Égaliberté and Citizenship: 
Born Yesterday

The question of a political cinema

What kind of an analysis can I be said to be undertaking in this book? What kind of project is being proposed? Looking back at the chapters on On the Waterfront and Mr Smith Goes to Washington can it be said that I am trying to find ways of applying political theories, so that some concepts are borrowed from Ernesto Laclau and applied to On the Waterfront while others are gathered from Claude Lefort and applied to Mr Smith? And so will it come to pass in this current chapter that some concepts will be gleaned from Étienne Balibar and applied to George Cukor’s Born Yesterday? In other words, am I merely using these films for illustrative purposes so that, for example, On the Waterfront can be said to illustrate some of Laclau’s theories, while Mr Smith illustrates Lefort’s and Born Yesterday illustrates Balibar’s? To such questions I can only answer ‘Yes’.

The criticism that will follow from such an admission is that my analyses here tell us something about political theory – and it might also be claimed that there is nothing wrong with that per se. But, above all else, these analyses tell us very little about films or cinema, so that if this book purports to be about films or cinema then it cannot make good on that claim. If the analyses here are merely using films to illustrate a set of political theories, then they might tell us something about those political theories, but they can do little to show what is unique or specific to cinema on those grounds. The book might then be one that is about theories of politics, yet it could hardly be called a book which deals with a politics of cinema.
Naturally, I will need to counter such potential criticisms, and I would want to claim that my analyses here tell us a great deal about cinema. The trouble my own conception of a politics of cinema will necessarily rub up against is that, for film studies, any politics of cinema has always required close attention to cinema’s formal properties. Any politics of cinema, according to such arguments, must be formally challenging: a politics is something which pushes against the normal or normalizing practices of dominant cinema. Thus, a politics of cinema is typically one which relies on cinema’s formal properties; formal analysis is essential for a politics of cinema.

As a result of this widely accepted conception of a politics of cinema, for a film to qualify as one which pursues a politics of cinema, it must foreground cinema’s formal properties. If a film tries to hide the formal properties of cinema by relying on techniques like continuity editing or modes of representation that seem to offer a transparent window on the world, then that film will be unable to provide anything of political value. We came across several modes of this approach in Chapters 2 and 3: for a film to be political it must demonstrate contradiction or alienation, or it must renounce appeals to mere pleasure (in favour of jouissance or unpleasure). And what is also required is an analysis by someone who possesses an ‘informed gaze’: what is needed is a mode of ‘symptomatic reading’ whereby the hidden layers and meanings of a film’s formal qualities are read and interpreted.

Perhaps another example of such a mode of analysis is worth mentioning. Brian Henderson’s analysis of some of Godard’s films takes a complex and subtle journey through many of the formal techniques employed by Godard in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Henderson is a scholar whom I admire tremendously; his best writings are informed by the debates surrounding a politics of cinema during the 1970s. (Henderson’s essay, ‘Toward a Non-Bourgeois Camera Style’ influenced an early title of this present book, Toward a Politics of Cinema.) In the article, Henderson concentrates on Godard’s use of the tracking shot in Weekend (1967), stating early on that Godard ‘repudiates “the individualist conception of the bourgeois hero” and his tracking shots reflect this’ (Henderson 1976: 424). Godard’s tracking shots also emphasize flatness and thus avoid the kinds of subjective depth associated with bourgeois subjectivity. Henderson offers this analysis from within the context of a dizzying array of formal