezes, fadada ao fracasso e à permanência em um estágio*

*de ego infantil, com o enfraquecimento do herói e com a sua transformação no “filho amante”. O processo de individuação requer uma luta constante contra o fascínio de dissolver-se no todo, o canto da sereia destruidora de tantos heróis. A autora recorre ao mito de Narciso para tratar o casamento como relação de alteridade e enfoca o necessário confronto com a sombra, momento crucial da vida. ■*

**Palavras-chave:** complexo matriarcal, ordem patriarcal, herói bufão, puer x puella, anima, Self, processo de individuação.

## Resumen

### *Ojos negros: la lucha de un hombre contra la fascinación de «no ser»*

*Estudio del proceso de individuación dentro de la riqueza simbólica de la película Ojos negros (1987), de Nikita Mikhalkov, considerando las relaciones matrimoniales y familiares. El autor explora el tema del incesto desde el punto de vista de Jung de bucear en lo más profundo de uno mismo para recuperar los tesoros más valiosos del ser humano. Este viaje suele estar condenado al fracaso y a permanecer en un estadio infantil*

*del ego, lo que debilita al héroe y lo transforma en el “niño amante”. El proceso de individuación requiere una lucha constante contra el encanto de disolverse en el todo, el canto de sirena que destruye a tantos héroes. Se utilizan algunos aspectos del mito de Narciso para tratar el tema del matrimonio como relación de alteridad, y se hace hincapié en la necesaria confrontación con la sombra, momento crucial de la vida. ■*

**Palabras clave:** complejo matriarcal, orden patriarcal, héroe bufón, puer x puella, ánima, Self, proceso de individuação.



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