

Instruction without Directness: Notes on Kore-eda's *Maborosi*

GENTA YAMAMOTO

Graduate School of Education, Kyoto University

*This article seeks to explore how one's transformation can be supported by the other through interpreting a film, *Maborosi* by Hirokazu Kore-eda. The other can let one acknowledge one's meaning of life or find one's own voice in his or her own way by instructing without directness. This article concludes that this instruction can be seen as a sort of education between the one and the other, and furthermore, when referencing to Cavell and Nancy's philosophy of film, it is also possible to say that the film has a potential to serve an educational role.*

INTRODUCTION

Let me begin by introducing an outline of *Maborosi* (1995), the film directed by Hirokazu Kore-eda.¹ This film is a story of a young woman, Yumiko. The film opens with a short scene where, in her dream, she remembers the day in her childhood when she could not stop her grandmother from leaving home. Her family were living together, but her grandmother had dementia and used to go outside without having any money. One day, her grandmother did it again and Yumiko asked her grandmother to come back home together, but her grandmother persistently refused her request and finally went missing. After that, her grandmother never came back home, so she regrets the loss of her grandmother even now and often has a nightmare about it.

When she awakes from her dream, she is in bed with her first husband, Ikuo. The first part of the film starts from here, and it describes her married life with him. The couple have known each other since their childhood, and to Yumiko, Ikuo has been always a humane person who has respected her as a person after her marriage as well. In contrast to her childhood, her new married life with him seems joyful for her. But suddenly, one day, at midnight, she hears from the police that Ikuo has thrown himself in front of a train. She is very confused and searches for the reason for his suicide many times, but she still cannot understand why he did this. Just as with her grandmother's loss, now by losing him, she gets depressed.

Time passes and, six years later, Yumiko gets married to her second husband, Tamio and decides to move from Osaka to Ishikawa. The latter part of this film shows her new married life with him. Tamio has lost his wife before but has a daughter. Yumiko, Tamio, their two children and Tamio's father begin to live together. She gradually establishes a new life with her family; however, she cannot stop thinking about the reason for Ikuo's death. One day in the winter, she suddenly leaves home and wanders around her village alone. Tamio did not know she had gone, so he becomes worried and goes to look for her. While driving at the seaside, he finds that her standing in front of someone's coffin cremated there and crying within her flashback to Ikuo's death. She asks him why Ikuo committed suicide, and he responds to her question in an unfamiliar way (this will be discussed later). Then, something happens in her mind, and she slowly leaves the seaside. After time has passed and seasons are changed from the winter to the spring, she decides to take a step forward a little more. The film ends here.

In this article, our primary concern is, especially in the last scene, how Tamio responds to Yumiko's question. This is because that his words do not seem easy for us to understand. To clarify this issue I first note the conversation between Tamio and Yumiko in the last scene.

(Yumiko) I just ... I just don't understand ... Why did he kill himself...? Why he was walking along the tracks...? Once I start thinking about it... I can't stop... Why...do you think he did it?

(Tamio) He (Tamio's father; *added by the quoter*) said that sea calls you. Dad used to go out to sea. He says when he was out alone, he used to see a beautiful light, shimmering in the distance, calling him. I think it can happen to anyone.

What does Tamio want to say to Yumiko? She might ask him about the reason for Ikuo's death, but he does not give any reasons directly and is just talking about his own father's story. Before discussing the role of his words, it must be revealed that how one's words can contribute to the other's transformation. In the next section, I will explain it by referencing Cavell's philosophy.

A ROLE OF THE OTHER

Cavell, in his *Contesting Tears* (1996), describes a role of the other who influences one's transformation, through interpreting a film, *Gaslight* (1944). Here again, let me begin by explaining the story briefly. This film is the story of a woman, Paula. She starts married life with her husband, Gregory, but soon after their marriage, she begins not to control herself well: losing her brooch or stealing his watch. Though she does not believe that there is something wrong, Gregory complains to her and furthermore confines her in their house. She gradually loses her confidence as a wife and finally become mentally ill. However, at that time, she encounters a young inspector, Brian, and he offers to investigate her situation. As a result, it is revealed that everything Gregory said to her is a lie; in fact, he secretly stole her brooch or deliberately put his watch into her place. The truth is the opposite: she has not become mad at all. In the last chapter of this film, Paula and Brian struggle against Gregory, and Paula achieves her separation from him. The film ends in the scene where we are given an expectation that Paula is going to start new life with Brian.

On Cavell's reading, it is Brian who supports Paula's transformation. Cavell specifically explains it: he is "bringing her back from strangulation, reintroducing her to language" and "returns her to her voice," so one can call him "her voice teacher" (Cavell, 1996, p. 58). His words imply that she will narrate her own life history once more.

Is it possible for us to find the same structure in *Maborosi*? As I have already mentioned, in this film, the most crucial person who can let Yumiko transform her life is her second husband, Tamio. This is true, but it should be also noticed here that there are the other people who have the same role. For example, a woman fisher or a neighbor of Yumiko, Tome-san, plays the role.

One day, Yumiko happens to meet Tome-san and asks her to fish for some crabs. It is a mild morning, but just after her going fishing, the weather gets rapidly worse. Tome-san does not appear even after dark, so Yumiko regrets having asked her to do it. At this moment, someone taps at the entrance door in Yumiko family's house, and she gets a *déjà vu*, which means she remembers the moment when once before at midnight a policeman came to her apartment to tell her of Ikuo's death. However, in spite of her bad feeling about Tome-san's disappearance, the person at the door is Tome-san. She is, happily, alive. Consequently, through this experience, Yumiko can acknowledge

a new possibility in relating to the accidents in another's life. To rephrase this point: on the one hand, indeed, Ikuo disappeared during the day and missed at night, yet on the other hand, it is also true that Tome-san disappeared in the half-light of the day but did come back at night. Yumiko can thus embrace the contingency of human being and therefore, she is able to acknowledge her new voice and to narrate her life history with the other once again.²

The role of the other is necessary for Yumiko to transform her own life, but it should be also noted here that one must not confuse this role of the other as support, help or gift accompanied by some sort of conformity, dependence, or obedience. What is the difference between them? How can we say that the other's role is nothing like, for example, Gregory's manipulative attitude toward Paula? The difference can be precisely distinguished when I discuss the case of Tamio. Through an analysis of their conversation, I will continue to discuss this question in the next section.

INDIRECT INSTRUCTION

"Why do you think Ikuo killed himself?" Yumiko asks Tamio. He does not answer by suggesting a reason directly, but instead, he tells a story that he heard from his father. Of course, Yumiko wants to understand and recognise the causality of Ikuo's death, but Tamio seems to avoid giving an answer. Why does he attempt to divert her question? This is because he knows that she is not able to reach the answer to the question in a correct way. There is no answer anywhere, and thus, no matter how much she feels driven to do it, her brooding must be avoided.

Nevertheless, what is interesting for me is that he just tells a story. How can his words contribute to her transformation? Indeed, his words seem to discourage her from this questioning or doubting attitude as a form of acceptance, but that's not enough. There must be a positive sense in Tamio's words. I suggest here that there are two significant points in his words: first, by introducing a story by way of a motif or an example, he can create a space in her mind where she will narrate Ikuo's death in the sense of not reasoning it, but acknowledging it; and secondly, by talking about his death indirectly, he can encourage her to be responsible for her own voice in narrating the past.

Let me explain the first point. Tamio says that his father used to see "a beautiful light, shimmering in the distance, calling him." As you might have already noticed, this father's story reminds Yumiko that Ikuo had thrown himself into the light of the train's headlights in the night. In other words, this story is a metaphor for the way in which every human being may be tempted by a great mystery when his or her sense of meaning is entirely lost.³ However, the most important point is that, by taking a style of storytelling, he requires her to acknowledge Ikuo's death just as an accidental event, or if you like, just as a simple fact or phenomenon. Hence, in this sense, he can instruct her in order for her not to seek to understand the causality of his death but for her to simply acknowledge the event.

However, there remains the question: Why does he not tell her the story or explanation of Ikuo's death directly? would it be more effective for Yumiko to know it directly? Clearly, Tamio disagrees with the idea of directness (or agrees with indirectness), but this is not only because the reason of Ikuo's death is lacking. Rather, this is also because it is through this tactic that Tamio lets her find her own voice. This means that it is only by her own effort that she can succeed in acknowledging Ikuo's death. Tamio's indirect instruction remains open the space for her own accomplishment. This is the second point that I am focusing on.

"I think it can happen to anyone." This is Tamio's final response to Yumiko. Of course, there

might be multiple interpretations of this comment, but I want to take an interpretation from the two points of view given in this section. First, “It can happen to anyone,” he says. This means that Ikuo’s death is an event that she only accidentally happens to encounter. Second, “I think,” he also says. This means that, in the same way as him, she also has to acknowledge Ikuo’s death in her own words. This comment might contain all the meanings which he wants to teach her.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper is to think of the role of the other as a supporter of one’s transformation. In the film *Maborosi*, Tamio can be seen as a key person who contributes to Yumiko’s transformation from the past to the future. Especially in the last scene of this film, within Tamio’s words, there are two roles which contribute to her transformation: first by presenting his father’s story to her, he lets her acknowledge Ikuo’s death simply as just as an event; and second, by keeping this instruction indirect, he lets her acknowledge it in her own way. In conclusion, this acknowledgement can be seen as an education that enables her to become aware of her own voice. If I can borrow Cavell’s expression, Tamio can be seen as a “her voice teacher.”

In addition, as I have already mentioned, this sort of education should not be seen as conformity, dependence, or obedience. The instruction by the other might be necessary, but this role must be distinguished from these sorts of oppression. In a positive sense, education as acknowledgement must keep a distance from one’s transformation, or it must retain the space for the other’s voice.

Emphasizing this suggestion, it seems to me to be interesting to refer to the Cavell and Jean-Luc Nancy’s scholar Rugo’s idea of “patience.” When we usually use the word “patience,” we understand it to mean in some way “being oppressed.” However, in his book, *Philosophy and the Patience of Film in Cavell and Nancy* (2016), patience is explained by him in another way as follows:

Thinking does not begin with doubt, but with patience, a tension that is not the prudence of wisdom, but the conduct of the one who joyfully lets oneself be carried into the world again and again. Patience is wanting more of what has first summoned, moved and attracted us. It is a power to endure the force of what comes, to receive it not in order to absorb it or counter it, but so that by that force we can respond again and again and respond with “More, more.” (p. 172)

Maborosi is the film which shows us Yumiko’s “patience” through Tamio’s instruction. “Film shows us the road to thinking as letting things be,” he adds (p. 180). According to Rugo, Cavell and Nancy, it is possible to say that the film can be an educator of “patience” for us. If that is the case, one might be able to ask how we are educated through film, but having said that, this is a future question for us.

NOTES

1. The film *Maborosi* has its original novel named *Maboroshi no Hikari* (1978) written by Teru Miyamoto.
2. This has been already mentioned by Shoji Ohkohchi on “Commentary” in *Maboroshi no Hikari* (1983). He explains that Tome-san “is described in contrast to the destiny of vulnerable creature. In between light and shade, an illusionary light is shining against a background of darkness.” (p. 170 [my translation]).
3. Tomio says to Yumiko, “A human being, when losing vitality, wants to die” in the novel (Miyamoto, 1983, p. 78 [my translation]).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This article is the product of the International Collaborative Course in London from December 9 to 11, 2019.

REFERENCES

- Cavell, S. (1996) *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
- Kore-eda, H. (dir.), Esumi, M. (Perf.) (1995) *Maborosi* [DVD] (Cinequanon).
- Miyamoto, T. (1978) Maboroshi no Hikari, *Shinchô*, 75 (8), pp. 6-38.
- Miyamoto, T. (1983) *Maboroshi no Hikari [Illusory Light]* (pbk. ed.) (Tokyo: Shinchôsha).
- Ohkouchi, S. (1983) Kaisetsu [Commentary], in: *Maboroshi no Hikari* (pbk. ed.), Miyamoto, T. (Tokyo: Shinchôsha), pp. 162-171.
- Rugo, D. (2016) *Philosophy and the Patience of Film in Cavell and Nancy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan).