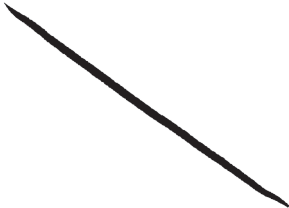


TEACHING EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE THROUGH FILMMAKING: A BOOVIE ENCOUNTER

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Abstract: Boovie is an annual festival and contest of adapting books into three-minute “book-trailers” for high school and middle school students in Romania. For the 2023 edition, together with Iulia Voicu, I held a workshop “Pedagogy through Film,” which was dedicated to pre-university teachers participating in the festival. This article is an expansion of the presentation I made in this workshop, which focused on the idea of teaching skills that can be conceptualized as “emotional intelligence” through filmmaking learning practices, specifically those related to film directing. The examples given (and main points) are: the necessity of learning how to deal with uncertainty in the educational process due to the high degree of relativism and subjectivity of art in general, and filmmaking in particular; the opportunity of questioning both micro- and macro-narratives in the process of screenwriting; and the complex communication skills that are needed in both working with actors and successful interpersonal relationships. Finally, this article discusses Sorin Botoșeneanu’s pedagogical practices, focusing on both the so-called “observational” and “unpacking” exercises and his postmodern approach to teaching, as a practitioner of horizontal pedagogy and attachment-based teaching.

Keywords: film pedagogy, emotional intelligence, film directing, performance anxiety, directing actors, attachment-based teaching, Sorin Botoșeneanu.

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Introduction

At Iulia Voicu’s invitation, I spoke to the teachers participating in Boovie—the festival I have been attending as a juror and trainer for the past two years—about film pedagogy from two practice-based perspectives, in the hope of inspiring or, at least, encouraging the teachers in their original usage of film as an educational instrument. Both perspectives initially refer to pedagogy *for* film (which prepares students for film professions) but, given their tight connection with psychological and socio-emotional development, I believe they can be real sources of inspiration for practices of pedagogy *through* film.

The first perspective—“an emotionally intelligent approach to teaching film directing”—I am currently theorizing in my PhD research, while the second consisted of a presentation of UNATC’s *Sorin Botoșeneanu Center for Pedagogy and Visual Studies* and the eponymous (Sorin Botoșeneanu) pedagogical model.

1. An Emotionally Intelligent Approach to Teaching Film Directing

As a graduate of Film Directing (BA in 2019, MA in 2021) at I.L. Caragiale National University of Theater and Film (UNATC) and, for the past two years, a Teaching Assistant for the Directing class to graduate in 2024 and for the “Visual forms and structures” course, I have adopted—for quite a while now and from

different roles—an interrogative approach to the goals and methods of specialized education in the case of film directing.

One of the particularities of this specialization in our film school is the tendency to favor the training of film authors (*auteurs*) over what we would call “craftspersons,” making it especially difficult to theorize a specific pedagogy. As pedagogues of future film directors of the *auteur* kind, the effort of objectification that any teacher needs to make comes with very specific challenges. For every “must” that we try to formulate as part of our educational strategy, there is always its reverse—and the accompanying counter-examples and counter-arguments. For each rule there are, unmistakably, exceptions, and that is due to, of course, the immense variety of expressions that cinema allows for.

As film directing teachers, this specificity determines us to play in a field full of ambiguities and uncertainties, but this is the price to pay—and we must pay it willingly and joyfully!—for the relativism that allows for our practice with the students to remain flexible and truly open to the diversity of their creative individualities.

In my experience, both as a student and as a young teacher, I have seen how this high degree of relativism, which is indeed probably specific to artistic education in general, is not only a marker of freedom and diversity of expression but also generates a great deal of uncertainty and anxiety for the students towards the educational process. Having been used—during the pre-university years most likely—with more concrete evaluation grids and more transparent value-asserting methods, the undergraduates’ first-year contact with studying film directing can come as a shock. Despite the fact that we continue to use the phrase “cinema language,” it is far from being as easily acquired as a foreign language. There are no rules, no grammar, and no A means B equivalents, but rather a multitude of codes and languages. And that is because, especially in the case of arthouse films, the tendency is for every film to create its own code which is communicated to the viewer from the beginning.

Even though they are usually attracted to filmmaking as a form of free expression of the self, students can often be disconcerted by the difficulty of acquiring or creating cinematic codes. They will always be looking for the formulation of rules, and we, the teachers, have the duty to always point out the exceptions.

Looking for a meaningful theoretical paradigm for my inquiries as a first-time film teacher (one of them having to do with the situation I have just described), I have followed my initial intuition of placing the concept of *emotional intelligence* at the center of my research. This juxtaposition of film directing pedagogy, and the concept of “emotional intelligence”—meaning a set of skills for managing your

own emotions and those of others (Goleman, 2016)—has proven highly useful for formulating ideas, observations, and descriptions of the subject. Following are three such ideas that I have taken the opportunity to present to the teachers who participated in the Boovie workshop.

1.1. Honoring the process. On performance/failure anxiety: Me, my expectations from myself and the expectations of others

Managing one's performance/failure anxiety is, without a doubt, a relevant ability in any field of work and for any human activity. In the case of film directing though, we might need to give it even more credit and recognize that it plays a dominant role in the learning process, taking in consideration: (1) the high standards of success that the industry proposes (through a binary that a first-year student might perceive as a given: either the most prestigious awards or anonymity); and (2) a significant legacy of romantic concepts about what it means to be an artist and to make art, especially that of "talent," this mysterious term which we sometimes use to hide what we don't understand about artistic education.

Vargas Maria Llosa wrote in his *Letters to a Young Novelist* that there are no precocious novelists, a statement we can extrapolate to cinema, as there are no (or anyway we should not wish for any) precocious filmmakers or precocious film auteurs.

I believe that only those who 'enter' in literature the way you enter a religious order, determined to dedicate the time, the energy, the hustle to that vocation, fulfills the conditions to truly become a writer and to write a work that outlives him. The other mysterious endowment that we call talent, genius, does not show—at least not among novelists, although there are cases among poets and composers—precociously and lightning-fast (the classic examples being, obviously, Rimbaud and Mozart), but after a long sequence of years of discipline and perseverance. There are no precocious novelists. All the great, admirable novelists were at first apprentice writers, whose talent consolidated slowly, based on steadfastness and conviction. It is very encouraging—isn't it?—for someone who, unlike a Rimbaud, who was a genius teenage poet, has gradually edified his talent. (Llosa, 2010, p. 16)

Taking advantage of this rhetorical "isn't it?," I shall answer in place of the fictional young novelist: Yes, it is indeed encouraging *but* I have seen (and have experienced plenty of it myself) a terrible unrest in students, coming from the impatience to receive confirmations.

The moment we, as pedagogues, accept that these psycho-emotional abilities (the so-called *soft skills* that make possible tolerance towards one's own mistakes, patience for one's own rhythm of development, together with the cultivation of stress and anxiety management skills and resources for **emotional**

resilience) constitute a major component of the students' developmental process, impacting their whole lives and careers, we are not only honoring the process before the result, but we are also offering students, if not a classical evaluation grid, then a grid that they can use to follow and monitor their own progress. Especially in this field of work, students might benefit a lot from approaching their practical exercises as learning experiences in which they do not learn only about filmmaking, but about themselves, observing how they treat themselves and their peers in the process of making a short film.

I considered this point especially important in the context of Boovie, knowing how much work and passion often goes into the completion of the book-trailers that the students make and how overly ambitious many of them can become, sometimes even at the price of enjoyment.

1.2. Screenwriting as a way of questioning of the micro- and macro-narratives: I and the Other whom I create/recreate

In fictional exercises, most often than not, students will write screenplays based on situations from their lives, and even when they don't do so in an obvious way, they still share a lot personal insight. As we say, even when writing with aliens for characters, they will still act and speak as people do—the people the author knows. Thus, a lot resurfaces of the students' intimate beliefs about the world (the macro-narratives) and about themselves and the others (the micro-narratives), which can also be seen as an essential element in both their socio-emotional and professional development. As Johnathan Haidt shows in *The Righteous Mind* (2016), it is one's micro-narratives that drive one to certain macro-narratives (ideological views).

What psychologists sometimes describe as “emotional immaturity” is also characterized by a limited capacity of putting yourself into another person's place (Botton, 2020), and this is exactly one of the essential tools to hone as a screenwriter or a film director to enable you to develop complex characters and to consider multiple perspectives in the creative process.

Learning screenwriting through practice and receiving the viewers' (this being the teachers, classmates, friends) responses to their visual narrations, students have the chance to step back from, to question or analyze personal narratives. This is an especially valuable opportunity for growth (for example, as a way **to train empathy**) on which, again, their professional development also highly relies.

As an example, we often see in a student screenplay about a couple breaking up how the author only supports the perspective of one character (often oversimplifying the opposite gender character's perspective), or in ones about parents and children how the parents are mostly the aggressors and the adult

children are exclusively victims (and I don't mean by choice, such as in stories of abuse, but a tendency to vilify characters without taking their perspective into account).

Developing these skills, with the adequate guidance of a teacher who gently brings into question these aspects of the students' screenplays, also constitutes an essential starting point in questioning representations in an extended sense, such as the representation of *otherness*, of social categories, and identities that the student-author does not belong to.

1.3. Working with actors, a semiotics of empathy: I and a real Other whom I bring into my storytelling

Probably the most common (and obvious) ground where personal and professional abilities meet in a film director's job is working with the actors. As Judith Weston proves in her book *Directing Actors* (1999), learning how to work with actors also means learning how to recognize emotions and name them, what real listening looks like, and to be able to distinguish both conceptually and verbally *feelings* from *thoughts*, *actions*, *needs*, *judgements*, gaining what we could call a real "grammar of living," which is needed to recreate the complexity of a real experience into a convincing performance.

This arsenal of instruments, this grammar, is incredibly similar to what psychologists such as Marshall B. Rosenberg in *Nonviolent Communication, A Language of Life* (2003), are describing as essential for good relationships with our peers. For example, a key element in nonviolent communication is the ability to deconstruct our often judgement-infused everyday language and translate it into human needs (ours and the others') in order to be able to respond to others with empathy and care (Rosenberg, 2003). The two visions, while apparently belonging to different fields of study, have an inspiring way of coming together into ideas such as this: you cannot tell anyone, not even to an actor, and that is still a common myth that even film professionals perpetuate, what (or who) to be, but you can, with the right words, ask them what you need them to do (in terms of actions).

Bringing this kind of perspective on language and human relationships from psychology into working with actors in film (as I am doing by bringing together Rosenberg and Weston, just to name the two) surpasses the goal of efficiency in teaching directors-to-be, making it for an even more complex educational goal, namely to introduce future professionals to a work ethic based on empathy and respect. I believe that, for far too long, our profession has been haunted by toxic mythical images of the film director as the figure who needs to make other people obey by means of domination. We as educators do have

an impact on industry practices through our students. And if we want to attract more pre-university teachers into pedagogy through filmmaking, we must be able to help them see film teamwork as an opportunity for social skills and emotional intelligence development, and not as an instance of reinforcing domination-based dynamics through an authoritarian and hierarchal model that they too could hold as a prejudice against the film industry and, therefore, against film as an educational tool.

Another key instrument in practicing film directing can be spontaneity—the ability to adapt to the unpredictable, to make changes, in this case, without completely letting go of your initial vision and the artistic intentions you started with. When you work with actors, you work with “living matter” (what can be more unpredictable than that?), but the only way you can benefit from it during your creative process is if you can make yourself stay *present in the moment* while working with it. Anxiety tends to be its greatest enemy, disconnecting us from our bodily sensations, from other people’s current communication with us, and sending us either in a (sometimes traumatic) past that we project into the present, or into a future that we foresee negatively (Rosenberg, 2003).

But being present, or “mindful”, or “grounded”—as a skill for life and creation, as an advantage for diffusing conflict and having rich interpersonal connections—is more than a poetical metaphor or a Buddhist concept. It is a skill that specialists such as Rosenberg tell us that we can learn to maximize. And film education especially can be an extremely useful resource here, as a lot of it has to do (as I will show next) with training the capacity to name sensations and perceptions, to differentiate them from interpretations, judgements or intertextual references, and, in general, to train our attention and perceptiveness.

II. Sorin Botoșeneanu, a model for pedagogical practice

In the second part of our presentation, we talked to the teachers about the activities of UNATC’s *Sorin Botoșeneanu Center for Pedagogy and Visual Studies*, such as film workshops for students and the *Arhiva Activă* (Active Archive) project, as well as the figure that inspired it, the professor at the Faculty of Film who trained and shaped us through his very special way of being and teaching, managing to build a community before he left us.

Even though our attachment to “Boto” (as students and teachers alike called him) is not making the very much anti-romantic effort of creating more utilitarian descriptions of his particular pedagogical style any easier (he had an authenticity and an emotional generosity that made even the word “methodology” sound too stiff in the context of his personality), we need to try it anyway because,

as he was saying himself, “you cannot use what you cannot put in words.” (As a fun fact, I have found that this statement is heavily supported by neuropsychologist’s Lisa Feldman Barrett’s work (2017) on emotional constructivism theory.)

So, without the claim of giving an exhaustive description—not even close!—these are some ideas and concepts that I have tried to present briefly to the teachers at the Boovie workshop.

II. 1. To see v. to look: “observational” and “unpacking” exercises

I started by describing Boto’s practice at “Let’s Go Digital!” filmmaking workshop for teenagers hosted by TIFF (Transylvania International Film Festival in Cluj-Napoca, Romania) and the “Visual Forms and Structures” course for first-year students at UNATC’s Faculty of Film.

In an “observational” exercise, the high school or the film student is shooting a 30-second or one-minute unstaged video, usually outdoors, in the streets. Then, together with the trainers or the teacher and the other students or participants, the student is gently guided through a detailed analysis of what he or she sees in the images. They name all the elements contained in the images (the “unpacking”) from the background to the foreground, and we talk about the rhythmical relation between the action contained in the images and their choice of moment to start the recording and end the recording, and also about their choices of positioning themselves with the camera. In the process of naming the elements in the pictures, there is a conscious focus on using a vocabulary that describes concrete characteristics of the objects, aspects that we can all agree on and that we perceive more or less the same, similar to an anthropological analysis, as opposed to metaphorical or symbolical signifiers or value judgements (*good/bad, beautiful/ugly*, etc.).

This approach serves multiple educational purposes. On one hand, as far as teaching *for* film is concerned, this type of “reading” of the images helps us bring students closer to the habit of watching out for a certain concreteness of things, a matter-of-factness that is essential for us in film creation.

At this point, I stopped and explained to our audience something that I thought could be especially valuable in the context of Boovie. I told the teachers, some of whom had been coordinating teams of students who worked on book-trailers in the competition, that as a member of the jury for the last two editions (I must have watched around 600 book-trailers in total), I have noticed a characteristic that was differentiating book-trailers that were more convincing as film objects from those that were still charming in their own way, but were a little less credible. And this had to do precisely with this question of matter-of-

factness. I took this opportunity to emphasize that a certain type of symbolism and convention that can work in theater does not produce the same effect in film. Pointing to a worn-out desk chair that was in the room, I argued that such an object could almost never work in a film medium as a throne to a medieval king. The more convincing book-trailers seem to be made with this matter-of-factness assumption in mind.

Therefore, this “neutralized” vocabulary constitutes an essential premise for creation in our field of work. (This is so self-evident to practitioners we sometimes forget that it can be a thing of novelty for first-time encounters with filmmaking, and a lot of the candor and humor of the book-trailers originate from this.)

On the other hand, the discussions in the observational exercises are far from having a “neutering” effect. As a matter of fact, these talks were whetting the appetite for a particular sensibility, whose final goal was creation and not destruction—as the term “deconstruction” can sometimes suggest. This echoes Susan Sontag’s view in *Against Interpretation* (2016), as she tries to warn us that a certain tradition of hermeneutics in art is taking away from us a much more unmediated, sensory (and even erotic, she says) rapport both to art and our surrounding reality, and also to some extent André Bazin’s love for realism as a love for things and humans “just the way they are,” unaltered by the assumptions and bias of an overly-aestheticizing film director (2014). The vision that Boto was imparting to undergraduates and high school students also came in the form of a humanist love for people and the world, which supported a curious, benevolent perspective filled with empathy.

By this, the analysis of the students’ exercises went very much beyond a mere technical necessity for film education. Through the emphasis on socio-emotional growth, the practice of “observational” and creative “unpacking” has become a real practice of pedagogy *through* film.

II. 2. Boto as a postmodern pedagogue: creating a learning community

Iulia Voicu and I have also considered relevant to tell the teachers a little bit about the learning atmosphere that Sorin Botoșeneanu cultivated around him.

A nonconformist spirit, Boto had turned his office into a place of encounters, a welcoming space with music, screenings, books, tea, coffee, and all sorts of *objets trouvés*, an interior design that, just like his relationship with the students, did not mirror the classical hierarchy in the classroom. Instead of a strict schedule and a teacher-desk / student-desk set-up, his office was accommodating a constant flow of students and sometimes teachers and PhD candidates who felt

it was a place where freedom reigned, a place of discussions and debates, but also fun and enjoyment. From strategizing for institutional betterment, informal group therapy to taking collective delight in audiovisual products (from *high art* canonical films and paintings, to *manele* [Romanian turbo folk] and pop music videos), we could indeed say that what we had was a real *learning community*.

The horizontal pedagogy that Boto practiced was manifested through an egalitarian attitude towards the students. Self-irony and humor, instead of an authoritarian formalism, were the qualities that strengthened the students' respect and admiration for him. Many people who knew Boto talk about the way he made them feel: *seen and heard*. Boto was what you would call a good listener, honestly interested in getting to know each of his students, and this was a great boost for their self-esteem, a boost they often craved for in the educational process.

Boto's teaching style was what Louis Cozolino called *teaching based on secure attachment* (2017).

Conclusions

After the presentation, I kept asking myself to what extent I managed to reach the teachers and whether I managed to talk from a common enough ground, afraid I had used too much specialized vocabulary and filmmaking experiences that were perhaps too foreign to them. From their feedback during the presentation and the discussion that followed it, I could tell that at least some of them resonated with my talk, culminating in one of the teachers coming to us at the end with the following analogy: "pedagogy as film directing." Indeed, even in my thesis, a great deal of skills I highlight as skills we aim to encourage in film directing students are the same ones we should aim to encourage in film directing teachers. As I try to prove in my research, both professions—film directing and teaching—can benefit a lot from learning to be more *present*.

My question now is should the models of practices of pedagogy through film that come from us, UNATC and Sorin Botoșeneanu Center, be conceptually translated into a more classical pedagogical paradigm, in order to appear more familiar to the Romanian pre-university system of education? Or, on the contrary, should film education to remain more of an *enfant terrible*, characterized by a rather subversive and, as Alain Bergala (2016) calls it, an "anti-didacticist" spirit?

And, as with most questions that impose binary thinking, the answer is, most probably, both.

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