PREFACE

During my graduate studies, I became interested in what critics were calling the "New French Extremity," a strand of auteur filmmaking (and critical scholarship) highlighting a fascinating intersection in French filmmaking: aesthetic traditions of form and content that characterized mid-to-late twentieth-century European art cinema, and elements of the (primarily American and Italian) exploitation genre films that had, for many years at that time, figured centrally in my recreational film viewing and participation in cult cinema fan culture. As I began to investigate the existing scholarship surrounding the New French Extremity (or NFE), I was impressed to find most of it had successfully transcended what is commonly known as the "media effects model" of cinematic violence and "deviant" sexuality in film. There was a definite sense in much of this NFE scholarship that ideas about causal or even correlative relationships between violence in (and outside of) films were outdated, lacking empirical validity, and obstructive to the kinds of deeper critical analysis these texts invite though their innovative styles and dynamic presentation. At the same time, the divided reactions and sensational controversies that linked these films as much as any aesthetic commonality were part of what drew me toward them as objects of cultural study. I saw in the films of the New French Extremity a unique critical opportunity. I spent a portion of my prior studies in scholarly defense of the merits and cultural significance of contemporary horror films. Despite serious engagement from certain prestigious scholars and critics (Robin Wood, Alan Jones, Mark Kermode), the popular horror film has been a favorite

target for derision not only in academic circles, but in popular discourse more broadly (with a swift dismissal usually reserved for pornography).

Fat Girl, *Irréversible*, *Trouble Every Day*, *Twentynine Palms*; these films planted a theoretical seed. These were cinematic artworks that possessed the impact of horror films—not just in psychological (and physiological) impact on the spectator—but in their potential cultural impact as well. The visceral affective quality of these films drew the sort of high-profile controversies that so often act as flashpoints for larger cultural debates. The films were shocking and abrasive—but defensible as serious films, by serious filmmakers clearly pursuing more than box office (or as is more commonly the case with horror, straight-to-video distribution) revenue.

My graduate training until that point, though rewarding, had not necessarily equipped me with sufficient training in the philosophy of art to precisely articulate why these films had artistic merit, while an ocean of similarly violent and sexually explicit "schlock" titles did not. However, reading the seminal sociologist Howard Becker shifted my thinking. For Becker, the categories we use to make sense of the social, and by extension, cultural world are not fixed objective realities. They are thoroughly relative and rooted in the social and moral definitions of whoever is espousing them. More importantly—Becker stresses that individuals will *act* towards things according to how they define and label them. Cinema is no exception. If a film is claimed to be obscene, reprehensible, dangerous, exploitative, or harmful, it has an effect. If that claim is made by a politician, journalist, critic, or censor, that effect intensifies. Again, my thinking shifted. Rather than a philosophical aesthetic question (are these films "art?"), I could interrogate the practical interest of the filmmakers in determining what it is they must do to be *considered* art. What fundamentally separates a film that *some* call art from a film that *no one* calls art is, ultimately, this very process of labeling itself.

I soon learned that Catherine Breillat's *Fat Girl*, a film as worthy of being labelled art as any in my view, had been banned in my home province of Ontario, Canada from 2001 until 2003. I suddenly felt an intangible (but no less powerful) personal connection to the material I had been studying. My knowledge of film censorship, a particularly pronounced and dramatic form of cultural control, had been couched in overtly historical contexts. I had no prior cause to consider it as a contemporary phenomenon. In discussing my research with colleagues, I found Ontarians generally surprised to learn that our governmental ratings system had veered into overt censorship recently enough as to fall within the twenty-first century. For millennials growing up in the file-sharing culture of the Internet, film censorship was not so much anathema as obsolete. However, I was not yet ready to concede this point—given the systemic nature of social control. The absence of an individual, easily identifiable "censor" does not necessarily imply the absence of censorship—or other proscriptive forms of cultural regulation.

It is not my intention with the latter half of this book to dilute the meaning of the term "censorship" beyond the point of usefulness by forcing too wide a range of social, cultural, political, and market phenomena under a single conceptual umbrella. Nevertheless, the film censorship case studies I examine here suggest an increased *limiting* of governmental film censorship's reach, in some sense the end of a century-or-so historical process. I feel that expanding the scope of definitions and research regarding film *regulation* (a more inclusive term) is the best way to guarantee this research can retain relevance in the present and future media landscape. I think a primary strength of this manuscript is the parallels it draws between the rhetorical practices of censors, and those of the other players—critics, distributors, audiences—that have seemed to assume the social control of film culture. In some of the cases involving governmental censorship—for instance *Fat Girl* or *Irréversible*—the rights of filmmakers and audiences prevailed. It strikes me that the latter cases—*The Brown Bunny* or *Welcome to New York*—are stories of artistic battles lost. One must then carefully consider whether censorial imperatives, made less threatening by an absence of governmental enforcement, cannot in fact be more formidable obstacles for adventurous films and filmmakers. This is no doubt a contentious claim for many reasons, some of which I hope to have meaningfully addressed in this research.

A few important notes:

1) The idea of "merit" is ultimately a problematic one. To argue for a film's protection from censorship based on merit, no matter how qualified the arguer, is a concession to censorial logic. To argue some films should not be censored is of course to tacitly concede that others should. Despite my reluctance to embrace free speech "absolutism," I do feel some fundamental separation should exist between issues surrounding a film's content, and those surrounding the right of viewers to access it.
2) There is always an argument to be made that, historically, censorship considerations often forced filmmakers to be *more* creative in their addressing of sensitive subjects. Classic dialogue such as "we'll always have Paris," or scenes like Cary Grant and Ingrid Bergman's protracted succession of three-second kisses in Hitchcock's *Notorious* owe some (partial and indirect) debt to censors and their aversion to explicitness. If it had not been necessary for Rod Serling to cloak his scathing social critiques in fantasy and allegory, we would not have *The Twilight Zone*.
3) In the same vein, I certainly would not claim that the films examined in this study contain no problematic content. While I subscribed to auteurism, I do not believe the filmmaker has the final say on the meaning or impact of his or her work, and I have tried to approach the claims of

> critics, CEOs, advocacy groups, and censors themselves as coming from a place of sincerity (difficult as that may at times be). I believe there are limits of good taste, and that it is certainly possible for a filmmaker to employ shock in irresponsible ways. That said, there is a meaningful difference between saying something to be provocative and being provocative to say something.

Lastly, this is not a work of prescriptive policy study. I believe the films examined here, which I have gone to some lengths and devoted much of the text to analyzing, are in themselves a form of solution to the problems raised in this study. While labeling (or more accurately "classification") processes were, at times, detrimental to the cultural status of these films, it might be equally productive to look at this dynamic through a reversed lens. That is, labels can obstruct films, but just as significantly, films can obstruct labels. In their various transgressions (particularly of genre categories), these films force a kind of sensitivity from the labeler. If, for example, it is declared that pornography may be censored but art may not, what does the censor do if faced with a film that is seemingly both? As evidenced in certain outcomes of cases explored in this study, perhaps they re-evaluate their criteria. The solution to the rigid categorization of films is, in some important sense, more films that resist and defy its systems.