



Andy Fabo

by Marcelle
Lean

Board Games, or I Was a Member

Andy Fabo



Of the Ontario Film Review Board

'Oh,
yeah! Harder! Yeah! Faster! Yeah! Faster!'

For six years, most mornings, I would eat my breakfast to the cadence of noisy (and if I was lucky, enraptured) sighs punctuated by mechanical thrusts of bodies. My eyes would be glued to the television screen while I would sip my coffee and chew my delicious muffin, until, all of a sudden, laborious screams from the television accompanied by a triumphant 'Ejaculation!', yelled by one member of the working panel would startle me.

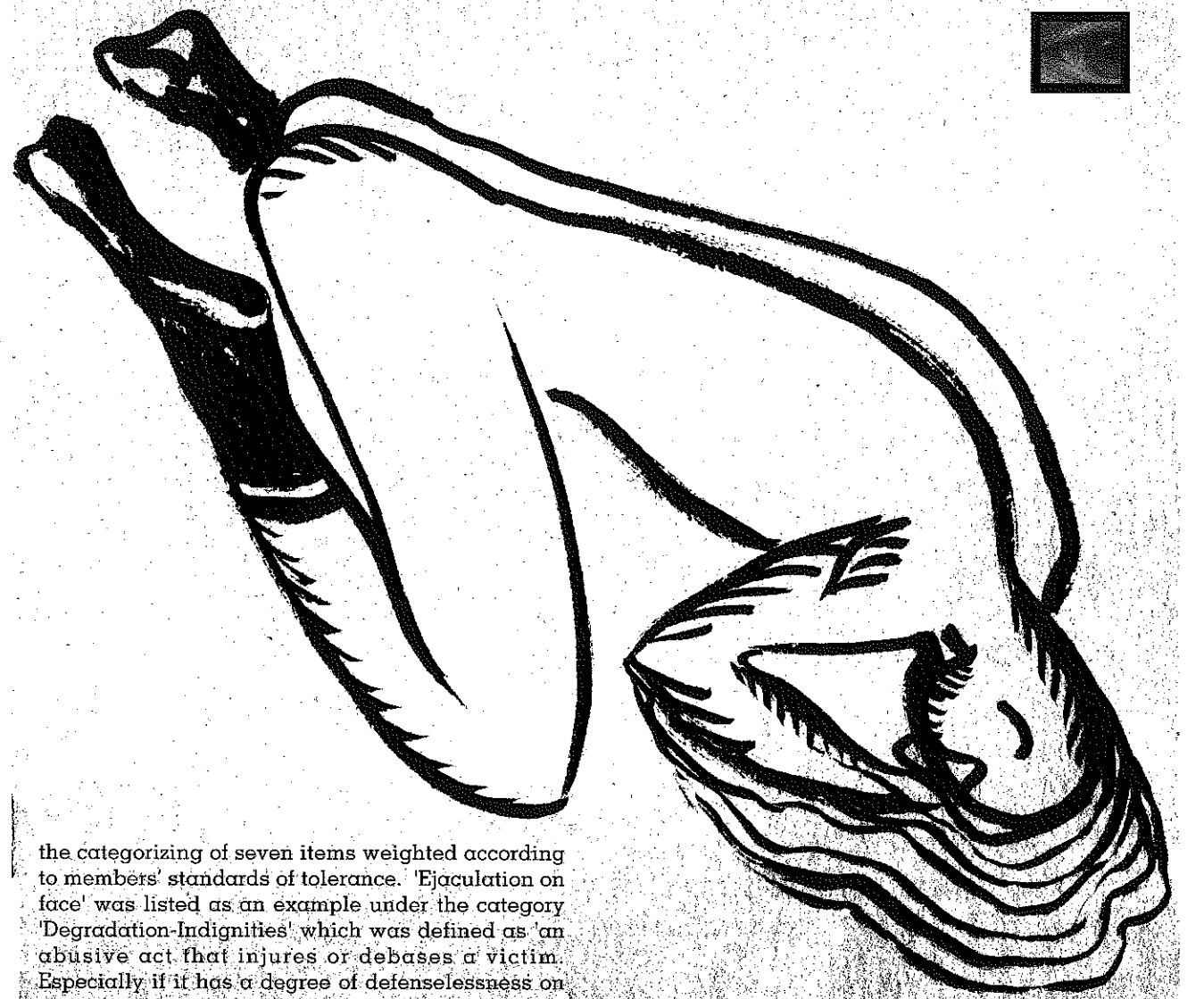


Everyone would have to abandon breakfast to scribble (on summary sheets) what they had just witnessed: the ultimate, tangible, successful accomplishment of a sexual act performed by a superman overwhelming a raving woman with gallons of semen. While she is moaning with the hedonistic privilege of rubbing 'the stuff' all over herself, he seems to have an untapped reservoir of semen he aimlessly and foolishly sprays around. In the middle of this frantic agitation, a panelist's shrieking voice would claim to have seen the semen hit the woman's eye or mouth or chin. The video would be immediately stopped and an intense discussion would start.

The object of the argument would be to determine whether the sexual partner received the semen on the face and whether ejaculation was accomplished in a degrading way. In some contentious instances, especially when the semen landed in or on the mouth, in the region between the neck and the chin, on the hair or on the temples, the members of the viewing panel would discuss whether or not these gray areas are parts of the face. One member would argue that if the semen enters the mouth, it is not on the face; another would debate that a drop accidentally appearing on the corner of the lips means nothing; but somebody else would question whether the semen really got on the

chin or on the neck. The leader of the pack (that is, the vice-chairperson of the panel) would take the initiative to rewind the tape so that we could all see the scene again in slow motion, frame by frame. The pro-censorship members would call for an elimination of the scene; the others would refuse to give in to that reading of visuals. A vote would be taken, and the majority would win.

A few months earlier, in September 1990, the 'repressive' majority had won: fifteen members, out of roughly twenty-five who then comprised the Ontario Film Review Board, had gathered in Barrie on a two-day retreat. Their job was to label sexual activities, as well as clarify, define and draft criteria for guidelines aimed at 'Adult' sex films. With the help of facilitators, the meeting, initiated by Robert Payne (then Chairperson of the Board), resulted in



the categorizing of seven items weighted according to members' standards of tolerance. 'Ejaculation on face' was listed as an example under the category 'Degradation-Indignities' which was defined as 'an abusive act that injures or debases a victim. Especially if it has a degree of defenselessness on the part of the victim, which could be a living being or a corpse.' (OFRB, Adult Sex Film, Rating Guidelines—September 1990). Other examples recorded under the same category were 'defecation, urination, forced penetration.' On a scale of one to four, 'ejaculation on face' weighted three, reflecting a high degree of intolerance, topped only by 'portrayal of a minor [a person intended to represent a person under the age of 16] appearing nude, in a scene which is sexually suggestive or explicit.' In February of 1991, the whole Board met again to finalize the weighting and the guidelines. The majority reneged on some of the definitions, blaming the facilitators, the relaxed atmosphere of the retreat and the air in Barrie for their earlier attitude.

In 1986, the year I was appointed to the Ontario Film Review Board, no one dared dream of such debates. The Board had entered a transitional era. In December 1984, the Censor Board officially shed its infamous name to be rebaptized the Ontario Film Review Board. The reign of Mary Brown as

Chairperson and champion of censorship ended with the appointment of Ann Jones in August 1986 as her successor. Regardless, little changed. The porn films sent to Ontario rarely showed explicit sexual activities. At the time we were operating in panels of five members (now only three because of budget cuts) led by a vice-chairperson supposedly in charge of eliciting relevant remarks, sometimes arousing discussions that would culminate in the classification of films and videos. The inspiration came from the amended (1975) *Theatres Act*, a blue booklet, now replaced by the amended (1988) *Theatres Act*, a red booklet. This 'bible' contained a section (Section 14) that was the basis for two working documents.

One of the basic documents is a set of guidelines which are reviewed yearly. At a glance, the neophyte can see four columns of classifications, in turn defined by such criteria as language, violence,

nudity, sexual involvement, horror, subject matter/treatment. For example, in the category 'Restricted,' under violence, one finds that "graphic portrayals of violence, torture, abuse, horror, extreme bloodletting, sexual violence integral to the plot" are permitted. The 'Family' classification restricts violence to "restrained, non-graphic portrayal of: armed combat, natural disaster-accidents, hand-to-hand combat, bloodletting." However, in Section 14 of the 1988 *Theatres Act*, another statement appears:

After viewing a film, the Board MAY refuse to approve a film for exhibition or distribution in Ontario....

The use of the verb 'may' enables the reviewer not only to classify a film, but also to cut, edit, delete, censor or ban a film. Free interpretation of Section 14 justified the austere, puritanical position of Mary Brown prior to my coming to the Board in 1986. (Interestingly enough, the legendary organ of repression was well-liked by her colleagues.)

When I joined the Board, I had to go through the initiation rite of watching the 'Take-Out Reel,' a montage of film snippets that send one to hell and back. I understood that this 'Take-Out Reel' originated by Mary Brown in the early eighties became her powerful tool to rally people to the censorship cause. The film displayed extreme images of horror and bestiality, ranging from snuff films to films showing women having intercourse with horses, pigs, dogs.... These sequences were taken out of context and put together in such a manipulative, arbitrary way that their excessive violence could only beg passionate pro-censorship reactions. Mary Brown would show the 'Take-Out Reel' to visitors, including community groups eager to understand what the Board was about. As a fallout from the Mary Brown era, between 1986 and 1988 profanity in films was tabulated to catapult films into the restrictive category regardless of contexts. Porn had become a disgusting commodity from which Ontarians had to be protected. The imprints of such attitudes linger to this day in some reviewers' minds. In 1986, these marks were so fresh and deep that the classification of a film was often reduced to counting the number of times the word 'fuck' was used.

The classification of a film or video is recorded by the vice-chairperson on a summary report and signed by all members present at the screening. The signatures of the members constituting a majority are visible on the front of the page; the members who constitute the minority sign on the back with a brief justification.

The summary report, which is a legal document, refers to the *Theatres Act* to support and justify the

reasons of a chosen classification. It works like an identification card where the film's title, genre, length and type (35mm, 16 mm, etc.) are recorded. A short plot summary is followed by additional observations (racial slurs, documentary footage...). If a film requires an information piece in addition to the category, then the panel agrees to choose from among a list of brief words to describe its dominant feature. For instance, the video *Silent Night, Deadly Night 5: The Toymaker* was unanimously classified 'Restricted' with two information pieces: 'Brutal violence' and 'Frightening scenes.' In case a member feels very strongly, he or she can ask for a cumulative vote, a process by which other members screen and classify the contentious film. When a film does not go to general distribution (as indicated in the summary report), it can run for a limited time on exhibition and be shown as many times as requested. Paul Morrissey's *Mixed Blood* came back so many times that all members must have screened it at least twice in the course of their tenure. Watching this hyperrealistic and ultra-violent film for the second time felt like punishment intended for Alex, the protagonist in Kubrick's *Clockwork Orange*, and mistakenly inflicted on the relatively innocent members of the OFRB by the wrong director. A distributor can also appeal the decision of a panel by simply re-submitting the film to a new panel preferably made up of members who had not classified it (some exceptions apply). The decision reached by the Appeal Panel is final and can only be contested at a lower court by the distributor. The fate of the distributor's product depends entirely on the members and vice-chairpersons. Panels are put together according to members' availability, not according to their compatibility.

The chairperson, whose job is administrative and representative of the whole Board, is appointed by the Premier of the province. The vice-chairpersons and the members are also appointed through the same channel. During my tenure, some members came through political routes: connections, patronage, etc.; others applied to join the Board because they had an honest interest in movies. (Although I am an unconditional film buff, I wish I could say I came from the latter.) Still others were recommended by influential people in recognition of their involvement in community affairs.

Throughout my six years' tenure, the number of members fluctuated from roughly fifteen to thirty-two and reflected the multicultural fabric of Ontario. At first, Mary Brown left the legacy of a pro-censorship, anti-sex squad composed mainly of older male members. I recall chairing (as an exercise) a panel of four middle-aged men screening a gentle porn movie in which a woman was fantasizing about sex in her letters. The video depicted

gentle flogging with a cat-o'-nine-tails, and an array of sexual activities of the fellatio and cunnilingus type. The members of the panel were mesmerized with pleasure. Classification time came, I asked for the verdict: rejected unanimously.

However, not all members were obtuse. I look back with nostalgia at the private conversations I had with a cinema professor on the meaning of Bellocchio's *Devil in the Flesh* and on feminism in *Patti Rocks*. Stimulating discussions rarely occurred during classification, though. Members seemed resentful that 'pretentious academics' would try to enlighten them. Most of the time discussions were distinctly un-theoretical. They would focus on issues such as ejaculation on face, or on uncanny visual detail: he slapped her on the behind, he left a red mark, is that torture or pleasure?

By about 1990, the police, through Project P (a vice-squad making sure that no obscene, illegal material is being circulated) began to review material the Board had approved. Video operators got arrested; Robert Payne, the Chairperson at the time, had to testify. One of the most memorable controversies centered on *Oriental Taboo*. A young actress was playing with a fake snake that she supposedly inserted into her vagina. Project P interpreted it as bestiality; the Board saw a plastic object (not a real snake) being consciously manipulated by a woman.

Board meetings occurred every two to three months, moving from the antiquated location of the Board to the elegant Sutton Place Hotel. Generally in our sessions we discussed internal policies, then hosted various guests from the video and film industry or the Minister and his/her assistants. A tasteful lunch concluded the day. On these occasions great attention was paid to costume: members (male and female) proudly paraded in their ostentatious clothes, then congratulated each other on their looks, smiled at each other, nodded at each other, sizing up opponents, already coagulated into cliques. This ballet then entered the performance stage, the boardroom. Very often pettiness took over, and the meeting came to a halt because of a disagreement on the use of a word or the settlement of the fair distribution of screening days or the appropriate starting time. In the middle of cacophonous disputes, items were left unresolved, deferred to the Policy Committee. Vice-chairpersons were elected at the June Board meeting to voice the grievance of members and act as buffer between chairpersons and members.

In 1987, I became the Chairperson of the first Policy Committee. Ann Jones, Censor Board Chair at the time, acted as though her authority were undermined by the existence of such an organ, while others were trying to dominate and appropriate issues. At first, my voice was often silenced by

clashing members; gradually I gained the respect of some members who recognized the difficulties of my position in that ocean of sharks. I introduced so-called academic research on the wording of information pieces. At one point, I studied the differences between 'coarse language' and 'swearing,' which led to the elimination of the latter word from our information list pieces. (My background in linguistics and lexicology-lexicography made it easier.) I also did some research on the thriller genre, differentiating between psychotraumatic thrillers and psychological thrillers.

Guidelines were also revised and recommendations presented to the whole Board to discuss and adopt. Through their yearly examination, the guidelines were modified to engage new realities of current movies (whence the attention paid to the relevance of subject matter in documentaries and waves of movies dealing with war [e.g. *Platoon*], sexual violence [*The Accused*, *Fatal Attraction*, *Internal Affairs*, etc.]) and even current events and issues.

Under the Liberals I had never felt any pressure to be pro or con censorship. The visits of officials from the Ministry of Consumer and Commercial Relations seemed to affirm that the people there were aware that we existed and did as good a job as we could. I was under the positive impression that I was trusted and respected as an individual capable of assuming the responsibilities of the Board. When the NDP took over, I felt like a pawn in the political game of issues that mattered to the ministers who took the commands. Their interferences (frequent visits of the respective ministers' assistants, the speeches from the ministers on their views on censorship, violence, etc.) left me struggling for my own oxygen in a 'Big Brother Is Watching You' atmosphere.

In retrospect, if I were to draw a balance sheet of my experience on the Ontario Film Review Board, I would refer to three levels of existence, as a member, a film addict and an art activist. As a member, I became acquainted with two chairpersons who administered the Board very differently. In 1986, Ann Jones attempted to maintain a dignified image of the OFRB by giving our meetings some decorum. She shuffled raging dissension aside by finally accepting the creation of a Policy committee in 1987 and the destruction of Mary Brown's 'Take-Out Reel' (circa 1989), the remnants of the cumbersome cadaver of censorship.

Ann Jones' successor, Robert Payne (1989-1992), tried to harmonize the members' views on standards of tolerance regarding sex in porn movies. The discrepancies in classification had become so confusing that distributors would submit their products with a prayer: they had been left with no ammunition in their arsenal to reason with us since

the classifications had grown so unpredictable. During his tenure, Robert Payne was an intelligent mediator and listener who treated everybody with deference. In the summer of 1992, a distinct rift between the Minister and the Chairperson involved an inexplicable isolation of the latter. In September 1992, he was promptly replaced by Dorothy Christian as the new Chairperson. Ms. Christian had served on the Board with the 'old school' members.

As a film addict and a celluloid consumer, I bathed in glory: between the summers of 1986 and 1992, I screened as many films and videos as I could, besides attending the Floating Film Festivals, the yearly Montreal Film Festivals, the Toronto Festivals of Festivals, and going to see films in cities like Paris where I gorged on French films, or in Hong Kong where I saw *The Lover* in its integral form before it opened in North America.

As an art activist, I was given the concrete opportunity to fight for the freedom of expression of filmmakers in all genres of film and video, including pornography. From screening hundreds, if not thousands, of 'porn flicks,' I certainly gathered a wealth of information about myself, about the attitudes of my colleagues and of society regarding sex.

Some members had to leave the Board to protect themselves: they had become casualties of the insufferable violence and vulgarity to which they had been subjected as censors. When video operators were arrested on charges of obscenity (around 1990), when Project P disagreed with the members' classifications and attempted to stigmatize them publicly, all the layers of accumulated experience exploded. We became warriors in an open zone where the pro-censorship and the anti-censorship camps intensely clashed. Memories of long, dogged, passionate debates tearing us apart and turning us against one another still linger in our lives. An alumna, profoundly marked by her experience at the Board, found artistic expression writing and illustrating erotic poems. I, with two other alumni, wrote a script on pornography and its effects. In this attempt, we felt a need to share our knowledge and experience with the public. At the same time, in a cathartic movement, the writing enabled us to "cleanse our brains," to expurgate the dirt, the violence, the on-screen degradation we had to witness day after day.

My experience on the Board broadened my horizons, and I feel that I served the institution with fervour and integrity. I donated my time and energy writing reports, preparing arguments, often speaking to various groups. Those of us who enjoyed working hard and devoting ourselves to cinema were frowned upon by other members and people in general. For the public at large we were censors,

a hated breed. To this day, my friends, acquaintances and others will not let me forget that I was part of a 'Censoring Machine' that was too lenient, a contradiction no one can escape or reconcile in spite of my protest that I was there to defend the creator's right of expression. Ironically, the Board had been the only place that made my addiction gratifying and somewhat lucrative: where else would I have been paid one hundred dollars per diem and how else would I have satisfied an insatiable appetite for celluloid? I will not deny that I have experienced painful symptoms of withdrawal since my termination, in spite of my haunting movie theatres and video stores. The fix is expensive, but at least I can pick and choose what I want to see.

Or is it that I pick and choose what the new OFRB members want me to see?

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