

## In Search of My Voice: From *Stella Dallas* to *Still Walking*

LINGWEI WANG

Graduate School of Education, Kyoto University

*This paper purposes to explore how to find 'my' voice unknown to 'myself' through comparison between two films, Stella Dallas and Still Walking. The paper focuses on their last scene. From the analysis, I reveal that Stella Dallas is intended to be less realistic than Still Walking, thus readers tend to care for Stella's voice rather than 'my' voice. In the contrast, the readers of Still Walking are more likely to think of 'my' voice. The latter way of film reading suggests a possibility to explore my 'self-unknown' voice through introspection.*

### INTRODUCTION

The paper aims to continue the discussion of 'unknownness' in Cavell's reading of *Stella Dallas*, a film made in 1937 and directed by King Vidor. In previous discussion, the dimension is ignored that 'I' should find 'my' voice unknown to 'myself' when considering Stella as a star instead of an ordinary person. However, the possibility of approaching the ignored issue is nearly closed to us readers if we merely concentrate on the film *Stella Dallas* because it provides us a sense of unreality, which makes the story far from us.

To bring forward the question of finding my 'self-unknown' voice, I shall first introduce another film, *Still Walking* and conduct a comparison between the two films' last scenes. Second, I shall mention that Kore-eda, the director of *Still Walking*, considers the film as a television drama and the reason why he thinks so. I shall modelize Kore-eda's understanding of film and television and then use the model to reanalyze the two films. The final section will draw some implications out of the comparison conducted in the previous sections, and finally return to the discussion of 'unknownness' while commenting on Paul Standish's and Naoko Saito's interpretation.

### HOW TO END THE FILM

First, I shall give brief introduction of *Stella Dallas* and *Still Walking*. *Stella Dallas* is one of the Hollywood melodramas that were discussed by Cavell in his book *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman*. The film is typically thought as the story of a self-sacrificing mother though Cavell claims that this is a story of 'self-liberation and self-empowering' (Cavell, 1996, p. 36). *Still Walking* is a family drama about grown children visiting their elderly parents. The family have gathered to commemorate the death of the eldest son as well. The film is something multifaceted but according to the director, it is a portrait of a typical dysfunctional family, as he says, 'family is irreplaceable but annoying' (Kore-eda, 2016, p. 210).

This section will pay attention to two different ways to end the story in *Stella Dallas* and *Still Walking*. The former film ends up making Stella walk towards us joyfully while the latter one finishes up with the family's receding backs.

In the last scene of *Stella Dallas*, as Cavell indicates, 'Stella turns to walk towards us, her gaze,

transforming itself, looms towards us' (Cavell, 1996, p. 216). Cavell firstly focuses on what Stella is walking away from, and points out that she has 'given up the idea of partaking of life with a man' and Laura (p. 218), and then connects Stella's leaving to Nora's exit in *A Doll's House* as a 'continuation' (p. 219), which means that Nora's future is hard to imagine while Stella has a future. Stella's walking towards us may account for the different expectation of the two women's futures in Cavell's consideration. He says,

Her walk toward us, as if the screen becomes her gaze, is allegorized as the presenting or creating of a star, or as the interpretation of stardom...This star, call her Barbara Stanwyck, is without obvious beauty or glamour...But she has a future...because she is presented here as a star (the camera showing her that particular insatiable interest in her every action and reaction), which entails the promise of return, of unpredictable reincarnation. (ibid.)

From above it can be inferred that *Stella Dallas* is a story about a star's birth in Cavell's reading of the last scene. It is important to notice that Stella is presented here as a star rather than an ordinary person. She is too different to be taken as a part of our normal selves. Stella and her voice, in that sense, are external to most of us.

Let us move to *Still Walking*. We shall first consider the last sequence in which Ryota's parents appear. After saying goodbye to their son Ryota, his wife and the little boy, they return home on the mountain road. They are talking but the camera does not allow us know their facial expressions. With climbing up step by step, they eventually disappear only leaving the mountain steps on the screen. It suggests that the aging parents will leave Ryota and go to the paradise one day. What's more, in the last sequence of the film, we are told the elderly parents both soon died and Ryota goes home with his new family after visiting his parents' grave. We can first see their face towards us for a few seconds when they are talking, but then the camera panoramas and stops to focus on the family's back and the long road before them.

Ryota and his family also have a future, hinted by the long road before them. But unlike in *Stella Dallas*, facial information is unshown in *Still Walking*. So we can only guess based on our experience. Instead of Ryota and his family's future, we actually keep thinking about our past, present and future when the story ends.

From above, it is inferred that when Stella walks towards us, we start to imagine a future for her; but when Ryota and his family walk away, we think about us more than the family slowly disappearing on the screen. To get further understanding of the difference, I shall introduce a comparative perspective in the next section. Before the discussion it is necessary to inform that Koro-eda, *Still Walking's* director, started his career in the television industry before making films and the experience had and still has a great influence upon him.

## A FILM OR A TELEVISION DRAMA

It is obvious that the two films are in different styles, and the nationality, we may say, explains the difference in the way of film expression. Especially because the former is labelled as a Hollywood melodrama and the latter is usually introduced as a Japanese family drama. However, Kore-eda's thinking of what television should be, as a kind of media, may offer us another perspective to reread *Stella Dallas* and *Still Walking*. First, let us see what Kore-eda says about

his film *Still Walking*.

In his autobiography, Kore-eda mentions, ‘If someone criticizes *Still Walking* for it being more like a TV drama than a film, I won’t object at all’ (Kore-eda, 2016, p. 210). Kore-eda worked for television before embarking on a career as a film director. He admits his experience in the television industry has had a great influence on him by saying ‘the DNA of television has been already inside my body’ (ibid.) and ‘I’m a television writer instead of a film producer in nature’ (ibid.). Undoubtedly, *Still Walking* is imaged and designed to be like a TV drama by Kore-eda.

Here comes the question: What does Kore-eda consider the difference between film and television? During an interview by undergraduate students in Sophia University, Kore-eda was asked the same question and answered in his friend Konno’s words (Kore-eda, 2010, p. 17). He indicates that when one sees a film in the darkness, he or she is completely immersed in the story for two or three hours and separated from daily life (p. 20). In contrast, he says, ‘television is a medium focusing on ordinary everyday life, compared to film which always depicts extraordinary things’ (ibid.). Furthermore, he adds, ‘the television-styled work also makes what surrounds it also become a part of the work itself’ (ibid.).

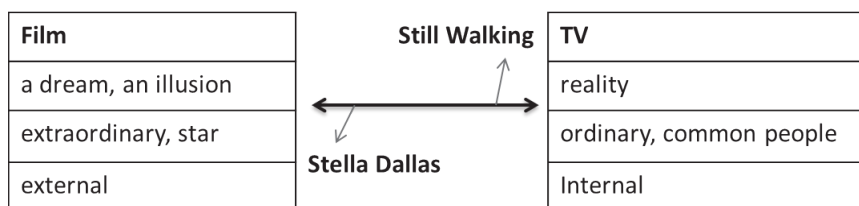


Chart 1 A comparison between Film and TV

The discussion above can be organized in Chart 1. *Still Walking*, as has been said, is obviously a television-styled work, and, in contrast, *Stella Dallas* may be considered as a film-styled work for most readers.

Let us return back to the discussion of the two films. *Stella Dallas* mainly tells us a story of an unusual woman. She is quite different from the surrounding people in the film to be understood. More importantly, Stella also seems different from most of the film’s target audience, so that her true voice may be misunderstood by those out of the story as well. In brief, her behaviour is not only unusual and awkward to her surroundings in the film, but also far from reality.

In *Still Walking*, in contrast, everything is deliberately designed to be realistic though it is a fictional work. Some conversations come from the actors’ personal experience (Kore-eda, 2016, pp. 197-198). The word ‘futsu’, which means ‘as usual’ in English, repeats in the film. Such repetition means that the fictional story displayed on the screen is also happening to ordinary families right now. Recognizing the voices on the screen is not a matter of recognizing the voice of others but of finding my voice, for the story in *Still Walking* is so close to us readers that we are unable to draw a line between fiction and reality.

However, it is time to pause and note that it is relative to readers as to which one is more like a television drama and which more close to their daily life. As has been analysed, *Still Walking* is designed to be more realistic than *Stella Dallas*. But, for example, one may argue that *Stella Dallas* is the more realistic one because of the appearance of the mother’s gaze of Stella; one may

also argue that in *Still Walking* the grandmother's behaviour seems a little difficult to understand. Readers are free to decide as they like and I do not mean that the former one *must* be a film-styled work and the latter *must* be regarded as a television-styled work. I emphasize the necessity to pay attention to the relation between the story and the reader, and to ask whether the reader is experiencing a story of self or others.

## VOICE AND UNKNOWNNESS

The analysis of *Stella Dallas* and *Still Walking* offers us some implications on the discussion of voice, if we pay attention to the relation between the voice represented on the screen and its reader. It gives us two ways to read a film and both are mentioned in Cavell's reading of *Stella Dallas*. If we consider the voice in the story as something external to us, we will be given a chance to recognize the voice of others, which Standish underlines in his interpretation of Cavell's reading of *Stella Dallas* (Standish, 2004, p. 99). Standish regards Stella as a star and the story of Stella as a process of approaching her voice.

In contrast, Saito criticizes Standish that his interpretation 'obscures the process of the moment of the birth of 'my' voice in resistance to the conforming force of 'our' voice' (Saito, 2004, p. 84). Her emphasis on 'search for the mother's gaze' (Cavell, 1996, p. 210) on the one hand, is based on her interpretation of Cavell's reading; on the other hand, she considers Stella's voice as 'my' voice instead of her 'voice' and Stella as an ordinary mother who loves her child instead of a star.

However, Saito limits her discussion to the topic of a voice's birth without mentioning other types of voice, especially the lost and 'self-unknown' voice inside our body. Though it may sound a little odd that one may lose and become unknown to one's own voice, it happens to us every time we get used to and even comfortable with those daily routines that we found troublesome at first. It also happens to us when we feel it is enjoyable and natural to behave as normal even though we used to think what was called the normal behavior ridiculous. In such circumstances, how can one realize the voiceless state in his or her self and revive one's lost voice?

One of the possible answers can be found in the reading a story about 'I' rather than him or her. It is metaphor of introspection. In the process of confronting 'myself' on a screen, one is given an opportunity to recognize the self-unknown voice and start again.

## CONCLUSION

The attempt to bring Kore-eda's consideration about television and film into the discussion of the voice gives us the following implications. First, the paper clarifies that there are two ways of reading a film: one is to view it as a dream quite far from us; the other is to consider the story as one version of daily life. In the former way, the reader's imagination is provoked by the film and he or she will try to understand this. In the latter one, the reader pictures his or her own life through the film. Second, as for education, one gets education not only when one communicates and participates with others, but also when one introspects and recognizes 'my' unknown voice. Education is generally defined as a communication process between learners and educators. Therefore, getting education usually means joining a language community and

the learner tends to express in the voice of others instead of 'mine'. To find 'my' unknown voice, every learner should be given more opportunities to face 'myself' and 'my' daily life.

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