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

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*

“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

- 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?

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 paradoxial, 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)