

# 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

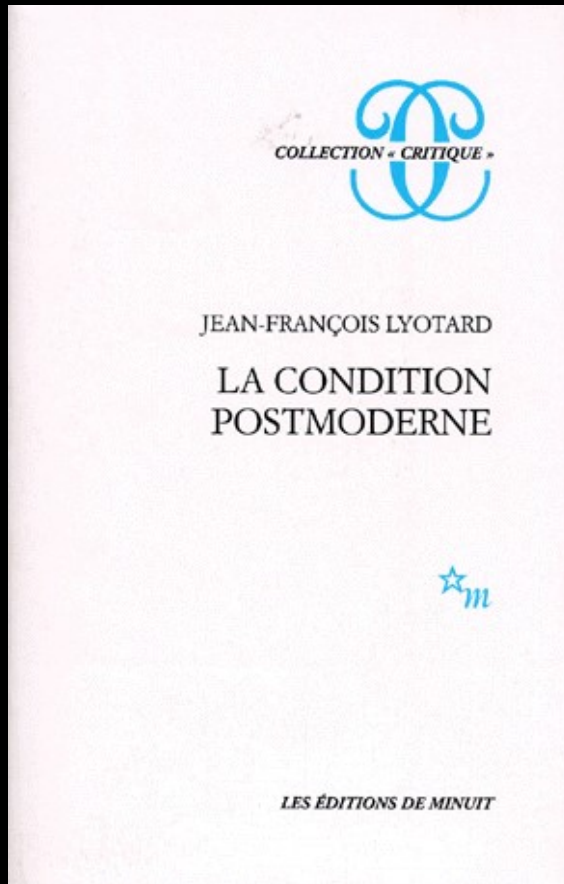
politics and history

intertextuality

examples from literature and film

Canadian fiction and postmodernism

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



**modernism:** 'grand narratives' (totalizing narratives or metadiscourses of modernity) -> the **Progress of Spirit** and the **March to Freedom** -> provide a unified and communicable meaning

**postmodernism:** 'little narratives' (or micronarratives, *petits récits*) -> no claim to a universal truth; questioning and problematizing the unified meaning, conventions, assumptions; self-critical

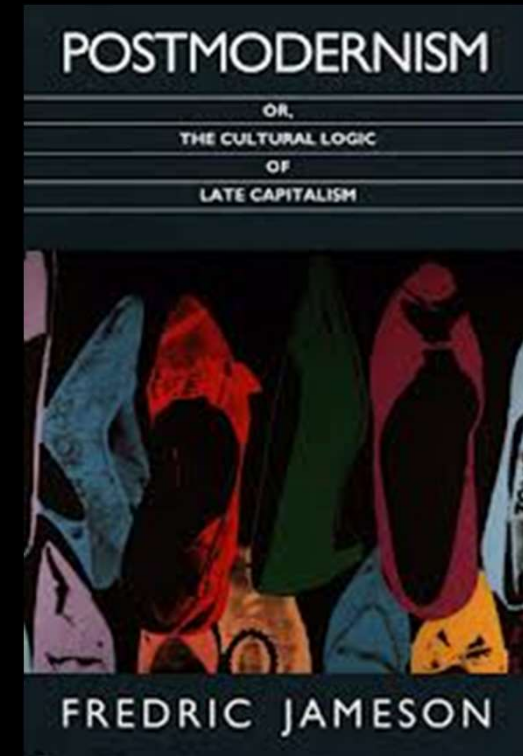
# Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” (1984)

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*  
(1887)

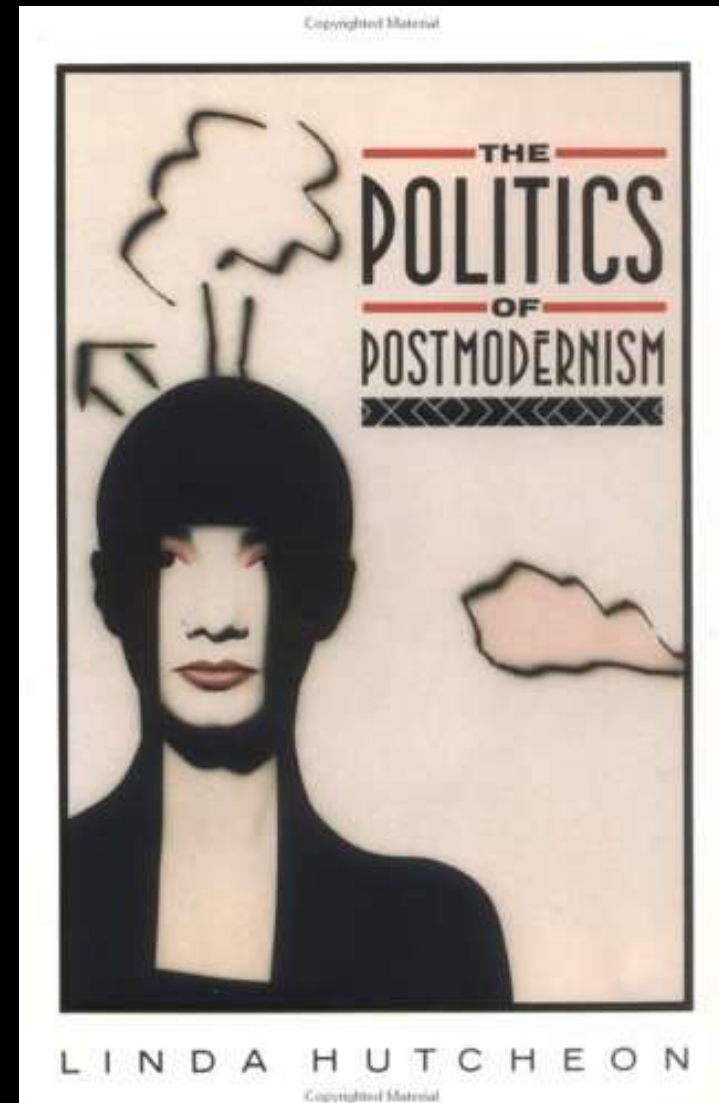


Andy Warhol, *Diamond Dust Shoes*  
(1980)



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).



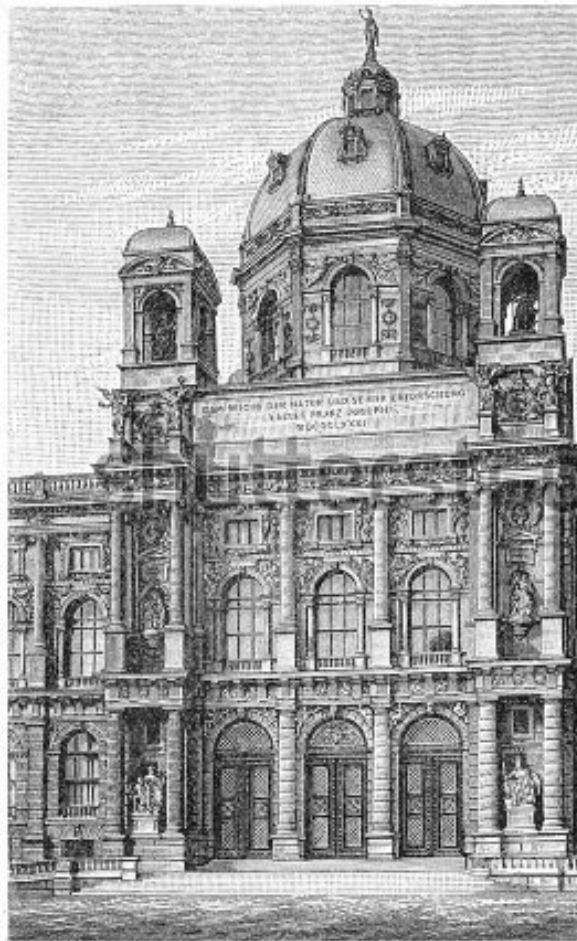
# Venice Biennale 1980 “The Presence of the Past”

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”

(Hutcheon, *A Poetics* 4)



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# Hutcheon's postmodernism

“critical revisiting and ironic dialogue” (*A Poetics* 4)

“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's **historiographic metafiction**

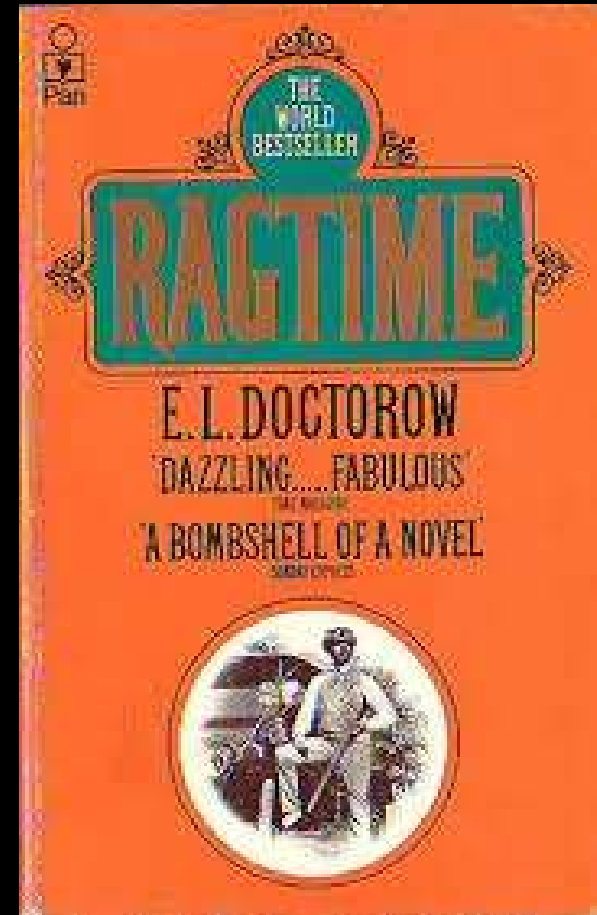
-> novels which are “both **intensely self-reflexive** and yet paradoxically also lay **claim to historical events and personages**” (“The Canadian Postmodern” 25)

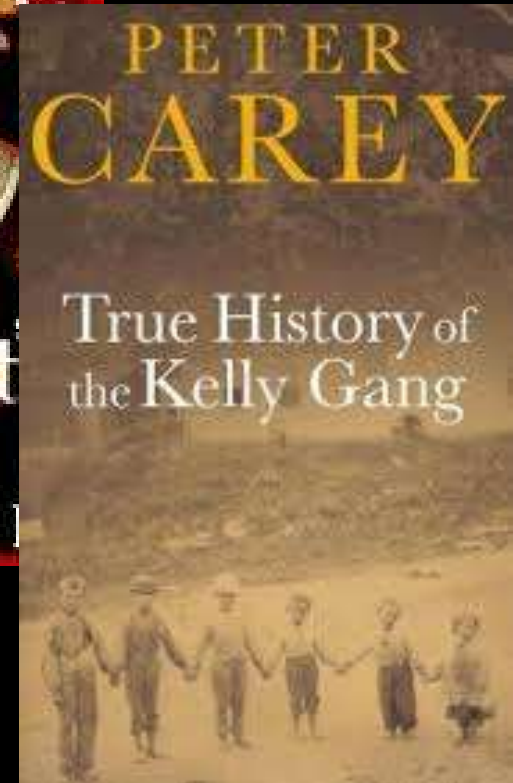
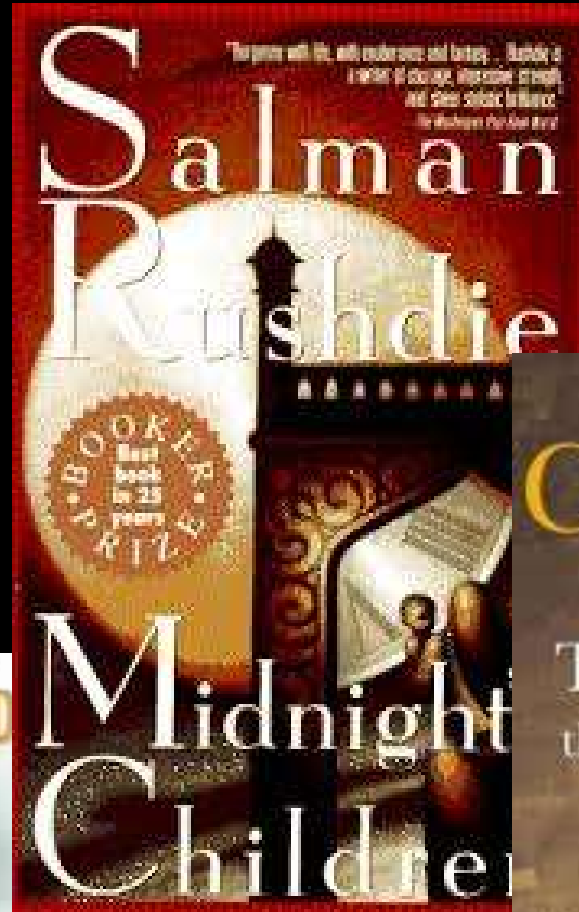
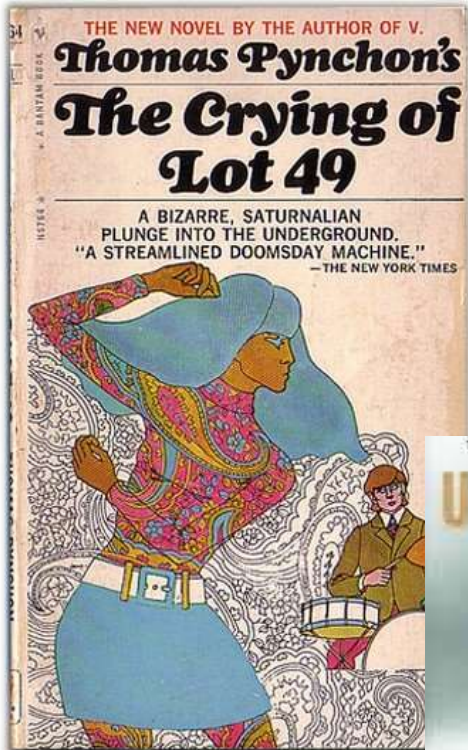
-> its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs

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

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

- 'imitating' a historical novel
- blurring fact and fiction
- intertextuality
- ambiguous 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 still possible to produce an original work of art today?



Michael Cunningham, *The Hours* (1998), film  
adaptation dir. Stephen Daldry (2002)

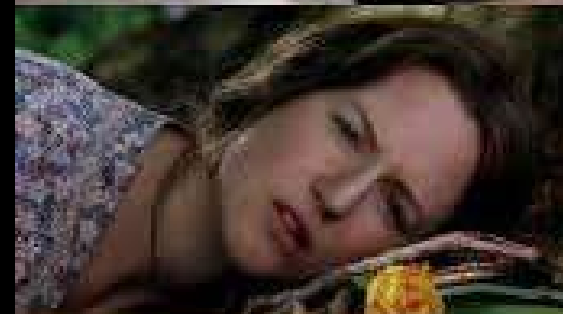
Virginia Woolf writing *Mrs.  
Dalloway* in the 1920s



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



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



# postmodernism and intertextuality

- *metatheatre*
  - Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966)
- *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
  - e.g. Margaret Atwood, *The Blind Assassin* (2000)
- representation of subjectivity -> meta-autobiography
  - e.g. Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975)
  - e.g. A. S. Byatt, *A Biographer's Tale* (2000)



## 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” and it took a distinct form (Hutcheon 18)
- Canadians are ‘**ex-centrics**’: position in the margin, **off the centre but in relation with it:**
  - Canada’s position between the US and Britain in international politics
  - Canada as culturally marginal (a former colony)
  - Canada’s identity has stemmed from regional impulses, e.g. Quebec, the West, the North/Arctic, the Maritime...

# The Canadian Postmodern

- 'ex-centricity' -> the Canadian, the postmodern, the feminist - seems 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 (British/American, male...)
- literary tradition: Susanna Moodie, Catharine Parr Trail, Emily Carr, Margaret Laurence, Mavis Gallant, Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro...

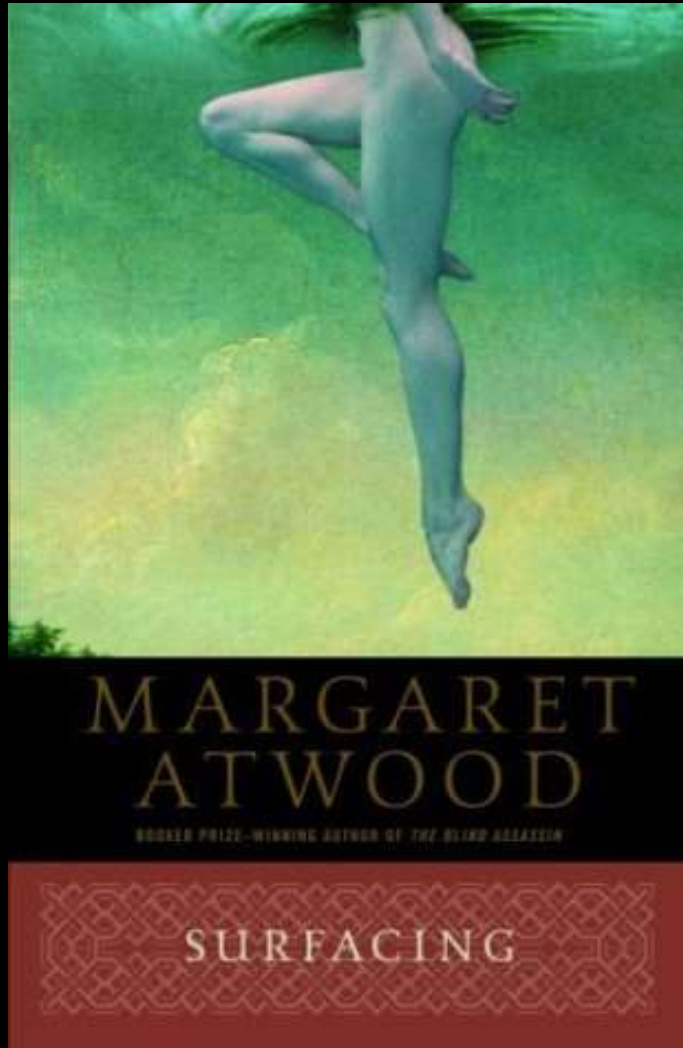
# The Canadian Postmodern

- **parody** to question authority -> inscribing canonical texts (identified as male, British/American, ...) and then subverting their status and authority (e.g. Timothy Findley, *Not Wanted on the Voyage*)
- “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*

# The Canadian Postmodern

- emphasizing difference in Canadian postmodernism through:
  - ethnicity
  - feminism
  - regionalism (the Pacific North West; the Maritime; Southern Ontario, the North.... + Francophone Quebec)
- “To render the particular concrete, to celebrate ex-centricity: this is the Canadian postmodern” (Hutcheon, “The Canadian Postmodern” 28)

# Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing* (1972)



- interplay of national identity, gender roles/feminist agenda, regionalism
- exploring and transgressing several dividing lines: city – country; Anglophone Canada – Francophone Canada; US – Canada; men- women; nature – culture; human-non-human;