



(Cognitive) Mapping the Backstreets of *Born to Run*

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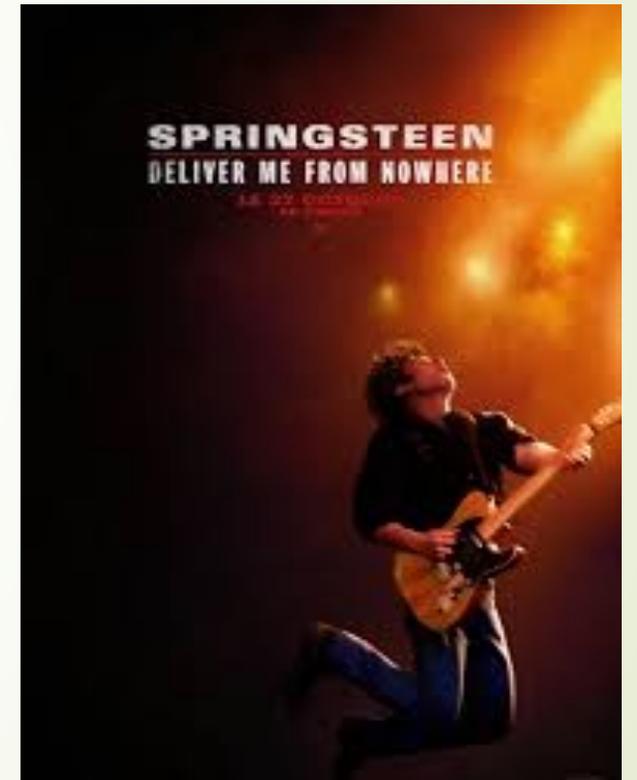
Why *Born to Run*?

- ▶ *Born to Run* was released in August of 1975, finally giving Bruce Springsteen the hit album that Columbia Records had demanded of him.
- ▶ Springsteen's career shifted from regional (and highly successful) artist to nation-wide phenomenon. The week of October 27, 1975, he was featured on the cover of both *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines.
- ▶ A bitter lawsuit with his manager Mike Appel stops his recording career for over a year, after the album's release.
- ▶ Upon his return to the recording studio, with his new manager, Jon Landau, he records an important studio album (*Darkness on the Edge of Town*) and then an album that aimed to capture the concert experience (*The River*).



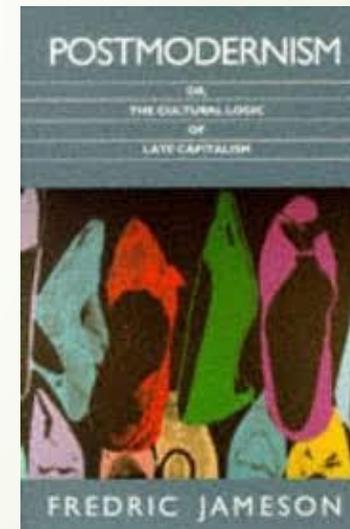
Why *Born to Run*?

- ▶ This album sets him up for international success, but a debilitating bout with depression leads to the recording of *Nebraska* instead of *Born in the U.S.A.* (this is the story of the film *Deliver Me from Nowhere*).
- ▶ From *Born in the U.S.A.* to the present day, his place in American music has been dominant. While sometimes misunderstood because of the title track from his 1984 album, he remains an important artistic voice concerning social and political questions.
- ▶ *Born to Run* is the artistic bridge between regional artist to international superstar artist.
- ▶ I wanted to revisit this seminal album to understand its resonance in this short timeline, in what it reveals about a moment in the United States in the period that has come to be known as “late capitalism”.



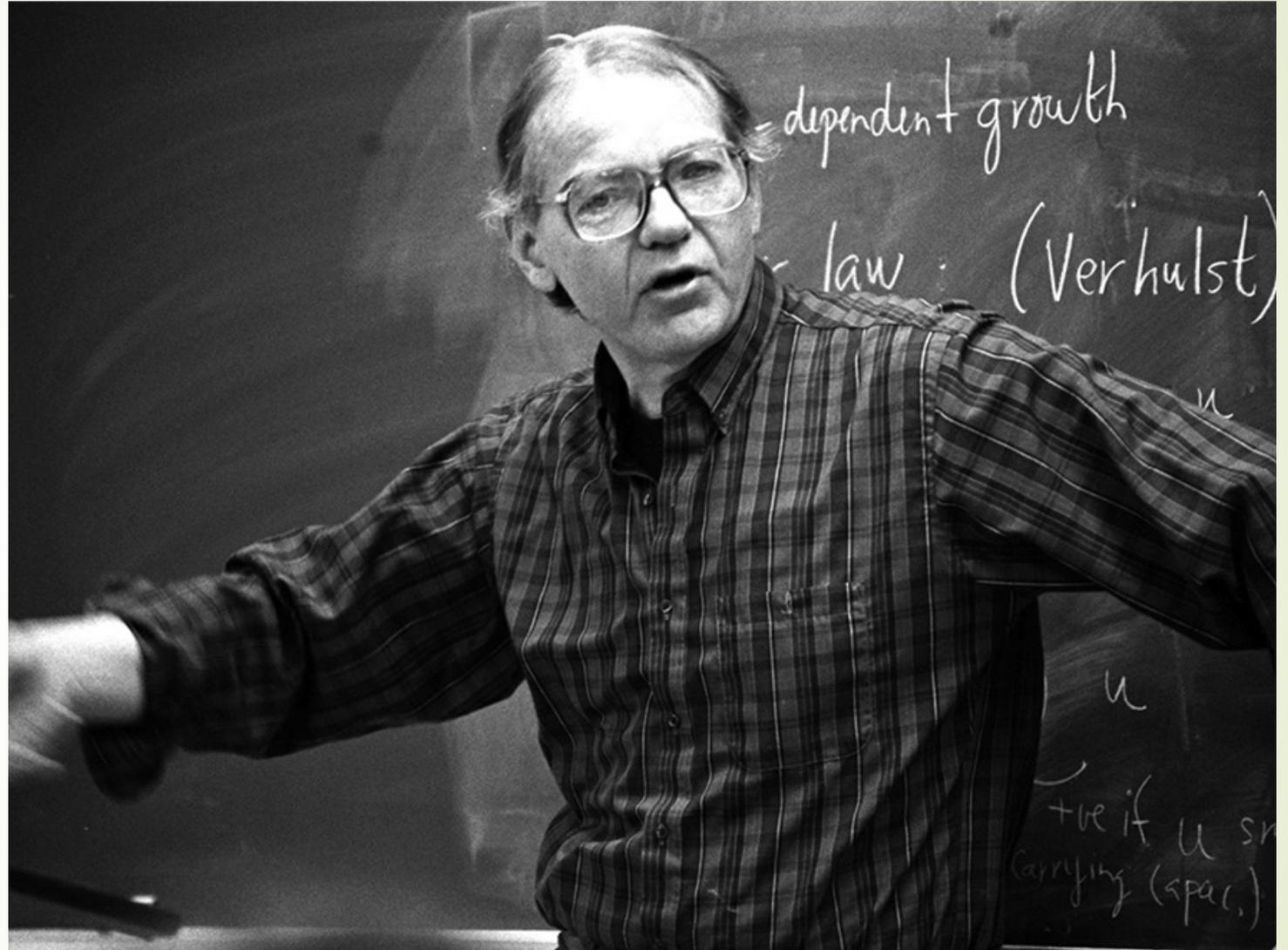
Why “Cognitive Mapping?”

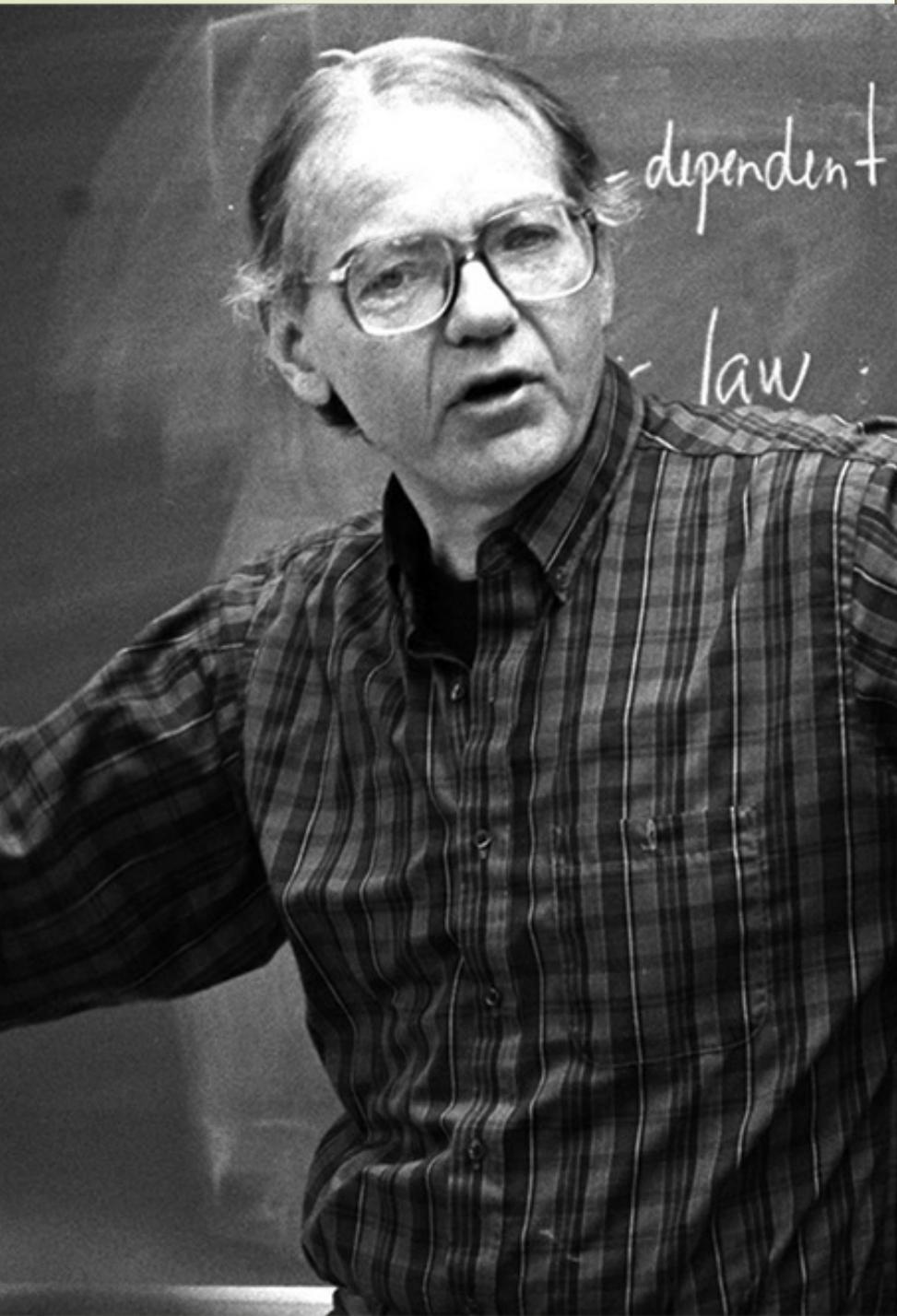
- The term “cognitive mapping” comes from the work of Fredric Jameson, perhaps the most prominent Marxist critic in the United States in the last 50 years.
- Jameson is best known for his work on postmodernism and his important 1991 study *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.
- “Cognitive mapping” is the term that emerges from the title essay of this book.
- But the method and its focus on popular culture began much earlier, notably with his *The Political Unconscious*, published in 1981.
- And in an important essay from 1979: “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture”.



Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture

- Jameson's theory in this article is that mass culture has not been properly understood as offering a critical site of capitalist society.
- At the time of his article, he notes that mass culture can be celebrated, mainly in reaction against high culture.
- This posture is anti-intellectual and weak in that it is purely reactionary.



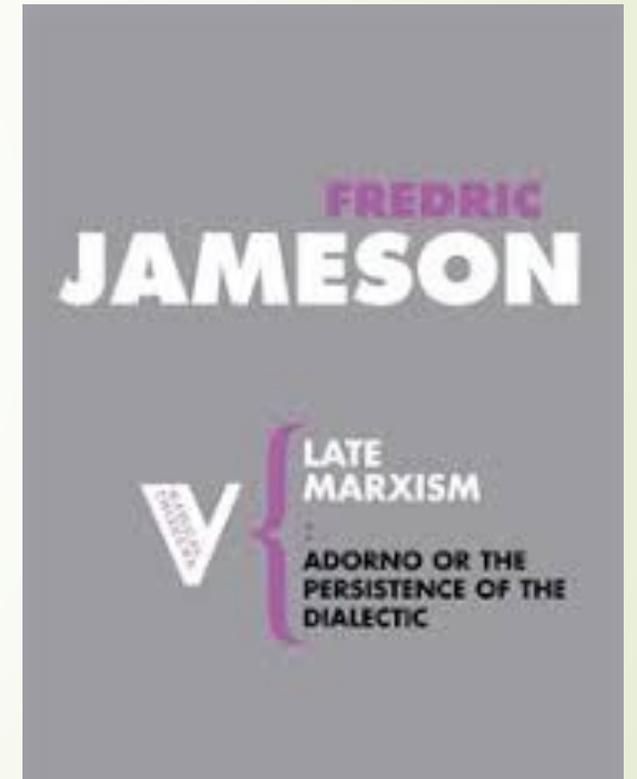


Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture

- The intellectual movement that takes popular culture seriously (and which Jameson greatly respects) is the Frankfurt School.
- With thinkers like Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Max Horkheimer, or Herbert Marcuse, this school of thought made deeply critical readings of reification, alienation, and the loss of sense or meaning centered around the rise of commodity or mass culture.

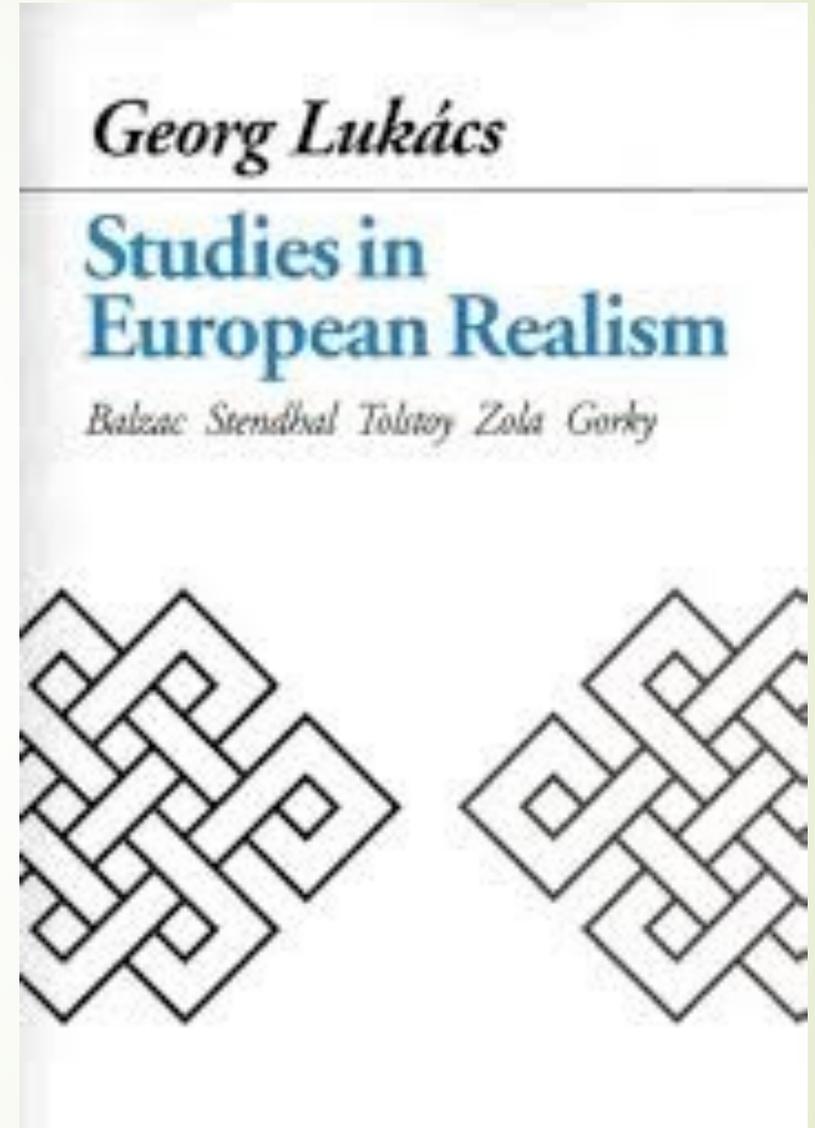
Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture

- ▶ In this tradition, one extreme position defended by thinkers like Adorno is that the work of art must resist commodification, “use,” or reification to have value.
- ▶ “Art for art’s sake” offers a work of art so turned inward on itself and so resistant to commodification that it offers a negative image of meaning in a world in which meaning has been endlessly reduced to a means/end logic.



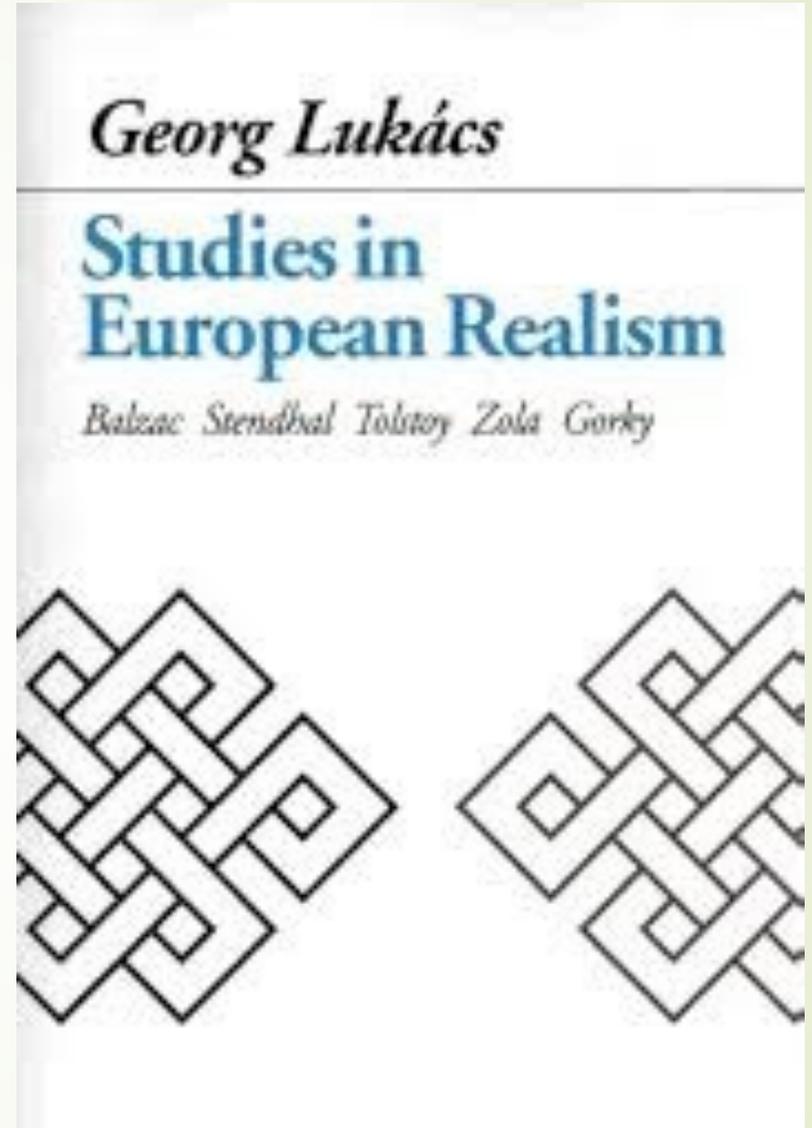
Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture

- ▶ The problem with such an approach is that the work of art is a purely negative object. Critique becomes almost an empty gesture.
- ▶ In contrast, Jameson reminds his readers that the Frankfurt School was in constant dialogue with the Hungarian critic and Marxist Georg Lukács, who defended a critique of commodities as expressions of their conditions of production.



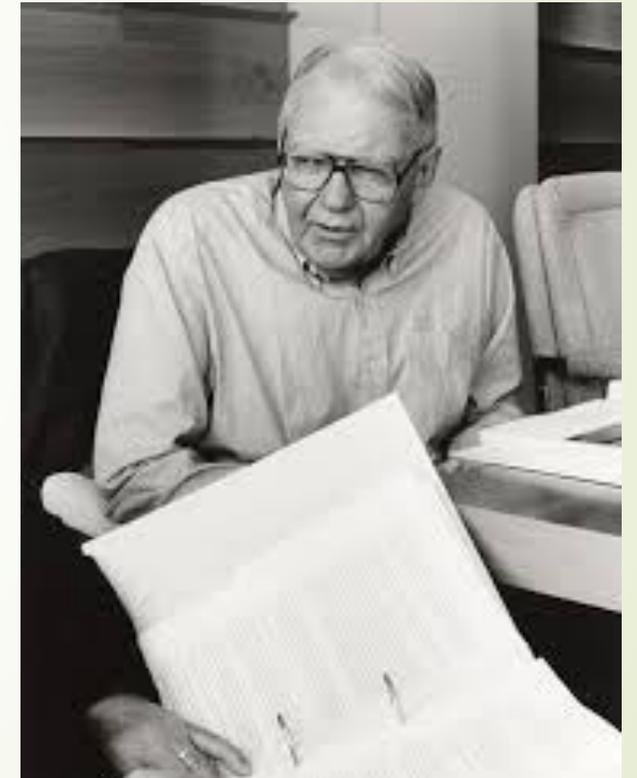
Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture

- ▶ Lukács is famously seduced by the work of Balzac as the perfect illustration of this theory:
- ▶ The artist as laborer, endlessly writing, turning out art as a commodity, with a content that depicts the larger mechanics of his increasingly alienated condition as laborer.
- ▶ Realism is both a **product** of this moment while also serving as its **diagnosis**, or “mapping”.



Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture

- ▶ Jameson argues that the “negative critique” of the Frankfurt School has proved ineffective, as commodification or reification has extended to high art.
- ▶ Everyone can have a Van Gogh t-shirt, a Warhol poster, or a Joyce-day tote-bag.
- ▶ He pleads for a position adapted from Lukács:
- ▶ Commodities as, yes, products of increasingly pervasive reification, but also offering an unconscious “map” of the conditions of their productions.
- ▶ This method might be summarized as “Why this work of art at this period of time? What are the conditions of its production and how are those conditions expressed in the work of art?”





Columbia Records, Bruce Springsteen, late capitalism

- Bruce Springsteen signed his record contract with Columbia Records (a division of CBS records in 1972).
- Discovered by John Hammond (who also discovered Count Basie, Aretha Franklin, Pete Seeger, and Bob Dylan, among many others), Springsteen is signed as a folk singer, in the model of Dylan.
- The structure of Columbia (and CBS) in the late 1960s and early 1970s is Fordist.
- The label was a semi-independent division of a vast broadcasting, advertising, and technology corporation. As such, Columbia owned its own studios, production factories, radio networks, and, of course, artists.
- Columbia's catalogue was also broad, running from rock and roll, folk, jazz, classical, to Broadway. In fact, the heart of its sales was in Broadway musicals.
- From a Marxist perspective, the structure remains in the model of monopoly capitalism.

Columbia Records, Bruce Springsteen, late capitalism

- ▶ Springsteen's contract was typical of any of the hundreds of artists signed by Columbia at the period: small advances for three first albums that would be supported by touring and a corporate marketing network.
- ▶ On the one hand, the sheer size of CBS Records and the depth of its artistic catalogue allowed CBS and Columbia to “waste” time on a number of artistic developments. For example, a folk singer who took several albums to find his voice could be supported by heavy sales in Broadway soundtracks.
- ▶ When that artist broke folk conventions and “went electric,” Columbia could “risk” the controversy because, again, of the sheer depth of its artistic catalogue.
- ▶ As part of a larger corporate structure, yet operating in relative independence, Columbia offered a unique “commercial temporality” to its most promising artists.



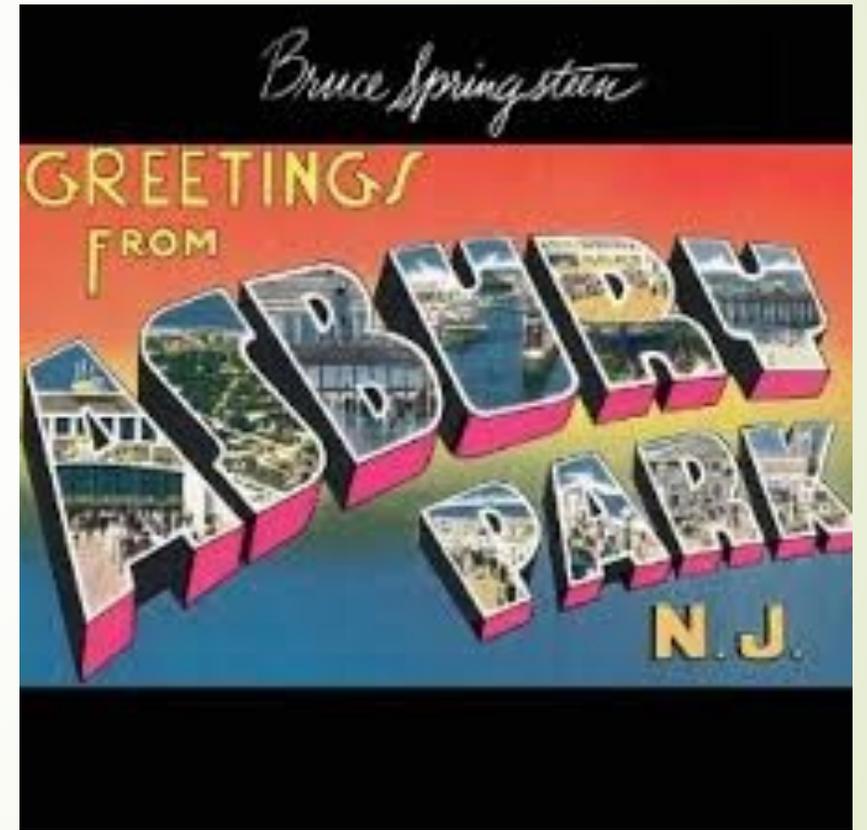
Columbia Records, Bruce Springsteen, late capitalism

- However, this system also came with a deeper corporate logic.
- Artists were expected to produce with in-house studio musicians.
- They were often forced into touring as opening acts with more established artists on the label.
- Touring was grueling and the turnaround time on album production in the contract was short and intense.
- The positions of leadership in such a structure were extremely powerful. Presidents and A&R executives could make or break careers as they wished.
- Springsteen nonetheless enjoyed the personal support of Columbia A&R executive John Hammond and president Clive Davis.
- But he disappointed in 1972 and 1973.



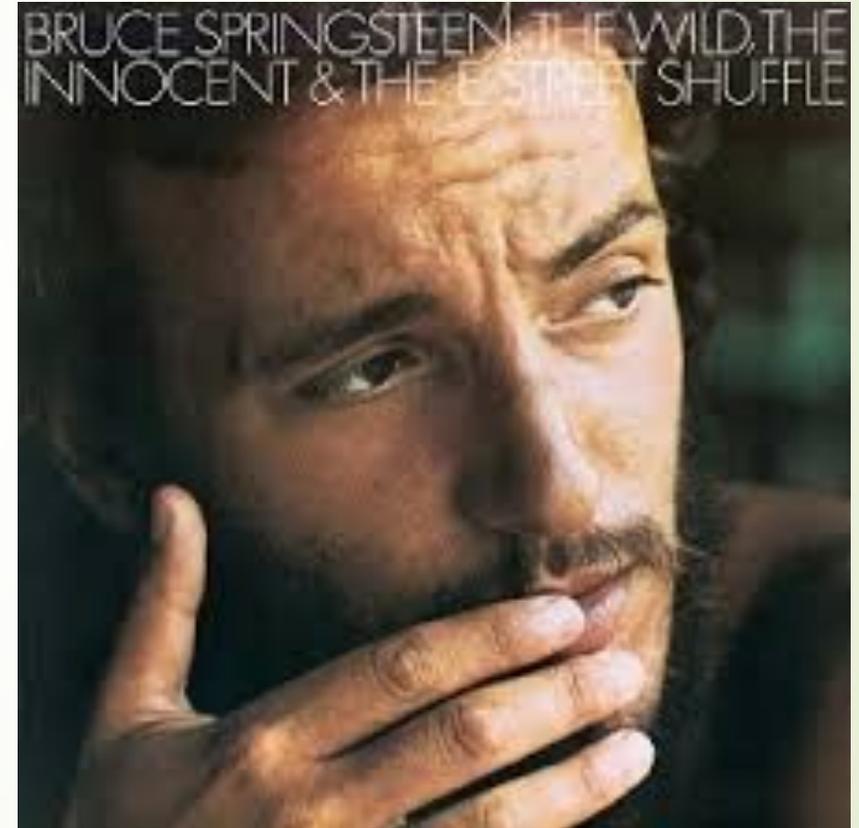
Columbia Records, Bruce Springsteen, late capitalism

- His first album, *Greetings from Asbury Park*, was supposed to be a folk-inflected “next Dylan” album, following his audition with Hammond.
- Springsteen insisted instead on adding an early version of the E-Street Band to record songs that more closely reflected his performing experience on the Jersey Shore.
- Davis at Columbia refused to release the album without the addition of solo “hit” songs, which Springsteen added at the last minute.



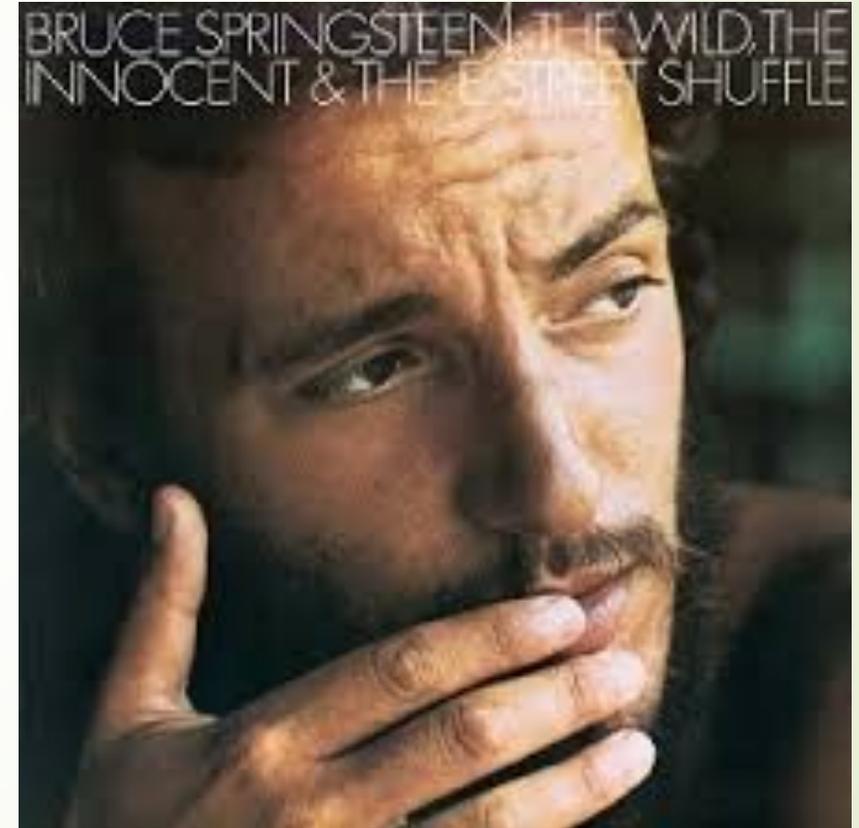
Columbia Records, Bruce Springsteen, late capitalism

- His next album, *The Wild, the Innocent, and the E-Street Shuffle* fully embraced the jazz/soul sound of the first official version of the E-Street band, repeating the artistic whims of his first album.
- Unfortunately, at this very moment, John Hammond retired and Clive Davis was fired from Columbia Records by CBS allegedly for abuse of his expense account.
- Davis was replaced by Irwin Segelstein, a television executive from CBS's broadcast division.
- CBS, faced with economic pressure from inflation, the oil crisis of 1973, a shrinking consumer market for albums (and underselling artists), was radically shifting its corporate logic.
- Gone was the Fordist investment and production structure, to be replaced by a stockholder logic that favored more rapid returns on investment and tighter links between CBS divisions into one, larger multinational corporate structure.



Columbia Records, Bruce Springsteen, late capitalism

- From a Jamesonian perspective, 1973 is important. It marks the beginning of important and fundamental shifts in capital flow towards increasingly anonymous and multinational stockholder structures, what is often called “finance capital.”
- The time of the almost “royal” executive (Clive Davis) and equally powerful A&R executive (John Hammond) comes to an abrupt close. Their personal tolerance for artistic freedom no longer receives corporate investment.
- The president who replaces Davis at Columbia had no recording or artistic experience and comes from television. Segelstein’s rise is emblematic of a general shift toward shorter attention and investment spans, the image over investment duration, and the rise of a logic of spectacle.
- A radical media shift is on the horizon (MTV will begin broadcasting only 8 years later) and CBS’s reorganization is part of this change.



Columbia Records, Bruce Springsteen, late capitalism

- By 1974, Columbia was ready to end Springsteen's contract after the third album.
- To honor its contract for the final album, Columbia and Segelstein demanded that Springsteen deliver a single for a new album that would finally be a radio hit.
- Springsteen's artistic horizon had suddenly been reduced to the production of one song. Gone were the rambling, wordy, songs of the previous two albums, with sudden rhythm and key changes.
- As he states in his biography and numerous interviews, his back was literally against the wall, and he had to rethink his relationship with recording to continue doing what he loved to do.
- He rented a small house in West Long Branch, NJ and listened endlessly to classic American rock and roll, deciding that what he needed was to create a studio album.





Columbia Records, Bruce Springsteen, late capitalism

- ▶ For this presentation, the choice of a “studio album” is very important.
- ▶ It is an artistic choice based on both form and content.
- ▶ The form is a unified whole. Each song reflects the “whole” of the content.
- ▶ The studio album also incorporates the studio as an instrument in the larger acoustic arrangement.
- ▶ The content of the album is reflected in its form.
- ▶ For Springsteen, this form is in the Phil Spector tradition of the “wall of sound.”

The Ronettes, “Be My Baby” (1963)

“Be My Baby” 0:00 – 0:52



Elements of the “wall of sound”

A full rhythm section.

Strong backbeat on 2 and 4 beat.

Dense percussion including glockenspiel.

No cymbals.

Doubling of instrumental tones or colors.

Dense mixing of the tracks to limit the microphone saturation or bleeding of the orchestra's multiple microphone configuration.

The effect is of a “wall” or “everything at once” aural experience of sound.

Columbia Records, Bruce Springsteen, late capitalism

- ▶ The aesthetic constraint of the “wall of sound” (and the specific mixing of the album) is important from a Jamesonian perspective.
- ▶ The aural sensation of fullness, of a sound “overflowing,” out of the studio appears to give the album a horizon that matches the economic horizon of Columbia: a national best-selling album.
- ▶ And yet, Springsteen is under constraint. The album will not see full production without a best-selling single.
- ▶ This is the internal contradiction that sends him into 6 months of grueling sessions with his band to produce the single “Born to Run”.
- ▶ The result “maps” out the contradictions in which Springsteen is working.
- ▶ An album that seems to celebrate the vast and open American dream, framed in a “wall of sound aesthetic,” but which also paints a picture of the increasingly limited artistic space afforded Springsteen.



The “wall of sound” introduction to “Born to Run”

“Born to Run” 0:00 – 0:55



Lyrics in tension with the aural effect

In the day we sweat it out on the streets of a runaway American dream

At night we ride through mansions of glory in suicide machines

Sprung from cages on Highway 9, chrome-wheeled, fuel-injected, and stepping out over the line

Whoah baby, this town rips the bones from your back

It's a death trap, it's a suicide rap, we gotta get out while we're young

'Cause tramps like us, baby we were born to run

The “cognitive map” of *Born to Run*

- ▶ Springsteen and Mike Appel deliver the single to Columbia in October 1974, and Appel leaked the single to radio stations to pressure Columbia into approving the album recording.
- ▶ The success of the single convinced Columbia to approve the studio sessions for 1974 and 1975.
- ▶ In grinding and perfectionist sessions throughout the following months, the album maintains the structural tension of the single.
- ▶ “Night,” “darkness,” “loneliness,” “prison,” “trap,” “ghosts”: this is the lexical field of an album that seemingly offers hope in its aural landscape of engines, horizons, roads, and desire.



“Thunder Road”: an invitation to escape

“Thunder Road” 3:05 –
3:53



Open roads filled with
ghosts and loss

- There were ghosts in the eyes of all the boys you sent away
They haunt this dusty beach road
In the skeleton frames of burned out Chevrolets
They scream your name at night in the street
Your graduation gown lies in rags at their feet
- And in the lonely cool before dawn
You hear their engines roaring on
When you get to the porch they're gone on the wind
So Mary, climb in
It's a town full of losers
I'm pulling out of here to win

“Tenth Avenue Freeze-Out”: the Jersey Shore

“Tenth Avenue Freeze-Out” 0:57 – 1:52



Solitude and desperation
cast as a Jersey Shore
celebration

- Well, I was stranded in the jungle trying to take in all the heat they was giving
The night is dark but the sidewalk's bright and lined with the light of the living
From a tenement window a transistor blasts
Turn around the corner, things got real quiet real fast
I walked into a Tenth Avenue freeze-out
Tenth Avenue freeze-out
- And I'm all alone, I'm all alone
(And kid, you better get the picture)
And I'm on my own, I'm on my own
And I can't go home

“Backstreets”: the grids of betrayal

“Backstreets” 1:08 – 1:50



Friendship as betrayal with a classic rock hook

- One soft infested summer, me and Terry became friends
Trying in vain to breathe the fire we was born in
Catching rides to the outskirts, tying faith between our teeth
Sleeping in that old abandoned beach house,
getting wasted in the heat
And hiding on the backstreets
Hiding on the backstreets
With a love so hard and filled with defeat
Running for our lives at night on them backstreets

“She’s the One”: an homage to the Bo Diddley rock and roll beat

“She’s the One” 1:25 –
2:24



Desire, rock and roll, and menace

- That thunder in your heart at night when you're kneeling in the dark,
it say's you're never gonna leave her
But there's this angel in her eyes that tells such desperate lies
and all you want to do is believe her
And tonight you'll try just one more time to leave it all behind and to break on through
Oh, she can take you, but if she wants to break you,
she's gonna find out that ain't so easy to do
And no matter where you sleep tonight or how far you run
Whoa-oh, she's the one
She's the one

“Meeting across the River”: a stylistic break, announcing the central tension of the album

“Meeting across the River” 0:26 – 1:09



Last chances and meetings on the artistic other side

- ▶ Hey, Eddie, can you lend me a few bucks?
Tonight, can you get us a ride?
Got to make it through the tunnel
Got a meeting with a man on the other side
- ▶ Hey Eddie, this guy, he's the real thing
So if you want to come along, you gotta promise
you won't say anything
'Cause this guy don't dance
And the word's been passed this is our last chance

“Jungleland”: crossing over to the other side and the “giant Exxon sign” of Manhattan

“Jungleland” 0:26 – 1:09



Taking a messy poetic stand

- The Rangers had a homecoming
In Harlem late last night
And the Magic Rat drove his sleek machine
Over the Jersey state line
Barefoot girl sitting on the hood of a Dodge
Drinking warm beer in the soft summer rain
The Rat pulls into town, rolls up his pants
Together they take a stab at romance
And disappear down Flamingo Lane
- Well, the Maximum Lawmen run down Flamingo
Chasing the Rat and the barefoot girl
And the kids 'round there live just like shadows
Always quiet, holding hands
From the churches to the jails
Tonight all is silence in the world
As we take our stand
Down in Jungleland

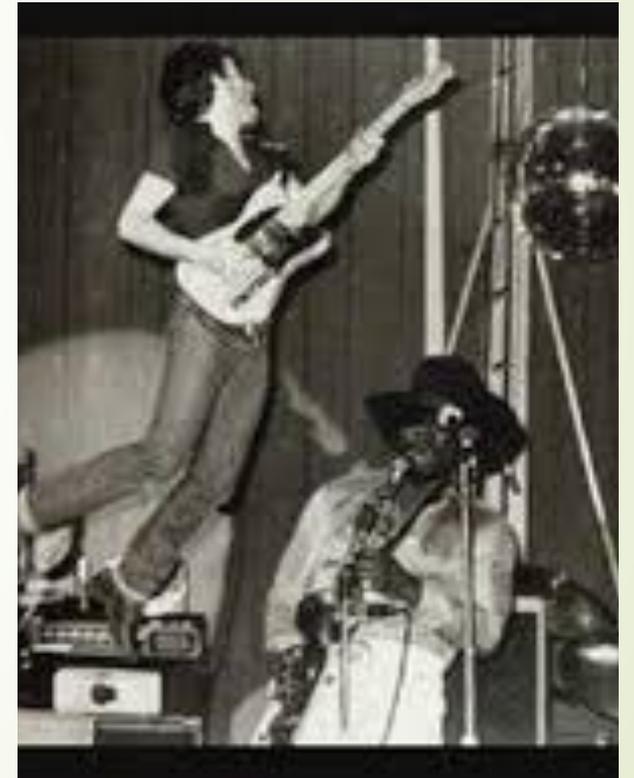
The “cognitive map” of *Born to Run*

- ▶ Jameson has always been careful to note that cognitive mapping is not programmatic.
- ▶ The “map” it offers is not definitive. “Cognitive mapping” points out the contradictions of late capitalism without mapping them from a “grand narrative” position of authority.
- ▶ This is why he calls his essay “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture” We consume commodities as part of false consciousness. We take great pleasure in not seeing or thinking about the violence of reification.
- ▶ Yet cognitive mapping turns that pleasure on itself and offers a glimpse of our false consciousness.
- ▶ For Jameson, commodities hold out this dialectical and utopian function.



The “cognitive map” of *Born to Run*

- ▶ The pleasure of the homage to the sound of 1960s rock and roll in *Born to Run* is coupled with “American dream” mythologies of the open highway, cars, escape, and “winning”.
- ▶ This is the utopia it sells to the uncritical listener.
- ▶ Yet the lyrics rub against all of this, even up to the form of the studio album.
- ▶ “Jungleland” is the bridge to the other side, where this cognitive map becomes at last visible, tracing out the moment of transition in the recording industry, caught between a dream and a commercial death.



“Jungleland”: artistic contradictions laid bare

“Jungleland” 7:58 – 8:42



A liminal poetic space

- Outside the street's on fire in a real death waltz
Between what's flesh and what's fantasy
And the poets down here don't write nothing at all
They just stand back and let it all be
And in the quick of a knife, they reach for their
moment
And try to make an honest stand
But they wind up wounded, not even dead
Tonight in Jungleland

The “cognitive map” of *Born to Run*

- ▶ There's much more to say about how Springsteen continues to walk this line, this liminal space between commodity and the conditions of its creation. He gives us many clues in his Broadway performance.
- ▶ “Ambivalence is my condition” he says in a recent interview.
- ▶ Jameson wrote his dissertation on Sartre, analyzing “the origins of a style”.
- ▶ Sartre famously left unfinished his great synthesis of Marxism and psychoanalysis applied to the artist, Flaubert, *L'Idiot de la famille*.
- ▶ What remains to be analyzed is Springsteen the artist in these conditions of late capitalism.

