

Thought on Display in the Land of Feeling: Griffith and Dickens

My talk looks at the emotionally charged scenes of Charles Dickens and his disciple D. W. Griffith, examining the unexpectedly prominent role that *thinking* plays in these scenes. In a departure from the affective economy of the melodramatic stage, Dickens and Griffith seem to believe that feeling is intensified by its involvement with the vagaries of conscious thought. In scenes from *Oliver Twist* and the *Christmas Books*, passion is punctuated by strange fits of reflection. As characters fall into desperate straits, their mental energies blaze: their minds wander, their lives flash before their eyes, and the pressures of the moment become a riddle demanding an answer. It is hard to sift thought from feeling; ideas are awash in affect, and feelings proceed in relentless, Lockean sequence. Likewise in Griffith's early Biograph pictures, the intensities of feeling are culminations of a narrative logic, and Griffith gives expression to these in ways that have less to do with the sublimity of melodrama than with the emerging cinema of consciousness.

In the context of our symposium, I'd like to ask how these amalgamated scenes of thought and feeling speak to Brian Massumi's theory of autonomous affect. For Massumi (as I understand him), the intensity we feel is quite independent of thought, language, and narrative, of "function and meaning" (28). It overflows its occasion, or rather it has no occasion. The personal and social conditions of our lives neither produce affect nor explain it. Presumably Massumi would view Dickens and Griffith's conflation of feeling with consciousness as a mistake, a stillborn emotionalism that represents not intensity but the "capture and closure" of intensity, the collapse of incipient possibility. But it seems to me that the celebrated intensities of Griffith and Dickens draw so much of their energy from narrative and circumstance that I can't say what it would even mean to unbind these things, what it would mean, in a sense, to restore affect to the body. I'd like to consider whether we can and why we should.