This book is an exploration of Canadian identity through the lens of cinema. It highlights the creation of that cinema in what I generally identify as “the postmodern period” in order to contrast this cinema with that of an earlier nationalist-realist tradition. Anne Friedberg argued, some twenty years ago, against the usage of “the adjective postmodern to describe contemporary cinematic styles.” The only postmodern aspect of contemporary cinema, according to her, is “metareferentiality,” that is, an ironic parody of former film content and styles rather than nostalgia for them. Since her comments were made, postmodernism as a concept has come to embrace other academic theories and ideologies, from postcolonial theories of hybridity to postfeminism. I have used the term postmodern to describe a cinema that has differentiated itself from its national-realist roots. Robert Stam, in his study of film theory published in 2000, summarizes how postmodern ideology created a language of “counter-hegemonic resistances based on such categories as race, gender, and sexuality.” Stam goes on to say that postmodernism as a discourse “has by now been ‘stretched’ to the breaking point.” I agree that postmodernism as an ideological construct is fading. This text is based on the application of some of the key concepts of postmodernism to Canadian cinema in the 1990 to 2010 period, but I am prepared to state that the importance of these characteristics is historical and that the technology of the digital age is generating a significant new cinematic practice for which the older postmodern categories are losing their relevance. While the digitalized media has been around for several decades, beginning with the Internet of the 1990s, it is the wireless technology of the twenty-first century that is generating a new intellectual paradigm.
The expansion of the cinematic image from a theatrical site to other venues—first to television half a century ago and now, through digitalization, to other screened platforms such as computers, smartphones, and home theatres—suggests that the postmodern was a transitional phase of cinema.

**POSTMODERNITY AND THE URBAN IMAGINARY IN CANADIAN CINEMA**

The films studied in this text projected a certain discourse that was mirrored in the postmodern categories mentioned by Stam and adopted here, but the technological world in which they were formed was associated with celluloid. The end of “film” in the production of cinema points to a radical new departure for the medium, equivalent to the birth of talkies or of technicolour. The daily uploading of countless photographic images and video clips to social networking websites like Facebook and YouTube has undermined the exclusivity of the film and image production modes. Capturing innumerable narratives (real and fictional) and uploading them to websites in order to “share” them has created a discourse that both challenges and transforms traditional film production. The language of the new digital “cinema” and where and how it is viewed may still be rooted in a language of an earlier era, but the digital transformation is becoming as significant as the transformation of the earlier languages of vaudeville and the stage as they migrated to early silent cinema a century ago.

As important as the transitional nature of the urban imaginary moment in Canadian cinema is the way in which the urban imaginary subverted iconic or stereotypical representations of a specific city, an example being a red Toronto streetcar, which can bring a film closer to viewers who are aware of that icon. The overall impact of a film set in Toronto is really much more complex and fragmented than the perception of one or two iconic associations. What an angry film like *Rude* means to a young African Canadian male from the Caribbean who has regularly been stopped by Toronto police and what it means to a white male academic from Calgary visiting Toronto are different because their experiences of Toronto are worlds apart. They walk its streets with a markedly different footprint. This differentiation goes even further in the case of a filmmaker like Atom Egoyan. He can say of his film *Chloe* (2009), “I really love the idea of [Toronto] playing itself. I love the idea of hearing
the streetcars and actually setting it [the film] on the main arteries of Queen, College and Dundas, and Yorkville of course." His idea of Toronto “playing itself” is ironic. On the one hand, Chloe liberates Toronto from its being dubbed into an American city, but, on the other hand, the film is a cheeky translation from a French thriller that is not set in Toronto. Egoyan’s setting the film in Toronto and in recognizable locations such as the Windsor Arms Hotel, the Allen Gardens, and so on is a conceit that may appeal to Torontonians wanting to see the story in a familiar and thereby self-valorizing locale (and also to Canadian funders), but it is no different an interpretation and translation than that which American producers perform when using Toronto as a substitute for an American city. As a postmodern film, it uses Toronto performatively to be something else.

The transmutability of urban settings and the ability of the camera to awaken subliminal associations in viewers who have certain perceptions of a particular city allow cities to be transformed into the familiar. When Egoyan was asked why he set Chloe in Toronto, he responded: “Because it’s my city and I think honestly there’s a huge erotic life in this town.” This projection of Toronto as a site of eroticism rather than of immigration or economic muscle fits Egoyan’s own film legacy and shows how a narrative can be adapted to numerous urban guises. Egoyan is Canadianizing a foreign narrative.

Egoyan’s fellow Torontonian and public intellectual, philosopher Mark Kingwell, has written extensively about city life. In Concrete Reveries: Consciousness and the City (2008), he discusses how a city embodies human consciousness and how it reciprocates this embodiment by having its presence influence human consciousness. This feedback loop has an ideological dimension, as certain classes control the process of city building and also generate the public discourse that serves as its ideological framing. Urban studies scholar Richard Florida, author of Who’s Your City? (2008), argues that human psychology can give a city a specific character depending on the attitudes of those who guide the city’s identity. In short, a city can have personality traits. “Places really do have different personalities,” he writes, meaning that cities can be viewed as reflecting a certain part of a psychological spectrum. While conferring consciousness on a conglomerate of animate and inanimate entities that is a city and giving this congregation a psychological profile is intriguing and even provocative, it does not necessarily help us to understand a
filmmaker, a city, and an urban film, unless, of course, the psychological profile attributed to a city is reflected in the film. What this current study reveals is how the spatiality, visuality, and orality attributed to a city’s collective consciousness is radically different from film to film. Distinct authorship means multiple cities rather than the essentialist cities that Florida proposes.

Because cities have a history, an economy, a social structure, and a proliferation of cultures, they cannot be essentialist other than as a simplified caricature. The life cycle of cities also means that they are constantly evolving. The economic and social forces, from immigration to war, ensure that a city is never stagnant but behaves like an organic entity in constant flux—growing, dying, transforming. A film about a city represents a particular cultural moment as experienced and expressed by the class, generation, ethnicity, and gender of filmmaker. This means that every film creates a different urban representation. While subverting any single overriding narrative about Toronto or Winnipeg, the postmodern moment in Canadian cinema did signal the emergence of the urban imaginary as a broad characteristic of that cinema.

CULTURAL GRAMMARS IN AUTEUR FILMMAKING

In describing the operation of the urban imaginary in cinema, I have emphasized the agency of the author and the role of various cultural elements that influence the film. My argument that the cinematic representation of a city has its roots in the auteurial imagination privileges the role of the creative self over that of the industrial production system. This does not mean, of course, that issues pertaining to film production and audience are not crucial to our understanding of how a film is constructed, nor do I dispute the validity of anti-authorial interpretations of cinematic creation. But my own emphasis falls on authorship as an important, though not exclusive, foundation of a work of art. I also acknowledge that the influences on the author belong as much, if not more, to the collectivity and its generation of meaning as they do to the self. I believe the term cultural grammar is useful in identifying these cultural influences and how they construct identities that the filmmaker is attempting to present to the film’s audience. Ordinarily, grammar refers to the largely subconscious system of rules that enables speakers of a language to create
structures that generate meaning in their language. The term can, however, be used more broadly to refer to any combination of elements that generates meaning. According to linguist Anna Wierzbicka, a cultural grammar is “a set of subconscious rules that shape a people’s ways of thinking, feeling, speaking, and interacting.” Similarly, the editors of Cultural Grammars of Nation, Diaspora, and Indigeneity in Canada (2012) describe their study as “an attempt to make discernible the language rules governing our critical choices and the conceptual frameworks we mobilize, consciously or not.” A culture’s “grammar” consists of the ideas and practices concerning a variety of identities that are standard within that culture and that allow for shared understanding and communication. In a manner analogous to the operation of language, this system of cultural rules structures the way in which we interpret our experience and thereby make sense of the world. There is no single cultural grammar as such for any society but rather a multiplicity of grammars that structure how concepts of race, gender, nationality, religion, and so on express meaning. Our view of our own and others’ various identities is formed through our upbringing, the social messages we encounter over time about those identities, and how we ourselves relate to those identities. As a society evolves, the normative reading of a specific identity changes, and our individual sense of how to read an identity likewise shifts over time.

A cultural grammar gives us is an understanding of certain fundamental aspects of our identity; that understanding is then modified by our personal experience and applied to our reading of our own identity as well as that of others. But these culturally transmitted aspects of identity must not be considered “attributes” that are embedded in individuals and so define them. Instead, they should be thought of as architectural building blocks that individuals, including artists, acquire over time and that they can manipulate into different shapes. Authorship presupposes a self formed by the cultural grammars of the society in which the author lives. When that self expresses its vision of urban life, it does so with both individual style and personal authenticity. It is the combination of a filmmaker’s unique and shared experiences of a city that allows each cinematic city studied here to be different from that of any other filmmaker’s city, even when it is physically the “same” city.

Cultural grammars are diverse expressions of historically evolving sensibilities and norms that contribute to the evolutionary nature of the art created
by filmmakers. The cultural grammars that inform a filmmaker's work are portals that open us to the interpretive richness and depth of his or her work. Because cultural grammars influence every filmmaker's awareness of his or her society and its issues, auteur films ordinarily resonate with this awareness. We should think of cultural grammars as performative. What we have as a result is a constant process of “becoming” through the interweaving of the sources of inspiration for individual filmmakers, the evolution of cultural grammars in society, and the audience's experiences in their reading of the film. In this way, a film is constantly changing in its subsequent viewing, even as it remains unchanged as a work. The meaning imparted to a 1970s film in its own day is different from the meaning imparted today, because the cultural and historical context is so different. It is the dynamic and interactive nature of cultural grammars that generates a constantly differentiated world of meanings. Cultural grammars of identity are intrinsically social, and because urban societies are so complicated—layered with numerous subcultures, each of which has its own discourse that evolves with time—the readings of a film are potentially infinite.

As framers of identities understood by a filmmaker and his audience, cultural grammars are portals to a culture that operate in four ways. First, in the broadest and most diffuse sense they emerge as public discourse communicated to a person through various forms of public media. Second, they come from social discourse, a narrower category, in which a person's constantly evolving social and professional circles create influences, interpretations, and codes that are peculiar to that circle. Third, they operate in the more intimate arena of domestic discourse, especially formative in childhood; the stories, religious and political orientation, and relationships within that arena create a distillation of broader cultural grammars. Finally, by integrating these three types of discourse, one creates around oneself an individual discourse as a statement of individuality. This book argues that the Canadian urban imaginary film displays a diversity of cultural grammars rooted in the language, gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, generation, national identity, ideology, and religion of its auteurs.

Identifying the cultural grammars at work in a film does not promote essentialism, reductionism, or categorization. Essentializing an author would imply that a particular director has a specific quality that he or she cannot escape. Reductionism refers to using a cultural grammar like nationality: that
Conclusion

is, reducing the director to one aspect and thus excluding other aspects. Finally, categorization involves highlighting a certain element of a person’s identity or history, which may not be normative, to the detriment of other aspects.

Cultural grammars are contingent, not essential, features of all our lives. Just as one can acquire a new language (a linguistic grammar), one can acquire new cultural grammars. A filmmaker may have begun life in the working class and then moved into a different class as a result of professional success. A filmmaker (or anyone) may have started my life in one gender and then changed to another and with that change gained a new understanding of gender. Our cultural grammars are generated by personal histories, by evolving social environments, by cultural revolutions, by technological change, and by the formative power of any subcultures through which we migrate. The cultural grammars that we inherit through the exigencies of birth and history may or may not inform our consciousness or ideology, and even if they do, these influences may be minor or subtle. The problem with reading any one cultural grammar as an essentialist identity comes from a misunderstanding of a cultural grammar as something that is possessed rather than articulated. In the words of philosopher Marya Schechtman, “The psychological forces constituting identity are dynamic and active—things a person does—rather than static and passive features she has.” This is especially true of a work of art. Cultural grammars, as framers of meaning gleaned from society and culture, as well as from personal experience, are evolving codes. A cultural grammar is not something that any work of art or artist can be reduced to or categorized as being. There are simply too many cultural grammars influencing us to focus on any one of them. We all work in numerous languages and cultures constantly. A filmmaker’s agency is a multifaceted expression of identity.

I believe that an in-depth study of even one of the filmmakers discussed in this book would reveal many more cultural grammars than are discussed here. Because cultural grammars give us certain languages of coherent expression and certain symbols of identity that are used in the creation of art, the communication between the filmmaker, the film, and its audience is always in a state of flux. One of the balancing elements in the communication between the author and the audience is the genre of the film, which is its own cultural grammar based on articulated codes and conventions that the audience, the film, and the filmmaker share. In terms of auteur cinema, the generic factor in the
articulation of any single film ebbs and flows. Sometimes it is central; at other times, it is marginal.

CINEMATIC URBANITY

I see three main factors at play in the construction of urbanity in Canadian film during the age of the urban imaginary. First, the personal urban experiences and evolving identities of the filmmakers, expressed through their cultural grammars, are critical to constructing urbanity. Second, the specific urban environments in which the filmmakers live and work, and which they acknowledge as formative contribute to that construction. The interplay between the filmmaker’s urban self and the city’s characteristics and qualities results in a film’s imagined spatiality, visuality, and orality. Third, the boundaries of film genres and the structure of the Canadian film industry serve as the contemporary drivers of the filmmaker’s urban imaginary. One aspect of this latter factor is related to audience reception. In the case of English-language Canadian cinema, the age of the absent audience coincides with the period of the urban imaginary. Canadian cinema of the postmodern era is appreciated only by a tiny intellectual and artistic elite. In contrast, Québec cinema has developed a wider range of urbanity than has English Canadian cinema. Because narrative film is both pitched and read in terms of genre-related labels, and because the state-supported approval and funding system remained more or less unchanged during the period considered in this study (1990 to 2010), the urban imaginary has been expressive of certain filmmaking imperatives associated with the orientation of agencies like Telefilm Canada toward certain genres and certain filmmakers. In the elusive quest for popular material to entice the absent Canadian audience, the Canadian system has given various signals about what should or should not be made. The films in this study are those that attracted funding because they met the criteria and the mandate of the moment. Clearly, films that express a strong urban imaginary are films that have resonated with decision makers in the industry. Otherwise, they would not exist.

While the tripartite structure of individual filmmaker, distinct city, and different genre may seem obvious, it does not mean that the integration of these three elements into a theoretical whole is itself obvious. The wholeness
comes from the construction of a conceptual hierarchy on which the theory of cinematic urbanity rests. This involves three distinct layers. First, the theory rests on the proposition that a break occurred in Canadian film history that resulted in two distinct periods: (1) the modernist period, with emphasis on nationalist realism that the Canadian feature film industry adopted from the National Film Board tradition and used until the end of the tax-break era in the early 1980s and (2) the postmodern period, with emphasis on the urban imaginary.

Second, cinematic urbanity is interpreted as being informed by the language of the cultural grammars through which films speak. These cultural grammars, while not necessarily urban in themselves, are experienced by the author of the film through his or her life in a specific Canadian urban context. While so many theorists of late (Giuliana Bruno, Anne Friedberg, Will Straw, and David James, for example) have moved away from auteurism and nationalism in their discourses on the city in cinema, I have resisted this tide. I have done so because the films discussed here evidence the birth of a new sense of Canadian identity that needs to be acknowledged. I want to give voice to this birth by discussing a wide range of urban entities and a wide range of film directors and still concluding that there exists in Canadian cinema a pan-urban sensibility that expresses Canada’s contemporary social reality.

Third, cinematic urbanity is rooted in the cinematic representation of a specific city visually, spatially and orally. This is the language of film. Locating these three modalities in each film allows the personal style of the auteur to be acknowledged. The result is a personalized city that has an imaginary construction to which spectators can relate by calling up their own experiences, their own prejudices and stereotypes, and by situating themselves in that particular filmic universe with some degree of comfort.

City/filmmaker/urban film is a causal trinity, but the theory of cultural grammars brings in a fourth causality—the identity of the spectator. By including the spectator in the process of applying cultural grammars, a hermeneutic circle is formed. Interpretation becomes the core of communicating the film’s visual images, its spatial codes, and, of course, its distinct speech and music. Through shared or disparate cultural grammars, the hermeneutic circle turns authorship into another face of spectatorship. The filmmaker is a viewer as well and, as a viewer of films, can be spurred toward creativity by shared
cultural grammars. As a Canadian, I am instantly aware of a Canadian discourse being aimed at me when I watch these films, and I revel in that. My pleasure is doubled in watching Canadian films that interpret an urban milieu when I have some level of identification with that particular city. Because I am surrounded by the spectre of the absent audience in my own country (English Canada), the pleasure of seeing a Canadian urban film should not be underestimated. Nor should the impact of cinematic urbanity be trivialized even though its audience is limited. Nationalist-realist rhetoric in Canadian cinema created a baseline for expressing national identity in film. Its successor, the urban imaginary, must be acknowledged as the salient feature of Canadian cinema during the final phase of celluloid filmmaking.