ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S AMERICA

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America Through the Lens
*Martin Scorsese's America*, Ellis Cashmore
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to Andrew Hunter
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If you want to understand my films, you have to see the landscapes of my America.

Stéphane Delorme paraphrasing Abel Ferrara, *Cabiers du cinéma* (October 2011)

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All of us who worked learned a great deal from Hitch. . . . He became fascinated with America. . . . He became very interested in America and he became a very staunch supporter of America and American ideals.

Robert Boyle
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At seven o’clock in the evening of Monday, June 6, 1938, about an hour and twenty minutes before sunset, the Queen Mary docked at West Fiftieth Street and Twelfth Avenue, New York, and within the hour Alfred Hitchcock, his wife Alma, and their daughter Patricia stepped into the United States. Alfred and Alma would soon turn thirty-eight; Patricia would soon turn ten. Hitchcock had in fact been charmed by things American, especially the American city, since as a boy he memorized train and trolley schedules from printed pamphlets that had become his treasure. One of his biographers, Patrick McGilligan, suggests that “early in life he learned from Americans and practiced American strategies” and quotes Hitchcock’s self-estimation as an “Americophile” (“Dreams” 1). Now, under the stewardship of Kay Brown (1905–1992), David O. Selznick’s New York representative, and without much further ado, the Hitchcocks were bustled off to California for meetings with Selznick before their return to England. Within a year they would be back, this
time for good, landing in New York in early March 1939 and, by way of Palm Beach, reaching California by the end of the month (Spoto 214). As is evidenced by photographs taken on board the Queen Mary on that sailing, especially one of the three Hitchcocks marching merrily, side by side, and in lock-step along the sunny deck, the voyage was an unqualified delight and the prospect of living in America nothing less than a dream coming true (Païni and Cogeval 440).

In the summer of 1937 they had sailed over for a quick preliminary visit (arriving August 22 at 8 a.m., with the breakup of an intense heat wave) and had a taste of American style with Brown’s hospitality. “Their life in England, after all, was quite luxurious,” writes Donald Spoto. “As undisputed prince of the British directors, he had more control than any other filmmaker in his country’s history. He was also in great social demand, and his Surrey home never wanted for grateful guests” (185). Brown saw to it that he would be feted at “21,” where he gobbled filets, vanilla ice cream, and brandy to his heart’s content; then visit Saratoga Springs, to see “rocking chairs. Actual rocking chairs, with people rocking in them. If we have rocking chairs in England it is only as curiosities. But here you have them in real life as well as in the movies” (Hitchcock qtd. in Spoto 188) and “carefully [place it] all under the bell jar of his prodigious memory” (188); and Washington, D.C. For Hitchcock America looked the green pasture. The Hitchcocks as a family took warmly to Brown. She and her husband, the lawyer James Barrett, lived in a duplex on East Eighty-Sixth Street with their two daughters, Laurinda and Kate, young enough to be playmates for Patricia Hitchcock but never particular friends of hers. Early that first summer, the Hitchcocks were invited for a weekend in the Hamptons, at the Barretts’ summer rental, Windmill
Cottage, Amagansett. Nearby, on low wooden fences, blankets of primroses would have been in bloom. Laurinda, who became an actor and worked later for Hitchcock, recollects bonfire picnics at “our beach,” which would have been Indian Wells Beach, about half a mile down a narrow straight tree-lined road dotted with clapboard houses and ending in a vast stretch of lush dunes. “Hitchcock was such a cook,” she recollects. “I learned from him that the only way to cook corn is to leave it in the husk, soak it in salt water, and put it in the coals of the fire.” Barrett told me of a later visit to the Hitchcock home in Los Angeles while he was making *The Wrong Man*:

*I was invited to dinner, and while I was there – I can’t remember if Pat was there or not – but Alma was there. He decided he would show me the kitchen because it was pretty fancy. I remember him showing me a drawer with great pride. Instead of pulling it out squarely, you pull the drawer down so you have slots in it. He kept fourteen fry pans. He started to show me the refrigerator; it was a walk-in refrigerator. I was much taller than he was. He opens the door and goes in, and points to the cow that he had all cut up in various steaks and chops, all bundled and tied. “Well, Hitch, where’s the meat hook?” He was standing behind me. I felt this tapping on my right shoulder. I turned around. And there indeed was the meat hook hanging right off to my right-hand side. Just tap tap tap. (Interview)*

On the Amagansett beach, they always had champagne, and an endlessly beautiful vista of surf and sand in both

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1 Built by Samuel S. Babcock at the northwest corner of Montauk Highway and Windmill Lane, and operated as a guesthouse between 1880 and 1962. Other guests of the Barretts at the same location, but not at the same time, were Ingrid Bergman and Burgess Meredith (conversation with Laurinda Barrett, July 27, 2012).

2 In *The Wrong Man*, as one of the false accusers of Manny Balestrero.
directions as far as the eye could see. It was a taste of very old American hospitality that the Hitchcocks were getting on Long Island – the village of Amagansett was founded in 1630, and there were numerous early nineteenth-century structures, and even earlier ones, to be seen in addition to long swaths of old, quite enormous trees. Brown had been working out the deal her boss so fiercely desired, to have the celebrated Hitchcock working at Selznick International, fixed on his payroll and, as he would fantasize it, under his creative control. In the spring of 1939, newly arrived in Los Angeles, Hitchcock was assigned to direct *Rebecca* (Leff 39).

The translation to film of this very popular Daphne du Maurier novel was a signal undertaking for Selznick, who at the time was just finishing postproduction on *Gone with the Wind*. But it was not a thoroughgoing American project. Fundamentally an English story set in (constructed) British and French locales, *Rebecca* contained only one somewhat contracted reference to America or Americans, the character of Mrs. Van Hopper (Florence Bates). This wealthy widowed harridan, whose central preoccupations are the subjugation of a charming English girl and the obsequious admiration of an aristocratic English widower, shows off a particularly fawning and anxious side of the American character. Lost in the upper climes of the American middle class, and having no true European aristocracy upon which to model herself, Mrs. Van Hopper perfectly exemplifies a kind of desperation about self-image and social control that Hitchcock was eminently equipped to diagnose, detail, and replicate (since it is virtually impossible to come of age in the United Kingdom without gaining an articulate perspective on social class). In filming *Foreign Correspondent* immediately afterward, on loan-out to Walter Wanger, he was able to effect a more developed reprise, posting his central
American hero to war-torn Europe, an Old World that could now be made to seem quaintly puzzling even as it charmed the all-business reporter who was all enthusiasm, get-go, and make-do.³

Not all of the films Hitchcock made from 1940 onward in America can be said to be “American” in terms of their content, although they were all consistently produced through the agency of American studio practice. *Suspicion* (1941, with the American actor Joan Fontaine leading), *The Paradine Case* (1947, starring Gregory Peck as a London advocate), *Under Capricorn* (1949, starring Ingrid Bergman as a tormented Australian wife), *Stage Fright* (1950, starring Richard Todd as a two-faced English chorus boy), and *I Confess* (1953, starring Montgomery Clift as a Canadian priest) are thus excepted from consideration here, as are *Frenzy* (1972, with Barry Foster as a Covent Garden fruit dealer). *Topaz* (1969, an international spy thriller) is not centrally about America, although it has some American characters; and the same is true of *Dial M for Murder* (1953), with one well-meaning but marginal American in it.


³“Shortly after the war broke out, a small group of British expatriates in Hollywood began to meet to devise ways to confront American neutrality and promote England’s cause,” writes Patrick McGilligan. “Hollywood mirrored America with its split between citizens anxious to join the fight against Hitler and those – a peculiar alliance of America Firsters and Communists abiding by the Hitler-Stalin pact – who preached isolationism.” The group operated “as a virtual cell of British intelligence” for two years, including among its membership Boris Karloff and others. Hitchcock was brought to meetings (256).
In Topaz (Universal, 1969), a Cuban delegation to the United Nations headed by Rico Parra has taken up residence at the Hotel Theresa (Seventh Avenue and 125th Street). Here, the bodyguard Hernandez (Carlos Rivas) points out a fleeing man. Fidel Castro had occupied a two-room suite on the ninth floor there when he visited New York for the 1960 opening of the U.N. and the film reconstructs that visit. Courtesy Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.


Of these latter, Lifeboat merits some special mention. Made at Twentieth Century–Fox, with Hitchcock on loan-out from Selznick International; through the teamwork of Hitchcock, his partner Alma Reville Hitchcock, author John Steinbeck, playwright Jo Swerling, and producer Kenneth Macgowan; and starring Tallulah Bankhead, Henry Hull, John Hodiak,
William Bendix, and Walter Slezak, the film depicts the experience of nine survivors of a U-boat attack in the mid-Atlantic. One of these is a German, as it turns out the captain of the U-boat himself (Slezak). The others suffer through the torments of being lost at sea without a compass, parching thirst and hunger, storms, and the fear that the wily German is leading them surreptitiously to a rendezvous with his own supply ship, on which they will be taken prisoner. A particularly desperate survivor is Gus Smith (né Schmidt (Bendix)), a sailor whose leg has been so severely wounded that gangrene has developed and he must have an amputation at sea,
at the hands of the German captain, no less, a doctor in civil-
ian life. Produced through the great technical expertise of
Fred Sersen, with crisp, even alluring cinematography by
Glen Macwilliams and design by James Basevi (who had
achieved the astonishing storm effects for John Ford’s The
Hurricane [1937]), the film is shot almost exclusively on a rear-
projection stage where the seascape plates are seamlessly
blended with soundstage photography of the rolling boat.
Some of the twilight sequences – such as one in which the
ship’s steward (Canada Lee) recites the Lord’s Prayer at the
funeral service of a young woman’s deceased infant – are
directed and photographed with profound aesthetic force.

Hitchcock’s grasp of social class relations and the tiny
revealing indices of class membership was more than articu-
late and precise. He was never unaware of the class implica-
tions of his characters’ relationships, indeed often architected
his films in order to highlight class difference as an explana-
tion for what might otherwise be seen as arbitrary behavioral
thrusts. There are two very significant revelations of the class
structure of American society in Lifeboat. First, we have the
sharply drawn portraits of various American characters’ atti-
tudes toward, and resentments about, the self-made million-
aire C. J. Rittenhouse (Hull), owner of several companies
including a shipbuilding concern.4 Happy to be saved out of
the sea and eager to show how chummy he can be in situa-
tions as unfortunate as this, Rittenhouse begs his boatmates
to call him “Rit.” But Kovac (Hodiak), the working-stiff hero
from the engine room, and Gus, even in the agonies of his
pain, are both notably put off by this false gesture of equa-
nimity. They can see plainly that even though he’s the most

4The shipbuilding magnate will return to Hitchcock in the persona of
Gavin Elster in Vertigo; and will play an off-camera role in the narrative of
Psycho.
philosophical and principled person onboard, “Rit” won’t take a cigar out of his mouth or stop signaling his wealth and dominance. Accordingly, they use a slight turn of vocalization when uttering his nickname, as if to say, “We call you what you command us to, but not because we feel friendly.” The hierarchy that indelibly differentiates Rit from Kovac became palpable early in the film. Coming aboard the boat, Kovac fished some cash out of the water, but meeting Rittenhouse he sighed and pressed the money into the tycoon’s hand, a gesture plainer than words: “You are the one with all the money; you will always be the one with all the money; this would seem naturally to belong to you.” Kovac is labeled a “fellow traveler” by Connie Porter, an ostensibly cold-hearted journalist/documentarian (Bankhead), mostly because his socialist views are expressed sloppily, one suspects, and she is herself too classy to appreciate his rudeness. Evident in his attitude toward Rittenhouse is a deep-seated Schelerian ressentiment, a refusal to acknowledge that he himself desires to have what Rittenhouse already possesses. As Kovac and Rit play poker, the betting quickly climbs out of Kovac’s range.

A second illumination of class relations occurs in a quiet love scene between Connie and Kovac, in which she reveals to him one of the secrets of her now-glamorous professional life: she was born, like him, on the south side of Chicago – the meat-packing district – and was able to take the up elevator only because she became involved with a wealthy man who bought her a diamond bracelet. With the bracelet as her key to success she soon found her way to the Gold Coast. Connie’s sophistication, substantial cultural capital, and social

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5 North of Chicago’s miracle mile, an extremely elite enclave first developed when Potter Palmer moved there after 1882. In *North by Northwest*, Roger Thornhill will also find his way there (to the Ambassador East Hotel) after a cropduster doesn’t manage to kill him.
command are only put-ons, evidence perhaps for the traditional American claim that everybody can make it yet also proof that for many – Connie is not alone – success is all show. Hitchcock knows that the only people who make it without having been there all along are the ones who have been handed directions to a secret passage, in Connie’s case the bracelet. She gives it up to the group so that they can use it as bait to catch a fish, and indeed they do, but at the same moment the African American steward Joe sights the German supply ship and in excitement the fishing line is let go and the fish, Connie’s bracelet, and the twine all slowly recede into the sea.

The America that Alfred Hitchcock knew as the 1940s became the 1950s was filled with energetic social climbers and dreamers, people convinced they inhabited a classless utopia where success and wealth could be theirs by entitlement. It was in every man’s power to transform himself and his world in this society that was rapidly accommodating to the grand shifts of modernity and marshaling its economy for the gear-up to war production and the rationalization of consumerism and advertising that burgeoned in the 1950s. Technical infrastructure was being developed – the interstate highway system and its road culture, for example – while the expansion of the cities into newly developed suburbs, the explosion of media with the growth of television, the social changes accompanying the redomestication of women, and the climate of pervasive fear occasioned by the Cold War all produced tensions, frustrations, and desires hitherto unimagined in a culture that had been stable and agrarian. The population was shifting away from the farm, toward the cities and suburbs, in a trenchant mobility both physical and social; jettisoned as dead weight were the consistencies of Victorian morality. Marital strain, psychoanalysis, space travel – all these were invoked or established by the late 1950s. Not only
did this atmosphere of excitement, yearning, optimism, and deep-seated fear inspire Hitchcock’s work, but the new country displaced him: if not from his class roots and class consciousness then at least from many of his old working relationships, since the producers, cinematographers, and designers who had collaborated with him in England were unavailable – indeed often considered undesirable – in a Hollywood tightly gripped by unionized American workers. We can see that Hitchcock made the transition with ease because *Rebecca*, as a first American film, is a virtually flawless technical production. But culturally he was still itching. George Perry notes that although “he clearly had a great love for his adopted country and things American, relishing the variety and vastness of the landscape, the diversity and occasional eccentricities of its people,” he might “complain about some aspect of American bureaucracy that was irking him. Perhaps his airmail copy of the *London Times* had been held up and was a day late, or Washington had decreed that the succulent Melton Mowbray pork pies he liked to have flown in from Fortnum & Mason no longer complied with the FDA’s fierce standards” (37).

Some of the influential cultural events and transformations that Hitchcock would have experienced as a worker in America – just to give a cursory kind of glance at the era, the place, and the temper of the times without paying attention to the Second World War, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, or any dedicated military contest: nylon stockings (1940); the Pentagon (1943); FDR winning a fourth term as president (1944); atomic bomb tests (1946); the creation of the Central Intelligence Agency (1947); the UNIVAC computer (1951); the Cuban Revolution (1953); color television (1953); the civil rights movement (1955); Sputnik (1957); the Barbie doll (1959); the Playboy Club (1960); the failed Bay of Pigs invasion (1961); Bob Dylan’s debut (1961); the JFK
assassination (1963); the Beatles in the U.S.A. (1964); the National Organization of Women (1966); the synthesis of DNA (1967); Martin Luther King and Robert F. Kennedy assassinated (1968); Neil Armstrong stepping onto the moon (1969); Jeffrey Miller and other students being shot at Kent State University (1970); Nixon in China (1972); the Watergate break-in (1972); the resignation of Richard M. Nixon (1974); the Apple personal computer (1976); the American bicentennial (1976).

In cinema: the three-dimensional camera movement in the animated *Pinocchio* (1940); the controversial *Citizen Kane* (1941); his cherished friend Carole Lombard perishing in a plane crash (1942); the trial of the Hollywood Ten (1947); Twentieth Century–Fox programming for television (1949); James Stewart sharing in film profits, with *Winchester ’73* (1950); VistaVision (1954); Joseph Breen replaced as Hollywood censor (1954); a rock sound track for *Blackboard Jungle* (1955); death of Humphrey Bogart (1957); death of Marilyn Monroe (1962); “Star Trek” (1966); the end of the Production Code (1968); the videocassette recorder (1974); *Jaws*, the beginning of blockbuster cinema (1975).

While Hitchcock did not make explicit reference to developments such as these, or to many of the ongoing political machinations that made for daily news; and while he hardly strove to substantiate David Lehman’s claim for the overriding theme in Hitchcock’s America, that “paranoia is sometimes a reasonable response to events in a world of menace” (29), his films were diligently faithful in their representation of the look and style of American everyday reality and did repeatedly focus on the “uncertainty of appearances” that Marshall Deutelbaum notices in *Saboteur* and elsewhere. His

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6Excepting the Central Intelligence Agency, which moves the story of *North by Northwest* and figures prominently in *Topaz.*
characters are fully sprung from the American crowd, much as though in making them he were some reincarnation of Baudelaire’s “painter of modern life,” mingling with strangers in the marketplace and quickly seizing their characteristics for his sketches. As a visionary adept at noticing and encapsulating tiny nuances of behavior, attitude, and conviction he was unparalleled in Hollywood. Consider even a small variegated cluster of portraits: the humiliated and snubbing expression with which Mrs. Van Hopper wishes her companion (Joan Fontaine) happiness in her just-announced marriage to Maxim de Winter (Laurence Olivier): the nose upraised, the smile not merely forced but virtually cranked onto the lips, the head thrown back as though confronting an impossible odor:

MRS. VAN HOPPER (with withering sarcasm): Mrs. de Winter.
(with a sour laugh): Good-bye, my dear, and good luck.

Or the traditionalist Mr. Kentley (Cedric Hardwicke) in Rope, politely declining a glass of champagne but eager to have his hands on a good solid glass of Scotch on the rocks. Again with alcohol (something Hitchcock knew intimately): in Rear Window, as Jeff (James Stewart) tries to convince his chum Doyle (Wendell Corey) that something strange is going on in the courtyard, Lisa (Grace Kelly) emerges from the kitchenette with three snifters of brandy, silently hands them around, begins a swirling motion with her wrist. Doyle picks it up like a bright monkey, swirling his wrist, too, as does Jeff. Lisa is all about the “right” way of doing things. Or consider the droning, stupefying voice of the coroner in Vertigo (Henry Jones), that echoing singsong phrasing and nasally inflected boredom as, summarizing the sad death of Madeleine Elster, he feels obliged to point to Scottie’s “lack of initiative.” Or
Rita the cleaner in *Marnie* (Edith Evanson), eager to finish her work so she can go to bed. Or the pathetic East German bodyguard Gromek (Wolfgang Kieling) in *Torn Curtain*, confessing nostalgically to Michael (Paul Newman) and Sarah (Julie Andrews) that he used to live in New York, used to eat at Pete’s Pizza, Eighty-Eighth and Eighth. The exorbitant fondness and pristine particularity of Gromek’s happy memory, as though dragged up from a dream childhood: he is like Hitchcock, an immigrant so absorbed with American culture that its fragments become embedded as treasures.

It is impossible to claim that this book constitutes a complete analysis, of either American culture or Hitchcockian film, and much could be said, about America and about Hitchcock, beyond what takes shape in these limited pages. The considerations that follow treat Hitchcock’s screened America as a locus of land- and cityscapes, personalities, values, social forms, and marriages – arbitrarily chosen features of American experience useful because they permit a certain organization of analysis, a hopefully refreshing reexamination of much-considered films, and a fidelity to the deep structures of American organization, behavior, and design that an astute observer such as Hitchcock would have been likely to notice and take interest in. My intention with this small book is to raise new questions and considerations, challenge viewers to look at Hitchcock’s wonderful films yet again, and see in his work an illumination of American form and life that has perhaps not been shown before in this way. Hitchcock’s films are seen here only in fragments, such as are necessary for the analyses at hand. I try to make a point of avoiding or at least diminishing conventional, canonical readings of Hitchcock films: for example, *Rear Window* as a murder mystery, but also a metaphor for cinema because of the limited window frames through which we see the action; *Vertigo* as a tale about haunting, love, and masquerade; *The
Trouble with Harry as a charming little murder comedy; North by Northwest as a picaresque adventure about mistaken identity; Psycho as a personality study; Torn Curtain as a spy story; Shadow of a Doubt as a dark melodrama; Rope as a study in psychopathology; Saboteur as an anti-Nazi war film; The Birds as a mystery about man and nature, and so on. Such readings as these, given out as fundamental refreshments, have been so often published and republished, so thirstily imbibed, that it has become difficult to penetrate the froth of theory and repeated observation in order to see and re-experience much of the delicacy, charge, and meaning that is available for us. I want here to work toward grasping how it is that Hitchcock’s American stories could not have been set anywhere else.

If I make bold to concentrate on tiny moments, gestures, angles, or other nuances of depiction, the reader should never forget that beyond his penetrating philosophy and arch wit Hitchcock was at heart a designer, who conceived his camera setups in physical terms and his screened images as carefully composed pictorializations. Laurinda Barrett was one of a small army of performers who worked for him, but her recollection of even a tiny engagement in The Wrong Man nicely exemplifies the Hitchcock method:

I remember the scene: police lineup. I remember offering to move, and being told that I couldn’t move a muscle, and do exactly what you’re told. I remember him showing me the pictures, and showing a window shade across the street at a certain level, and at a different level in the next shot. The fact that as an actor you didn’t have to do anything, you didn’t have to offer anything original, even a little breath of anything. I got the impression I wasn’t permitted to do it. I thought, “Ooo, I’d better shut up here.” He wouldn’t allow it at all, but he showed me the shots and he said, “That’s what every shot is.” He didn’t do anything else but what
be drew on those pieces of paper. They were all followed systematically and to the letter. (Interview)

It may help to remember that for fully seventeen years it was as a British citizen that Alfred Hitchcock lived and worked in the United States. On April 20, 1955, during pre-production of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (on the day a cable arrived with the news that Niall MacGinnis would probably not be available to play Drayton [Meiklejohn], and at a moment when consideration was being given to the words the dying Frenchman Louis Bernard would whisper into Ben McKenna’s ears), Henry Bumstead drove him over to the Los Angeles County Court where he swore the oath and became

Jo McKenna (Doris Day) and her son Hank (Christopher Olsen) singing “Que Sera, Sera” in *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (Paramount, 1956). The gown is by Edith Head. The opulent set was designed by Henry Bumstead and built on Paramount’s Stage 1. Courtesy Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.
an official American (Spoto 388). In a charming way, then, *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, an American family’s encounter with the darkest side of European power struggles and a horrid personal misfortune, became Hitchcock’s first “true” American film. Ben McKenna’s tongue-tied exasperations; Jo Conway’s frustrations both as a mother who believes she has lost a child and as a performer who believes she has lost her career; the kidnapped child’s wide-eyed astonishment at the nefarious spectacles opening around him — all this brilliantly formalizes Hitchcock’s own encounter, both with America and with the possibilities of cinema.

Not only Hitchcock’s encounter, I should finally confess. In 1956, when this film came out, I, too, was ten years old, just like Hank (whom I watched at Shea’s Buffalo, my parents having driven us across the border just for such an opportunity). If not my very earliest encounter with film as spectacle and marvel, or with America, *The Man Who Knew Too Much* it was that first opened me to film’s intensity, its mystery, and its delirious complication, and to the American family as a strangely warped mirror of my own. With gratitude to Alfred Hitchcock in memory, then, I dedicate these thoughts.
When from a strategic promontory in the twenty-first century we look upon the cultural space of America, it seems preponderantly urban and to a significant degree internationalized. The American modern spatial form, largely agglomerated urban development characterized by dense clusters of skyscrapers and vast surrounding tracts of suburban sprawl, is also to be found in Europe, Asia, South America, Australia, and parts of Africa, but in America it somehow seems aboriginal, natural, characteristic, unimposed. While in the United States there are pastoral regions spreading across parts of the south and the Midwest – central Georgia, southern Illinois, New Mexico, Arizona are some – the typical image of the American scene today is neither a pasture nor a tiny village nor a meandering river with paddle-wheelers churning upstream, but instead a seemingly endless interlocking chain of expressways jammed with vehicular traffic and a cityscape remarkably unchanging from Boston to Minneapolis to New Orleans to San Diego,