

Literary Postmodernism

“In a universe where no more explanations are possible, all that remains is to play with the pieces. Playing with the pieces, that is postmodernism”
(Jean Baudrillard, *The Evil Demon of Images* 29).

Outline:

theories of postmodernism: Lyotard, Jameson,
Hutcheon

postmodernism and: originality

representation

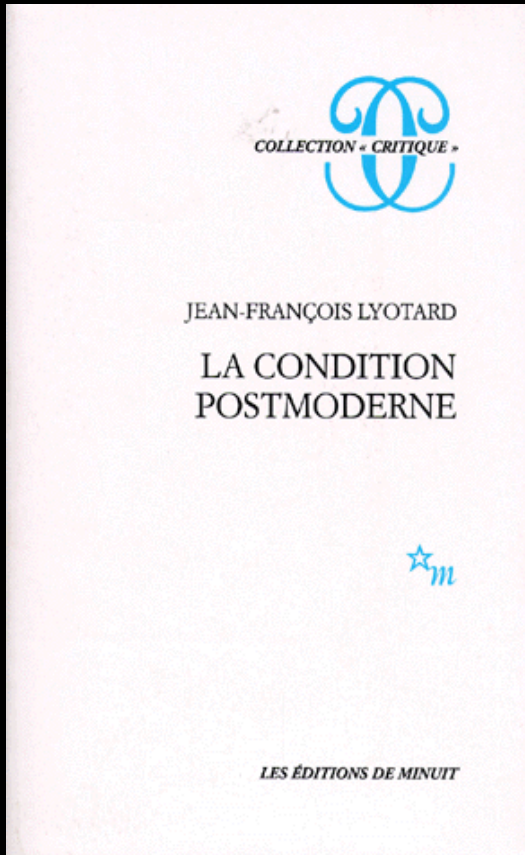
politics and history

intertextuality

examples from literature and film

Canadian fiction and postmodernism

Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (1979/1984)



modernism: 'grand narratives' ->
the Progress of Spirit and the
March to Freedom -> unified
and communicable meaning

postmodernism: questioning
and problematizing the unified
meaning, conventions,
assumptions; self-critical

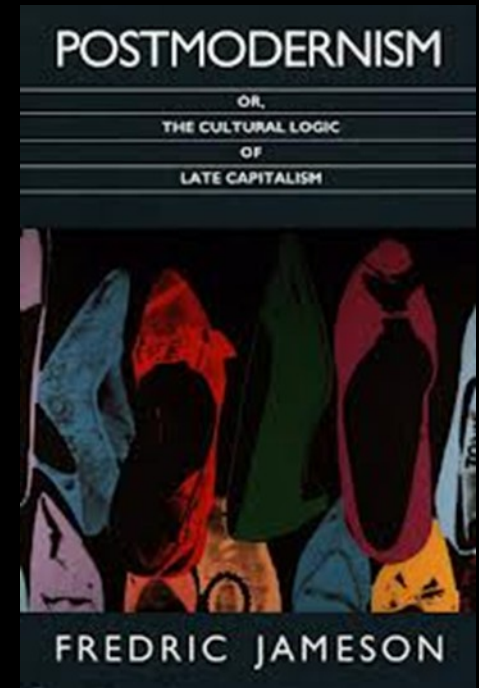
Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” (1984)

postmodernism is a “cultural dominant”

industrial capitalism -> cultural dominant of realism

colonial (imperialist) capitalism -> modernism

post-industrial, multinational, or late capitalism -> postmodernism



modern and postmodern painting (Jameson)

Vincent Van Gogh, *A Pair of Shoes*



Andy Warhol, *Diamond Dust Shoes*



Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988)
and *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989)

“What I want to call postmodernism is fundamentally **contradictory**, resolutely **historical**, and inescapably **political**. Its contradictions may well be those of late capitalist society, but whatever the cause, these contradictions are certainly manifest in the important postmodern concept of ‘the presence of the past’” (*A Poetics* 4).

Venice Biennale 1980 “The Presence of the Past”

Strada Novissima -> “historical parody”



“a critical revisiting, an ironic dialogue with the past of both art and society, a recalling of a critically shared vocabulary of architectural forms” (*A Poetics* 4)

Hutcheon's postmodernism

“critical revisiting and ironic dialogue”

“a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges” (*A Poetics* 3)

the postmodern paradox -> critique and complicity at the same time (*The Politics* 14)

Hutcheon: historiographic metafiction

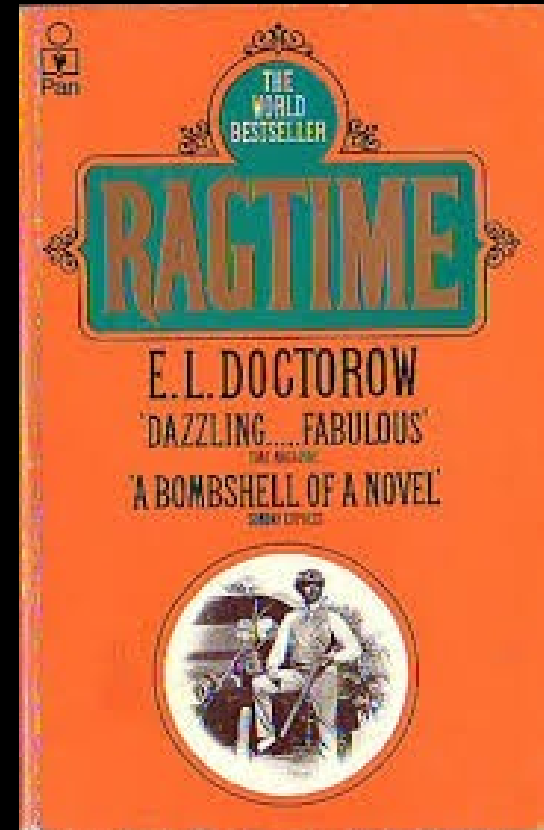
-> novels which are “both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages”

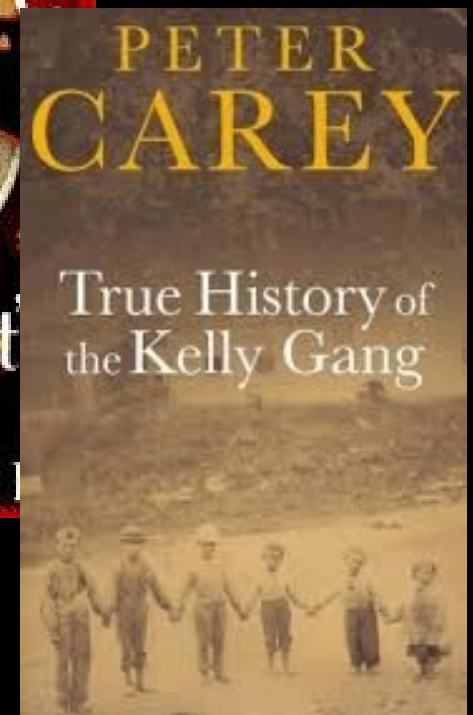
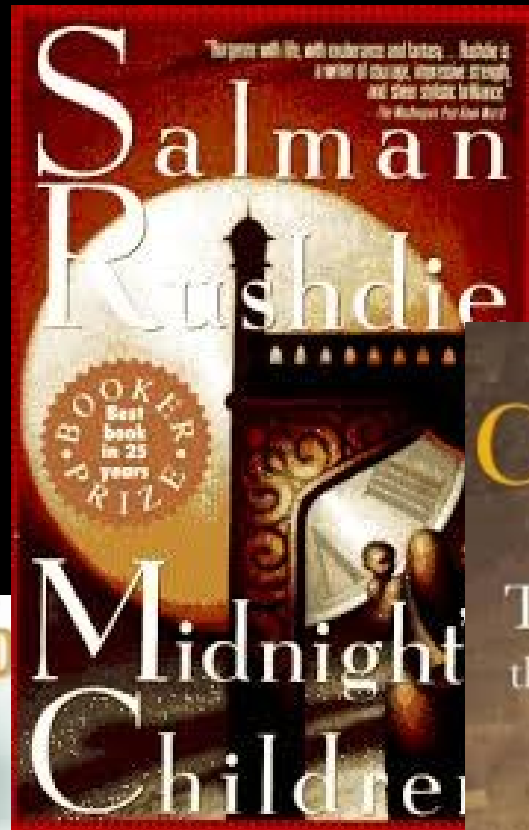
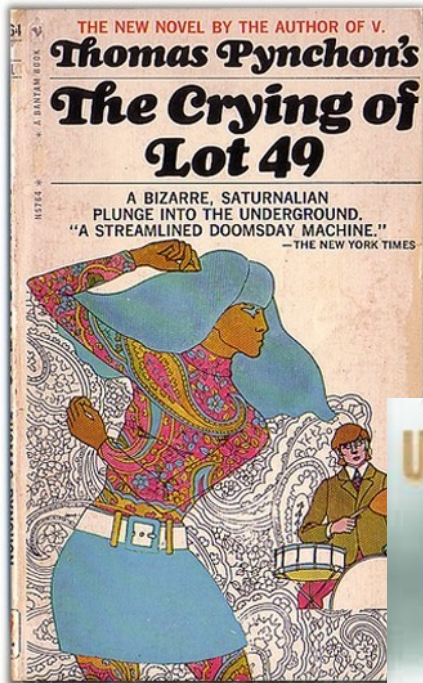
-> its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs

-> challenges notions such as historical truth and accurate knowledge of the past

E. L. Doctorow, *Ragtime* (1975)

- blurring fact and fiction
- intertextuality
- narrator





Postmodernism and originality

- pull away from the modernist focus on originality and authenticity
- deconstruction of the idea of the artistic genius
- poststructuralism and Roland Barthes' "Death of the Author" (1967)

=> is it really possible to produce an original work of art today?

Michael Cunningham, *The Hours* (1998)

Virginia Woolf writing
Mrs. Dalloway in the
1920s



Laura Brown reading *Mrs.*
Dalloway in the 1950s



Clarissa Vaughn living Mrs.
Dalloway's story in early
2000s



postmodernism and rewriting

- *metatheatre*
 - Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*
- *postcolonial rewritings*
 - J. M. Coetzee, *Foe*
 - Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*
 - Peter Carey, *Jack Maggs*
 - Margaret Atwood, *The Penelopiad*
- *pastiche*
 - Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*
 - David Lodge, *The British Museum is Falling Down*

postmodernism: a problem of representation?



representation of fiction -> metafiction

representation of subjectivity -> meta-autobiography

overview of literary postmodernism

- skepticism towards objective truth and universal structures
- self-reflexivity
- instability of meanings
- surrender in the face of originality/authenticity
- problematizing mimetic (transparent) representations
- emphasis on difference and plurality
- ironic appropriation of existing images/texts
- metafiction and metatextuality
- mixing fact and fiction, history and fiction, high and low genres

Linda Hutcheon, “The Canadian Postmodern: English Fiction since 1960”

- 1960s – flourishing of CanLit
- 1970s/1980s – “postmodernism had arrived to Canada” (Hutcheon 18)
- Canadian ‘ex-centrics’: position in the margin, off the centre but in relation with it:
 - the (geopolitical) centre shifts in Canada
 - regional differences
 - suspicion towards authority

The Canadian Postmodern

- 'ex-centricity' - the Canadian, the postmodern, the feminist - seem to share the self-defining challenge to the dominant tradition, all write from the 'ex-centric' position of marginalization
- a relation between the national search for Canadian cultural identity and feminist search for a distinctive identity -> takes shape of the postmodern, the paradoxical, the contradictory, contesting the power of dominant cultures
- literary tradition: Susanna Moodie, Catharine Parr Trail, Emily Carr, Margaret Laurence, Mavis Gallant, Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro...

The Canadian Postmodern

- parody in order to question authority -> inscribing canonical texts (male, British/American) and then subverting their status and authority:
“Parody, then, becomes a major form of critique, allowing a writer to speak to her or his culture from within it but without being totally co-opted by it” (Hutcheon, “The Canadian Postmodern” 23)
- recalling the texts of the past (literary or historical) and then re-narrating or re-conceptualizing the past, becoming intertextual: e.g. Atwood’s *The Penelopiad*

“To render the particular concrete, to celebrate ex-centricity: this is the Canadian postmodern” (Hutcheon, “The Canadian Postmodern” 28)