Bruce Springsteen & Michel de Certeau - Absent Bodies

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Religion & Absent Bodies in Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life* and Bruce Springsteen’s *The Rising*

This paper brings Bruce Springsteen’s 2002 album *The Rising* about 9/11 into conversation with Michel de Certeau’s 1984 volume *The Practice of Everyday Life* – in particular his chapter ‘Walking in the City’. De Certeau begins by recalling the view from the World Trade Center (as was) and how this is akin to ‘looking down like a god’ but, more ordinarily, city dwellers have to live down below on the streets. He pursues this idea and concludes by arguing that a person’s journey through a modern urban landscape begins with oneself and, specifically, with one’s childhood. Thus, he states: ‘the childhood experience that determines spatial practices later develops its effects, proliferates, floods private and public spaces, undoes their readable surfaces, and creates within the planned city a “metaphorical” or mobile city, like the one Kandinsky dreamed of: “a great city built according to all the rules of architecture and then suddenly shaken by a force that defies all calculation.”’

The dialogue will not be a one-to-one process whereby a song by Springsteen is mapped to a point made by de Certeau. Rather, we shall note how the symbolic fields of Catholic philosopher and Catholic-raised singer/songwriter share common ground in faith and ritual. We explore three instances of where Springsteen and de Certeau have a shared field of symbolic production: 1) cities; 2) homes; and 3) stories. All three aspects of life are important loci for both of them in understanding the dynamics of the contemporary world and the tension between body and absent body plays a key role in each of these three fields. The paper will conclude with some general thoughts about wider implications.
1) *The City & the Absent Body*. De Certeau argues that the city is defined by a threefold operation: (i) production of its own space; (ii) substitution of ‘nowhen’ (a non-specific nowhere) for traditions; and (iii) the creation of a universal and anonymous subject, which is the city itself. In this de Certeau is pointing out how city dwelling often crushes the patterns of meaning which people need to live their lives. In coming to be, as large physical spaces, cities risk stifling the awareness of time within which people live. The sense of personal, individual identity is also lost due to the sheer mass of people who live alongside each other. Often in de Certeau’s thinking, then, the city is a place of forgetting and anonymity for individuals and the symbolic institutions that shape urban life. One of the tasks he embarks upon is to re-discover that symbolic life (tradition) in the city’s space.

Those urban dialectics of presence/absence, losing/searching, cityscape/spiritual site, find resonance across much of Springsteen’s *The Rising*. It begins with *embodied* reflections on *loneliness* (‘Once I thought I knew everything I needed to know about you – Your sweet whisper, your tender touch’) as the opening song ‘Lonesome Day’ explores feelings of loss and possible bereavement. This contrast between *embodied* themes and *absence* of body is developed over several tracks (e.g. ‘Into the Fire,’ ‘Nothing Man,’ ‘Countin’ on a Miracle’). ‘Empty Sky’ speaks about ‘an empty impression in the bed where you used to be’ and this sense of embodied absence reaches a culmination in the song ‘You’re Missing’ as Springsteen lists all the domestic details that remain in place following a bereavement. The sense of a body’s absence is heightened on that track by the opening stanza’s reference to shirts and shoes just left in a closet. Thus, Springsteen’s reflections on the loss of bodies from city streets come to a conclusion in one person’s *home*, which is another theme that de Certeau explores.
2) The Home & the Absent Body. De Certeau argues that in the symbolic desert of the city one of the primary settings for finding meaning is the domestic environment. He writes: ‘Only the cave of the home remains believable, still open for a certain time to legends, still full of shadows ... It is through the opportunity they offer to store up rich silences and wordless stories, or rather through their capacity to create cellars and garrets everywhere, that local legends permit exits, ways of going out and coming back in, and thus habitable spaces.’ Although Springsteen opens a number of windows onto various household environments (or ‘caves’, to use de Certeau’s term), such domestic settings have always played a much more ambiguous role in his songs. Frequently the home is something that his characters are seeking to escape from, so the theme of home and absent body is one that runs throughout Springsteen’s work. On The Rising this familiar theme is given a new perspective not only through an extended exploration of bereavement but in different ways, such as ‘Further On (Up the Road)’ where the symbolism of the absent body is not an expression of wanderlust (again a frequent trope in Springsteen’s work) but of hope that the song’s characters will be re-united after death ‘further on up the road’.

3) Stories of the Absent Body. Springsteen’s songs are often in the form of narratives, short stories or parables about modern, everyday American life and here we find another link with the work of de Certeau. For de Certeau not only do stories provide the narrative container for everyday life in the city, they shape everyday practices and this collection of what he calls verbal ‘relics’ provides the landscape of memory. Songs on The Rising (including the title track) give a narrative shape to the absent bodies of 9/11 and the feelings of bereavement felt by the immediate families and friends who lost loved ones as well as being felt more widely in the USA and across the world. The song ‘The
“Rising” itself can be heard as a song about someone caught up in the Twin Towers (a firefighter or worker – ‘Can't see nothin' in front of me, Can't see nothin' coming up behind’) or a song about resurrection and heaven (‘I see you Mary in the garden, in the garden of a thousand sighs; there's holy pictures of our children, dancin’ in a sky filled with light). And discussion about what sort of song this might be takes place across the internet. For example on the SongMeanings website one contributor responds: ‘I'd say you're overthinking this. "The Rising" is pretty clearly a literal story of a firefighter making a sacrifice in the face of great danger and evil. There's nothing "corny" or "embarrassing" about that. He CERTAINLY isn't singing about what the towers 'represented,' at least as far as American capitalism is concerned. He's using the story of the firefighter to tell the story of what he hopes for the country. He does this sort of thing repeatedly throughout The Rising and, in fact, throughout his career. He'll take a power[ful] story, give it a literal meaning, and make it a statement about something much more broad. Here he's talking about faith, redemption, sacrifice, hope, and forgiveness. On a song like "Born in the USA," for example, he tells the story of a Vietnam vet rather than stand on a soapbox and say "hey some of these policies are unfair and un-American." The real corniness would have come if he'd spent the album grandstanding. Instead, he tells powerful stories for every day people. It's rock and roll, it's brilliant, and it's not about just about the imagery and characters he uses, whether it be the story of a firefighter or Biblical allusions.’ That’s an example of the sensemaking from one listener and fan of Springsteen’s music.

In his pre-<i>The Rising</i> discussion of how Springsteen’s fans approached his body of work, Daniel Cavicchi observes: ‘Fans are not necessarily thinking about where they stand in an abstract, larger social order or how their fandom can change that order; rather they are concerned with how to get through each day
and how their participation in performance helps them to understand the fluctuating and contradictory experience of daily life and to make connections with other people around them.’ That brings us back to de Certeau’s thinking and the questions he addresses about how people who have grown up in a western culture that is shaped by the urban environment, even if they live in a rural area, find meaning for their lives.

So let me conclude by exploring briefly some of the wider implications of this and suggest three things. First, popular culture and its various musical manifestations are places where individuals and communities do a significant degree of their meaning making in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century. People turn to such artistic expressions to help them make sense of the world and their experiences within it – including events as momentous as 9/11. Second, such musical forms can share common ground with religious traditions and faith communities. Let me be clear, I’m not arguing that popular music is merely sublimated religion because the picture is much more complicated and nuanced than that. Both phenomena (religion and popular music) are located within the personal, spiritual, psychological, organizational and communal lives of people so it should be no surprise they share certain characteristics; and given that Christianity has long been embedded in Western culture it is only to be expected that motifs from that faith will find their way into artistic expressions of all kinds. So third and finally, what does this common ground look like? This goes beyond the immediate concerns of this paper but I think we can identify four shared themes in the worlds of popular music and religion – and in this instance, Christianity:

1. **Transcendence** – That sense of ‘Otherness’ which can be interpreted as an experience of God (a deity/divine reality) in whatever form ‘God’ is understood.
2. **Embodiedness** – obviously bodily experience is important to all human beings and especially to an incarnational faith like Christianity. Bodily absence is also part of this common ground in that human mortality raises all kinds of questions of meaning for believers and non-believers alike. Bodily absence is also the foundation of Christianity.

3. **Connectedness** – linking with others through *shared* experiences, *stories* of experiences and efforts at sensemaking *with* those experiences, is part of the social-psychological element of the practice of both music-listening and religion.

4. **Ritual** – if we are listeners to music of whatever kind then we are shaped by our practice; we form communities of listeners; we handle life-stages and crises; and express and explore who we are as people. The same thing can be said about the ritualised practices of religion.