

Melodrama after Sentiment

ABSTRACT

It has been almost forty years since Peter Brooks released his pathbreaking and influential book, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, and the Mode of Excess* (1975). Over these decades, melodrama has not only undergone critical rehabilitation; it has also become a key medium-crossing genre, and perhaps the most important category for linking twentieth-century cinema with the century that came before. But melodrama's mode of excess has deep connections with a still earlier *sentimental* mode that features emotion mediated by reciprocal sympathy. The sentimental, it can be demonstrated, both set the conditions for melodrama's emergence around the time of the French Revolution and continued to co-exist with melodrama through nineteenth-century fiction and into the age of cinema. What happens to Brooks's story when melodrama's manichaeic extremes of character, gesture, and style are understood to evolve from, and with, the mixed and moderating effects of "putting oneself in the place of the other"? The paper concludes with a close look at D.W. Griffith's celebrated refashioning of Dickens in the formative years of Hollywood's "classical narrative system."