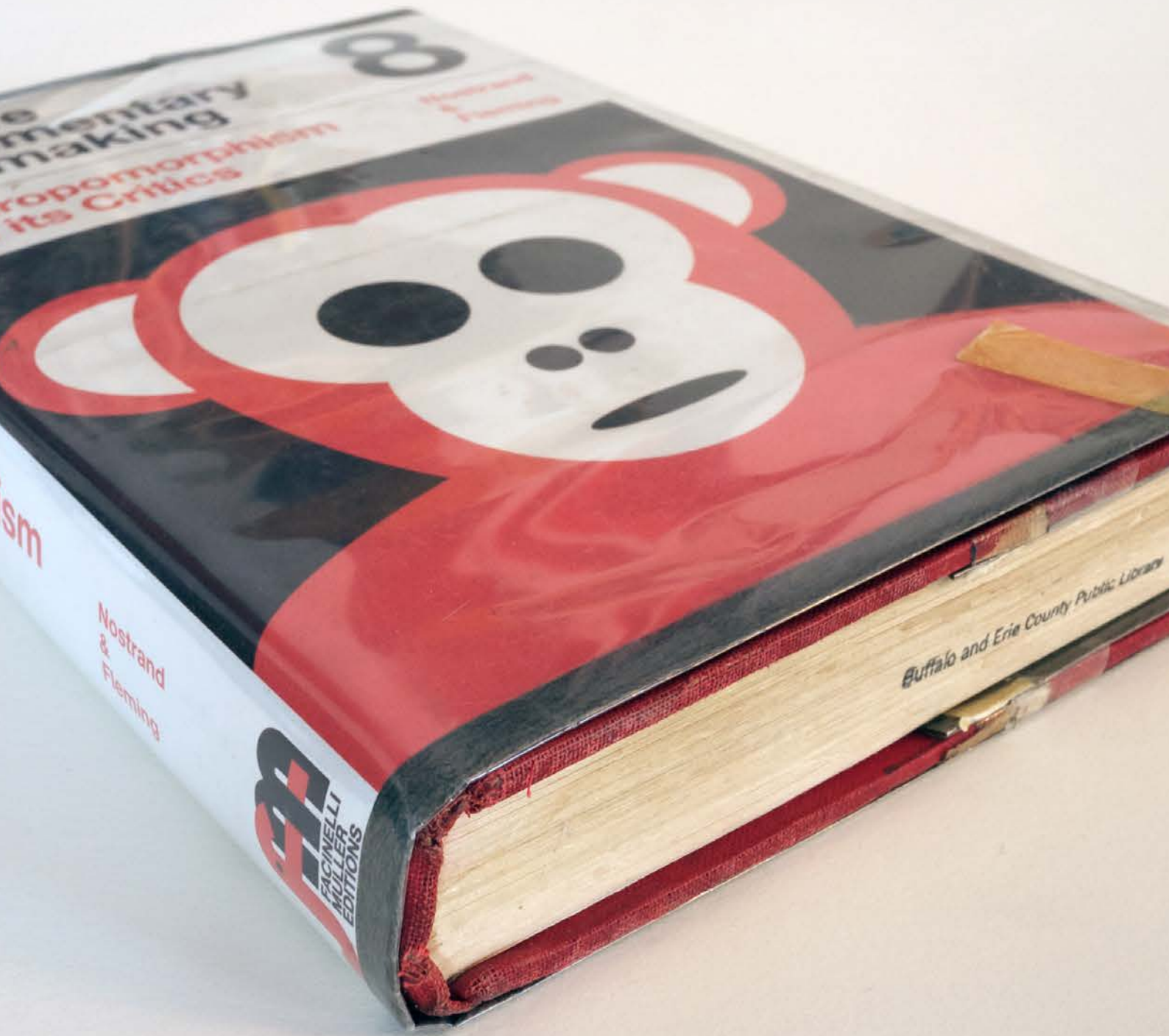


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Literary Animals Look

Robert McKay – *An Illustrated Theriography* / Andrea Vesentini – *The Vanishing Cow* / John Miller – *Illustrating the Fur Trade in Boy's Own Adventure Fiction* / June Dwyer – *A Visit from the Doom Squad: How War Transforms Ways of Seeing Zoos* / Udine Sellbach – *The Archipelago of Old Age and Childhood: Creaturely Life in the Floating Islands* / Claire Nettleton – *The Caged Animal: the Avant-Garde Artist in Manette Salomon* / Scott Hurley/Daniel Bruins – *Engendering Empathy for Nonhuman Suffering: Using Graphic Narratives to Raise Awareness about Commercial Dog Breeding Operations* / Katherine Bishop – *The Anti-Imperialist American Literary Animal: Esure I nvisioning Empathy* / Julian Monatgue – *Volumes From an Imagined Intellectual History of Animals, Architecture and Man*

THE VANISHING COW

Starting from 1934, the covers of The New Yorker began to portray images of melancholy animals looking at the changes occurring in the American landscape at the time, endangering their presence in the modern way of living. The essay chronicles the story of the vanishing animal, a recurring theme of the magazine's covers from the mid-thirties to the mid-sixties, as a visual counterpart to the advancement of progress and the effects it had on the landscape, as well as on the utopian pastoral ideal that it purported to democratize among the middle class. The thread linking these New Yorker covers therefore offers a modern rendition of an American Paradise Lost, and the artists' illustrations become what Akira Mizuta Lippit calls 'virtual shelters for displaced animals.' Among several popular magazines, The New Yorker was by far the greatest chronicler of this loss, despite its urban focus, or perhaps thanks to it, as it allowed a sense of unbiased detachment and urbane condescendence towards the suburbs and the country.

Text by **Andrea Vesentini**

What man has to do in order to transcend the animal, to transcend the mechanical within himself, and what his unique spirituality leads to, is often anguish. And so, by comparison and despite the model of the machine, the animals seem to him to enjoy a kind of innocence. The animal has been emptied of experience and secrets, and this new invented "innocence" begins to provoke in man a kind of nostalgia. For the first time, animals are placed in a *receding* past ⁽ⁱ⁾.

Once upon a time, there was a cow. If Ilona Karasz's illustration (fig. 1) for the cover of the May 19, 1934 issue of *The New Yorker* could speak in fairy-tale language, this is how it would begin. A cow overlooks the changes in the American landscape from the top of a hill, the towering skyscrapers of the polluted city emerging from the horizon, enveloped in a cloud of smog, and the hilly countryside pointed with houses, the city sprawling along the country road taken over by cars and buses. And yet, the cow observes from a distance, in the shade of a tree in the very

forefront of the picture, giving her back to the spectators as if they were also part of the scene, witnessing the change. A fence visually separates the spot where the cow still stands from the unrestrained human development, out of which she is physically exiled. The composition of the image clearly resembles that of the countless adverts that envisioned the proximity of a bright future of evolution and modernization, those utopian views where the American man stared in wonder at the advancement of progress as if he were contemplating a diorama at a world's fair ⁽ⁱⁱ⁾. We are not allowed to see the

expression on the cow's face, but we can easily guess it would betray a certain degree of melancholia; Karasz's clear division of spaces gives the scene a nostalgic feel: the grayness of the sky starkly contrasting with the luminous colors of the large tree and the cow's white fur. The winding road ends right at the cow's feet. She might still be in the forefront of the picture, but the world of tomorrow is rapidly advancing, pushing her to the side of the scene, and eventually out of it. In spite of her positioning in the frame, the image tells us that the cow belongs to what Berger calls the "receding past" in the opening quote. The trope of the disappearing animal is by no means an invention of *The New Yorker* artist: already in the nineteenth century, American landscape painters portrayed wild creatures retreating to the realm of the mythic wilderness of the continent ⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾. However, it was only with the domination of the machine over nature, when first the railway and then the car revolutionized the landscape and turned the American man into a nomadic commuter, that the marginalization of the animal became truly apparent ^(iv). The recurring theme of the vanishing animal in *The New Yorker* covers from the mid-thirties to the mid-sixties worked as a visual counterpart to the advancement of progress and its effects on the landscape and the utopian pastoral ideal that it purported to democratize among the middle class. Although covers featuring animals, especially cows, were by no means exclusive to *The New Yorker* at the time, the magazine was the only one to use them as a critique of suburban expansion, despite or perhaps thanks to its urban focus that allowed a sense of unbiased detachment and urbane condescendence towards the new developments, as well as the country ^(v). Its cover art still represents an icon of popular culture and, most importantly, an enthralling continuum of powerful commentaries to the shifts in American history. As a cultural object, the covers work as a mirror in which for almost a hundred years the middle class has looked at its own shortcomings, a venue of hegemonic self-irony ^(vi).

The Melancholy Cow

Dramatic changes were not foreign to the American landscape: the pristine nature of the continent had been exploited from the early days of colonization. Defining Karasz's cow as a 'vanishing' animal intentionally evokes other subjects who were depicted in the process of disappearing in the previous century. The 'vanishing Indian' is a leitmotif often found in nineteenth-century painting, especially in the Hudson River School ^(vii). Like *The New Yorker* cow, Thomas Cole's *Indian at Sunset* (fig. 2) nostalgically contemplates the untamed wilderness of the land from above, in the shade of a stately tree, another romantic relic of the receding past. The common assumption that the country was to be a "garden of Eden restored" for the new American Adam, as Carolyn Merchant wrote, called for the marginalization of its original inhabitants, perceived as closer to the animal sphere than the human ^(viii). Indians were progressively pushed to the darker corner of the picture, both historically and figuratively, most famously in John Gast's *American Progress*, or Flora Palmer's lithograph *The Rocky Mountains: Emigrants Crossing the Plains*, where cows still stand on the side of progress, enabling the westward advancement of the wagons ^(ix). But cows and Indians were to find themselves on the same side in the following century.

In August 1942, *The New Yorker* published a short story by Jonathan Harrington, 'Cow in Quicksand', in which a group of native Americans rescue a cow from quicksand with the help of a white man on a visit to the wild West. Harrington portrays the white narrator as an observer, helping in the effort but mostly detached from the scene, while the cow and the Indians share the similar lot of standing on the unsteady ground that swallows into oblivion whomever steps on it

^(x). As had been the case for the Indians, cows were entering what Lippit calls "a state of *perpetual vanishing*," their "*spectral*" presence looming as a nostalgic memento of a lost era in the modern landscape ^(xi). Lippit explains this nostalgic attitude toward animals through the Freudian conception of melancholia: humans look at animals as their halves lost in the process of evolution, incapable to retrieve their "primal

May 19, 1934

THE

Price 15 cents

NEW YORKER

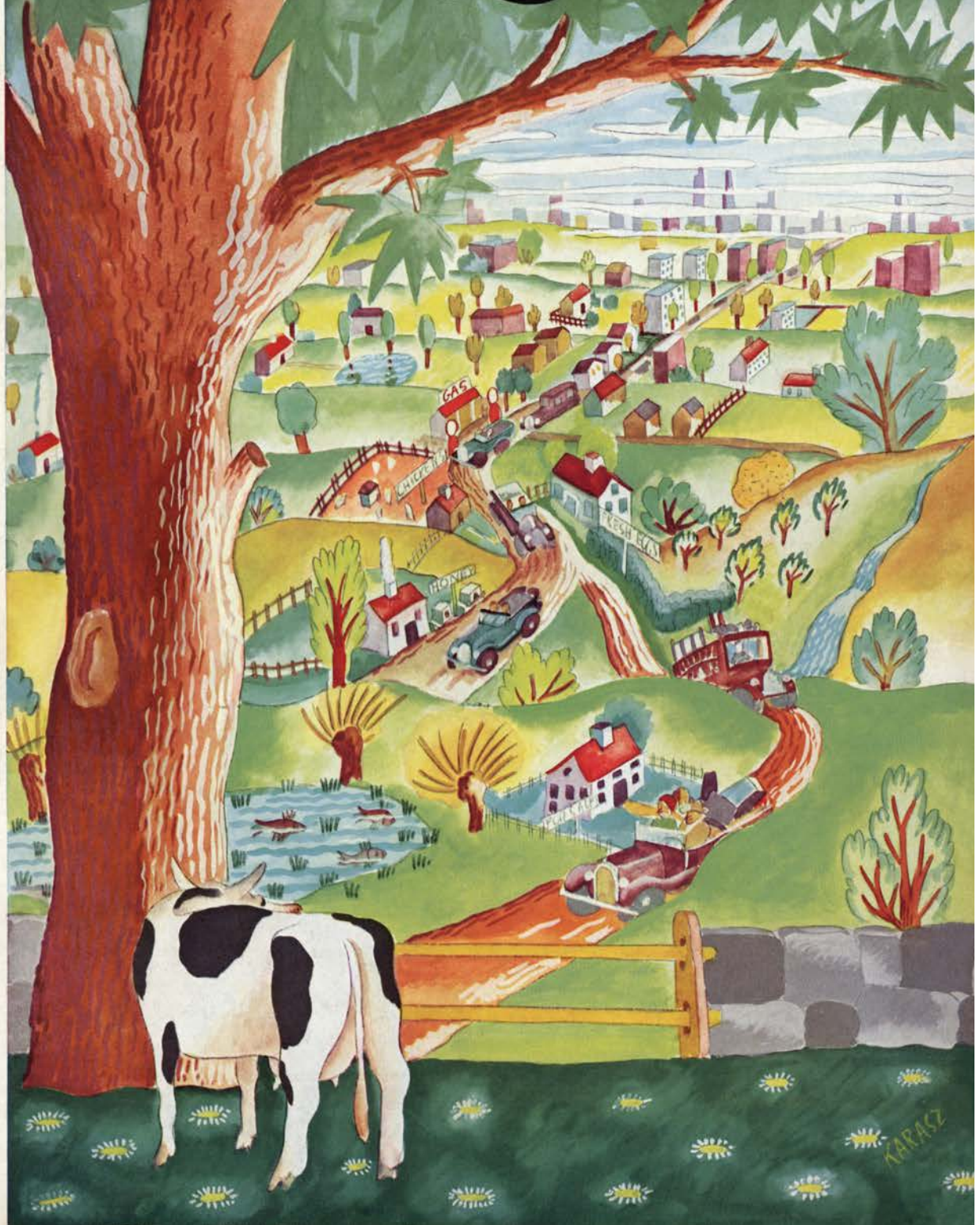


Fig.1 Ilona Karasz

Untitled Cover Illustration, The New Yorker, Split, 19th May 1934, print, 20.3x27.9 cm © Courtesy of Condé Nast

identification" with them ^(xii). However, the melancholia that permeates Karasz's cover illustration as well, as the ones to follow, seems to be different in nature. The animals are not only meant to be looked at melancholically. They look melancholic. In 1957 *The New Yorker* published a poem by R. P. Lister pondering on the intrinsic melancholia of cows:

Man may think several thoughts a day
But seldom gives them full attention;
His thoughts are mostly colored gray
And few of them are fit to mention

A cow's are pure, and colored green—
Pleasant, maybe, but rarely jolly—
And that is why the rustic scene
Is so suffused with melancholy ^(xiii).

Why is it so hard for Lister's and Karasz's cow to indulge in jolly thoughts when the bovine life seems quite peaceful and carefree? Cows had historically represented the slow-paced nature of the rural world by virtue of their quiet nature, endurance and sturdy presence suggesting the unhurried rhythm and steady character of country life, attributes that are not necessarily melancholy. But once cows are placed before a novel background, the scene turns into one of melancholia.

The lost object that Freud deems as necessary to trigger a melancholic state appears to be the very landscape that the cow is looking at, the disappearing rural America. ^(xiv) The hidden gaze of the cow betrays the bittersweet awareness that, as the quintessential rural animal, she is also soon bound to disappear. This awareness is quickly interiorized by the viewer, who shares the same point of view as the animal. The booming postwar world looks different when seen through the eyes of the cow. Her melancholia becomes the melancholia of the viewer. The human gaze that first coincided with the animal gaze shifts with the understanding that, by looking at the changing landscape, the animal is in fact interrogating the viewer, who is exposed to man's disruptive power. This final self-realization brings the viewer to the opposite side, that of being the object of the vanishing animal's gaze, the cause of its impending disappearance.

The cow and the deer, respectively signifying the rural and the wild, faced a common destiny before the bulldozer of postwar expansion. Theirs was, in fact, a tale of changing fortunes. Although the rural functioned as an instrument of civilization against the wild lands up until the late 1800s, *The New Yorker* turned cows into romantic remnants of the vanishing past as the new frontier movement out of the city began ^(xv). Robert F. Berkhofer notes that, in nineteenth-century American arts, the evanescent appearance of the Indian in the grandiose Western sceneries mirrored the ruins common to many European landscape paintings, which kindled a romantic impression of the past. ^(xvi) Mark David Spence sees in Cole's depiction of Indians an attempt "to arouse a sense of nostalgia and pity in order to give romantic poignancy to a scene," portraying them as "a romantic poet or a tragic and pensive figure from classical antiquity" who witnessed the unspoiled beauty of the American land giving in to the march of progress. ^(xvii) Karasz's cover shares with Cole's *Indian* the same clear-cut division into two spaces, one associated with the receding past and the other with the advancing future, a common trait of *The New Yorker* covers depicting vanishing animals. Most of them reveal a romantic taste in the choice of colors, dramatic composition and treatment of the landscape that resonates with the classic depiction of the vanishing Indian, the resilient and melancholy ruin of history.

Karasz's illustration was only the first of many melancholy cows and animals found in the covers of *The New Yorker* in the years to follow. Although John Berger couples the marginalization of the animal in Western societies with the advent of capitalism, between the nineteenth century and the twentieth century, the pictures we will see in these pages challenge this *clear-cut expansionism* rather than freezing it at a historical divide to show how this rupture was only one step in a longer process of America's dominance over its landscape, from the eradication of the wilderness, to postwar suburbanization. ^(xviii) Either in commuter trains, private cars or space shuttles, the American frontier kept moving long after Frederick Jackson Turner declared it closed in 1893, perpetuating a history of



Fig.2 Thomas Cole
Indian at Sunset, 1845-1847, Oil on canvas, 36x44 cm, private collection

of expansionism rather than freezing it at a specific point in time.^(xix) Taken as a body of images rather than isolated works, this motif in *The New Yorker* covers thus becomes a narrative: Seen one after the other, the still scenes are set into motion, telling a visual story of animals turning from a vanishing into a vanished object.

The Suburban Cow

The fact that the melancholy animal first appeared in 1934 is a peculiar coincidence. 1934 was the year when the Indian Reorganization Act tried to counter the devastating effects of the marginalizing policies toward Native Americans, who by that time had been confined to Western mythology and inhospitable lands unfit for agriculture. The same 'New Deal' that attempted to bring the vanished Indian back

to the forefront was soon to cause another disappearance. Although many view suburbanization, and all the changes it entailed in terms of car usage and lifestyle, solely as a product of postwar policies, it was actually the New Deal reforms that made it possible. A month after Karasz's cover, on June 28, and only ten days after the enactment of the Indian Reorganization Act, the Congress passed the National Housing Act of 1934, leading to the creation of the Federal Housing Administration that would simplify the system of mortgage loans and enable the rise of suburbia in the years after the war. The May 15, 1954 cover (fig. 3) showed that the land once used for pasturing and agriculture was ready to be subdivided for the growing needs of the postwar baby-boom. Where the cows are still grazing, a young couple envisions their future modernist house, starkly overlapping the rural

May 15, 1954

THE

Price 20 cents

NEW YORKER

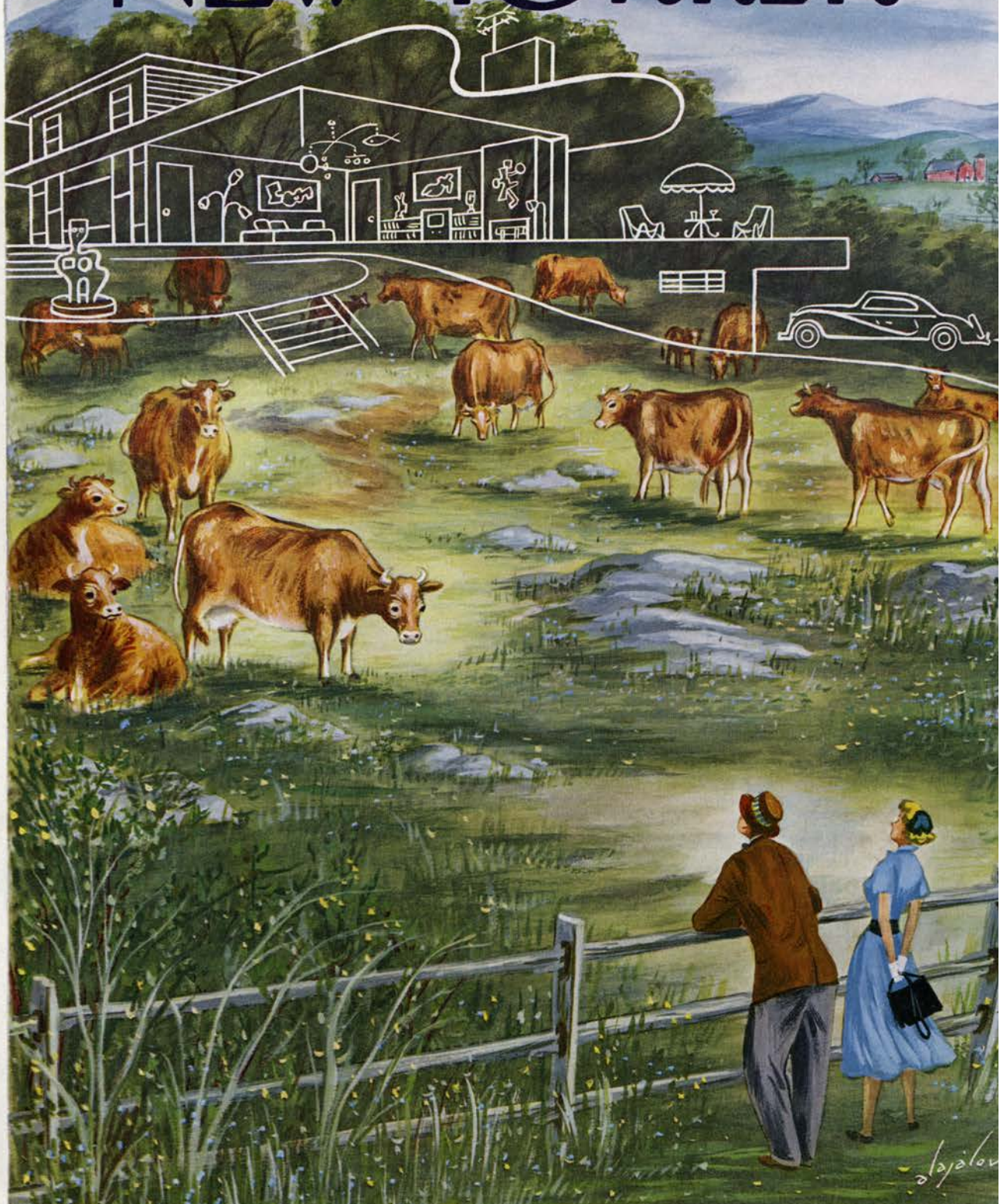


Fig.3 Constantin Alajalov

Untitled Cover Illustration, The New Yorker, 15 May 1954, print, 20.3x27.9 cm © Courtesy of Condé Nast.

that was implemented in 1956, the unrelenting spread of the automobile, all of those changes were to *recolonize* the vanishing Eden.

Despite its claim to return to the pastoral idyll commodified for the masses, the suburban revolution severed America's long-term relationship with the land ^(xx), ending the agrarian myth envisaged by Thomas Jefferson and other forefathers of the nation depicted in Victor Bobritsky's 1938 cover: the cows found in his typical New England village are the only ones that seem to be aware of the train looming in the background of the apparently peaceful scene, once again conveying a sense of melancholia ^(xxi). The inherent contradictions of the suburban model led to the birth of ambiguous terminology such as "rural suburb" ^(xxii), shedding light on America's clashing need to picture itself both as a rural and modern country, a legacy of Jefferson's republicanism lying behind the nostalgic portrayal of the progressive suburbanization of the landscape ^(xxiii). American politics was moving on, abandoning the rural ideal, save its mentioning in speeches and allegories, to spur the nostalgic soul of voters for political purposes. What if this rural world actually manifested itself during a political rally though? The attendants of a speech held by a candidate for the Senate in a 1952 cover look quite puzzled when a herd of cows shows up at the gathering: references to pastoralism might work at a theoretical level, but the actual presence of cattle is rather outlandish ^(xxiv).

On the other hand, the wilderness that had been tamed by the end of the nineteenth century, usually portrayed by the infrequent occurrence of deer in the magazine, was to be further marginalized. John Steinbeck's *The Pastures of Heaven* opens on the chase of an unruly deer by a Spanish corporal in 1776 California leading to the casual discovery of an Eden-like valley, since then called the Pastures of Heaven ^(xxv). It closes on the same valley nostalgically contemplated as an endangered corner of pristine nature by a bus of tourists, one of whom farsightedly predicts its imminent subdivisions into building lots — in fact, the book was published in 1932 when Southern California was about to be savagely urbanized ^(xxvi).

As the covers show, the restoration and modernization of Eden turned out to be the ultimate capitulation of Eden as nineteenth-century romantics knew it. In fact, it managed to achieve quite the opposite of the pastoral ideal that it claimed to reinstate after decades of wild urbanism and industrial growth. The illustration of a 1962 cover by Charles E. Martin (fig. 4) celebrates the arrival of spring by showing the new Eden revisited through consumer culture ^(xxvii). A stag and a doe give a skeptical look at the new shopping mall, dropped in the wild woods where they still manage to find shelter from the invasion of cars and shoppers. Forced behind the bush that once again creates a spatial barrier between the realm of men and the endangered wilderness, this alternative American family stands on the far side of the shopping-crazed hoards of another familial model, the baby-boom family ^(xxviii). Less bewilderment and greater nostalgia is found in the pensive gaze of the peasant featured in Perry Barlow's 1947 cover ^(xxix). The man peers at a new car-invaded building, presumably another shopping center. His horses are already half out of the picture, and the only boundary between the hayfield and the suburbanized space is a feeble wooden fence that will eventually come off — most suburbs were in fact built on reconverted agricultural lands ^(xxx).

The thread linking these *New Yorker* covers therefore offers a modern rendition of an American *Paradise Lost* ^(xxxi), and the artists' illustrations become what Lippit calls a "virtual shelters for displaced animals," which are being gradually evicted from American everyday life to re-enter it through popular culture, either Disney films or *The Discovery Channel* ^(xxxii). Even the literature published within the magazine depicted rural life in an elegiac fashion. E.B. White's poem "The Red Cow is Dead," published in 1946, ironically mourned the death of a cow in the Isle of Wight ^(xxxiii). On May 4, 1963, the magazine published a playful and yet nostalgic elegy of the rural world by Jon Swan, "A Portable Gallery of Pastoral Animals," describing animals almost as fairytale archetypes and historical characters, remnants of a much more glorious past where horses fought in war instead of being put aside by a tractor ^(xxxiv).

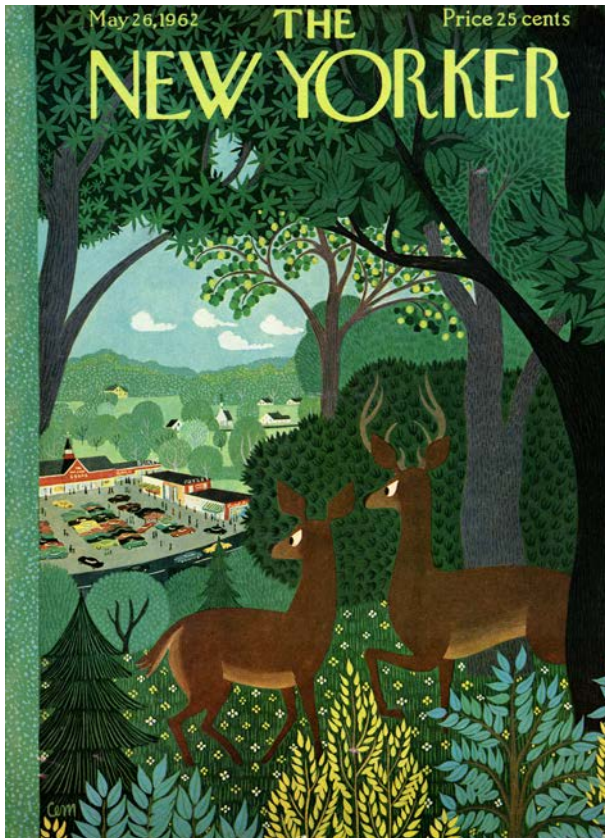


Fig.4 Charles E. Martin

Untitled Cover Illustration, The New Yorker, 26 May 1962, print, 20.3x27.9 cm
© Courtesy of Condé Nast.

But the new beast that replaced horses and cattle for locomotion was the automobile. Alain's 1951 cover highlights the contrast between the fast-paced modernization and the slowness of the vanishing past ^(xxxv). In the rural Southwestern scene, the cows are confronted with the speed of the new fetishized animal, they are physically inapt for the frantic mobility of postwar America. Ten years later, William Steig's cover (fig. 5) portrays the cows carelessly slowing down the road-trip of an affluent couple, whose garish red car does not blend with the pastel hues of the country. The son of immigrant parents, William Steig devoted most of his career at *The New Yorker* to the depiction of the lower classes, and as such his art often addressed the endangerment of this world caused by the expansion of the suburban middle class, of which the car was the greatest epitome ^(xxxvi). America's rush to modernization also advanced at the speed of tanks, such as those hampered by a herd of cows grazing in their way, as happened in a famous

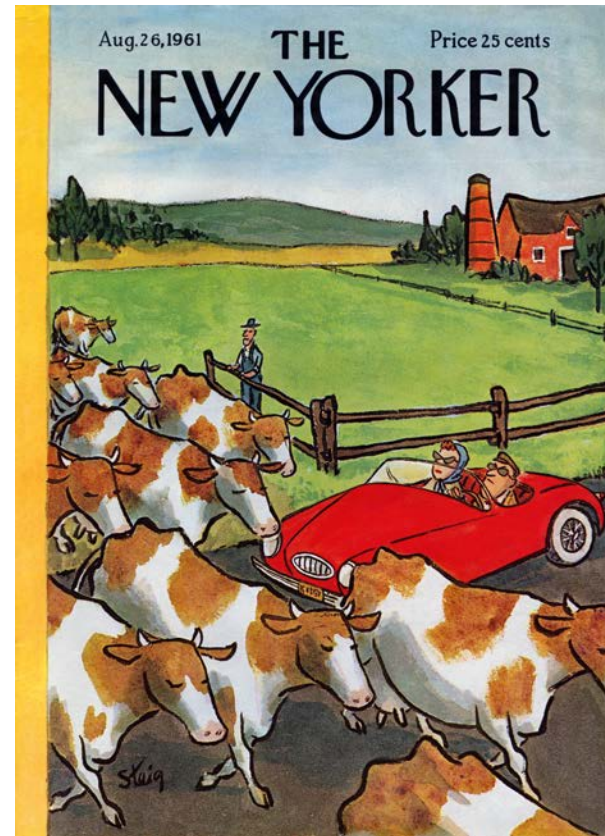


Fig.5 William Steig

Untitled Cover Illustration, The New Yorker, 26 Aug. 1961, print, 20.3x27.9 cm.
© Courtesy of Condé Nast.

wartime cover by Peter Arno ^(xxxvii).

Speeding past the marginalized wilderness, the cars in De Miskey's 1959 cover (fig. 6) are physically severing the landscape, the highway working as a dramatic divider, cutting the woods in half and keeping apart the two melancholy deer that look into each other's eyes wondering whether the drivers will ever slow down enough to notice the faint warning sign signaling their presence. Little could the powerless deer do against the new driver of progress. The commuter train speeding through the countryside in a 1942 cover by Arno is just as well driven by the same fever ^(xxxviii). The busy passengers are too self-absorbed in the rat race of modern life to pause their eyes on the rural scenery, where the tiny horse is soon to slip away from sight: this time, what marks the boundary between the fast-advancing future and the receding past is the window.

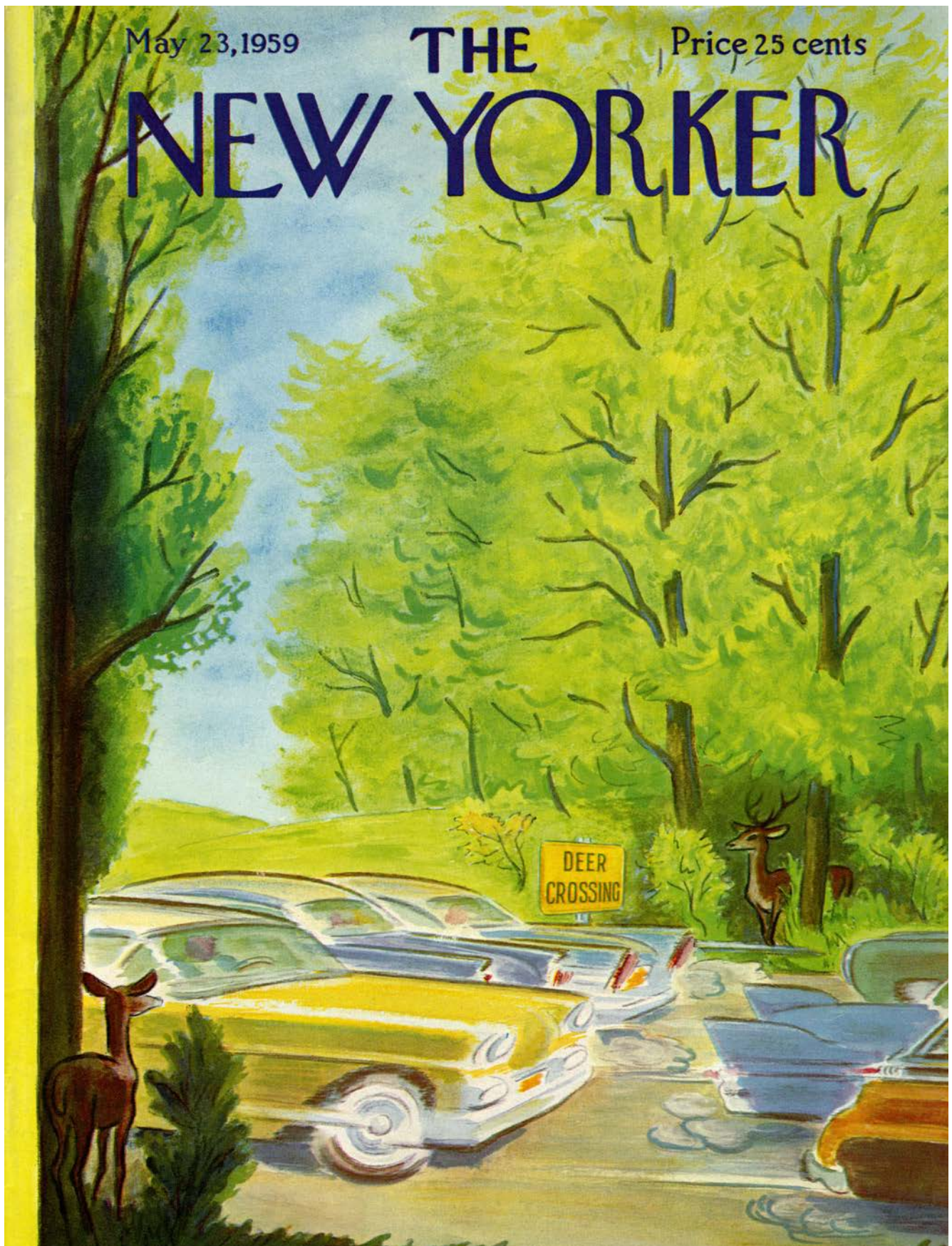


Fig.6 Julian de Miskey

Untitled Cover Illustration, The New Yorker, 23 May 1959, print, 20.3x27.9 cm © Courtesy of Condé Nast.

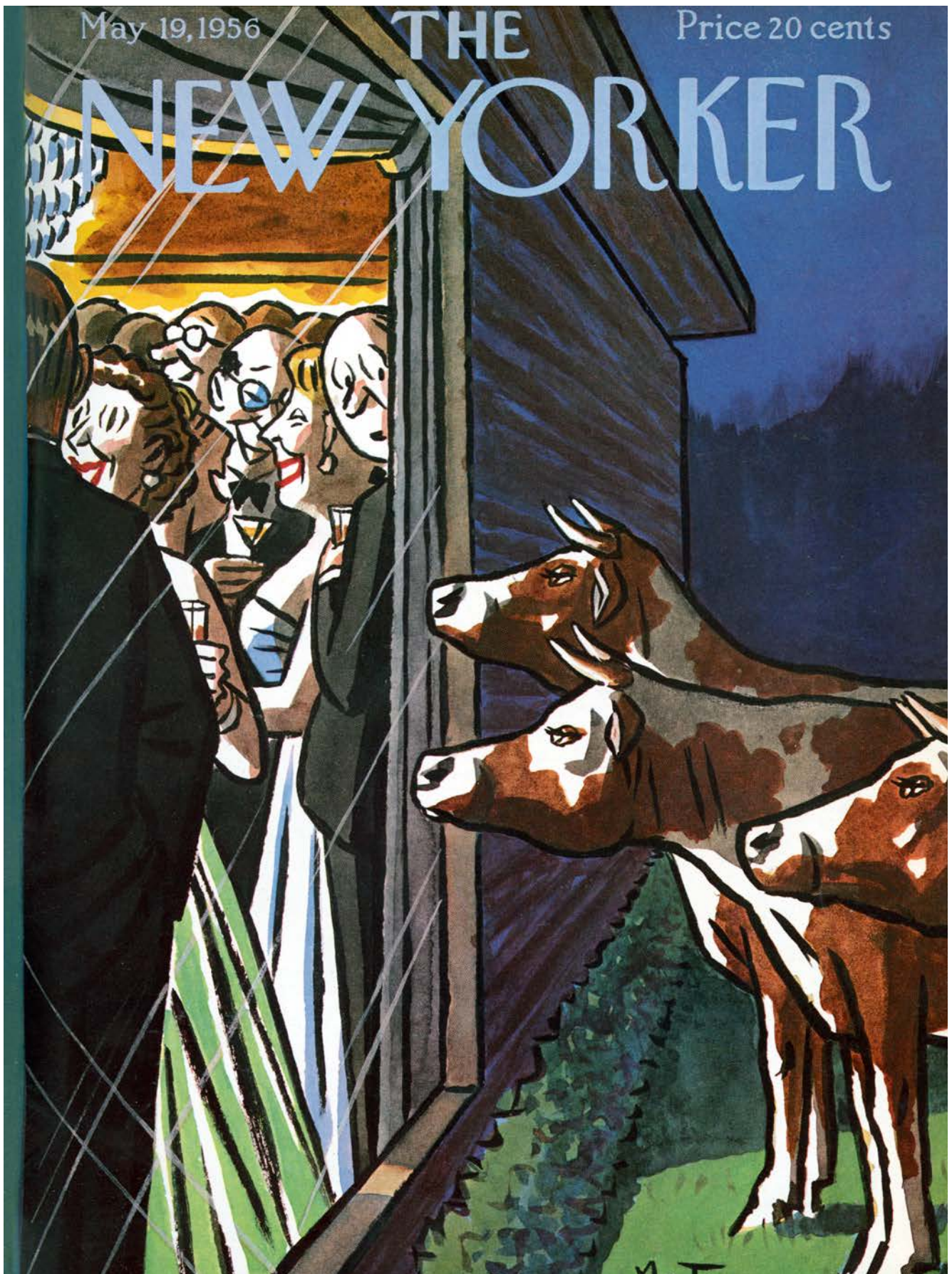


Fig.7 Peter Arno

Untitled Cover Illustration, The New Yorker, 19 May 1956, print, 20.3x27.9 cm © Courtesy of Condé Nast.

The Gazing Cow

Increasingly, wild and rural animals found themselves on the other side of the barricade in visual representation. In his critique of John Berger's seminal essay on animals, Jonathan Burt notes that Berger dwells on "the traditional dividing line whereby man is a linguistic animal and animals are not." In this regard, *The New Yorker* illustrations bring to light a divide that is not so much linguistic, as it is spatial. The vanishing animal belongs to a landscape that is being usurped by suburban settlers who are always depicted as newcomers and strangers to this space. Even though with the opposite purpose, nineteenth-century portrayals of the westward movement stemmed from the same split between the "new man" and the "old landscape" to draw their celebratory representation of the frontier. *The New Yorker* artists based their portrayal of the postwar vanishing animal on this spatial dichotomy, man and animal physically kept apart by walls, hedges and windows ^(xooix). Douglas Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), recounting the love story between an upper-class widow and a gardener whose only wish is to spend the rest of his life in the wild woods like a novel Thoreau, ends with the famous scene of a deer frolicking out of the picture window of the man's newly renovated mill house in the forest ^(xi). Jane Wyman's character has finally surrendered to his love, and Rock Hudson has laid his weapons down and converted to a semi-domestic way of life that reconciles the woods and a nicely decorated house. In this picture-perfect ending, the deer peers through the glass, certainly to bless their union but also to remind us that, once domestic life steps in, the call of the wild is necessarily left out of the hearth ^(xii). In the very last shot, the camera moves away from the two lovers to linger on the melancholy image of the deer, the sole protagonist of the frame shown behind the bars of the window before it walks out of the picture. The End.

Like the image of Jane Wyman looking at the deer through the windowpane, most of *The New Yorker* covers are centered on the idea of gaze, especially what Lippit calls "the speechless semiotic of the animal look." ^(xlii) Even more so than the

cinematic animal, the ones found in *The New Yorker* covers are frozen by the artist's pencil. Paralyzed and mute, their gaze is all that is left for us to look at. In most of the illustrations seen so far, the animal is either looking at the man-shaped landscape or being looked at by a human observer. A 1956 cover by Peter Arno (fig. 7) shows three cows peeking at a cocktail party from behind a window. Despite the spatial division of the composition, Arno places the spectator on the side of the animal, creating a complex set of crossing gazes. First, we find the gaze of the animals, the uninvited onlookers of the action that is taking place indoors; then, the gazes of the affluent attendants of the party who look at each other without realizing that they are the object of the animal gaze. However, one of them notices the presence of the animals and gives them a startled look. Such a look, a mark of Arno's art that he compared to the expression in the face of a person photographed unexpectedly, is the look of someone who becomes aware of being the object of a gaze, exactly as the character in this illustration is. ^(xliii)

By gazing at this startled look, viewers find themselves in the ambivalent position of sharing both the animals' perspective of onlookers, given their spatial location, but also that of the surprised man who finds himself being looked at, because they belong to the human realm. The surprise found in the man's face is therefore the surprise of the viewer, who becomes aware of the presence of the vanishing animal and of the change in the landscape, because he can finally see it through the eyes of the animal. In Berger's words, "when he is *being seen* by the animal, he is being seen as his surroundings are seen by him." ^(xliv)

The complex structure of Arno's illustration exemplifies that, by looking at the vanishing animal on *The New Yorker* cover, spectators experience "the point of view of the absolute other," as Derrida calls the animal gaze ^(xlv). In fact, the 1956 work is designed after another cover illustration that Arno drew for a 1942 issue (fig. 8), where an MP soldier is the outsider left out of the window, the uninvited witness of his fellow soldiers' happiness. Historically, the Western world has come to view the animal as the emblem of otherness. A soulless and



Fig. 8 Peter Arno

Untitled Cover Illustration, The New Yorker, 28 Feb 1942, print, 20.3x27.9 cm © Courtesy of Condé Nast.

reasonless creature, it was always excluded from any greater plan grounded on either Christian or philosophical tradition ^(xlvii). But the melancholy gaze of the vanishing animal is also the gaze of the past being sacrificed on the altar of progress, which still manifests itself in the form of spectral alterity: first Indians, then livestock and wildlife. Arno's image evokes Donna Haraway's description of the animal gaze in the dioramas at the American Museum of Natural History:

Each diorama has at least one animal that catches the viewer's gaze and holds it in communion. ... The moment seems fragile, the animals about to disappear, the communion about to break; the Hall threatens to dissolve into the chaos of the Age of Man. But it does not. The gaze holds, and the wary animal heals those who will look. ... The glass front of the diorama forbids the body's entry, but the gaze invites his visual penetration. The animal is frozen in a moment of supreme life, and man is transfixed. ... The specular commerce between man and animal at the interface of two evolutionary ages is completed ^(xlviii).

Often is an exchange of gazes between a startled man and an animal found in the cover illustrations, long before Arno's work. Sometimes it happens because men try to transform nature into a space of leisure, such as swimming or golf, and several physical elements can act as interface, like stonewalls or fences ^(xlix). In 1965, Peter Arno drew the last recorded cover of the vanishing animal in the history of *The New Yorker* (fig. 9): a fawn quietly sipping water from the swimming pool of a suburban house, completely unnoticed by the attendants of another cocktail party. A large hedge shields the animal from sight, acting as a screen between the glittering colours of the party and the dark blue realm of the deer, the realm of the water drunk by the animal (nature) and that of alcohol in the back (artifice). In hindsight we might see that hedge as a curtain falling on the lot of the disappearing animal in the magazine's

covers, the end of our story.

The Ghost Cow

However, the disappearance of the vanishing animal as a theme is by no means the end of animals on *The New Yorker* covers. Wildlife became completely absent, save the ordinary moose and reindeer in the Christmas issues, serving as a mark of consumerism rather than an expression of wilderness ⁽ⁱ⁾. In popular culture, cows entered the preserve of advertising imagery. Elsie the Cow, the mascot of *Borden Dairy Company* since 1936, became a leading attraction at the 1964 New York World's Fair, where a real cow was picked for the role. Already in 1933, John Thurber wrote a sardonic account for the magazine on a mechanical cow designed by Messmore & Damon for the Chicago World's Fair. The piece chronicled in detail the whole vanishing process, from when a live cow was brought in to pose as a model for a clay copy, a plaster negative and then a papier-mâché hollow replica to be filled with real milk, a phonograph that mooed and several other mechanisms, to when the cow was slaughtered and replaced by her simulacrum ⁽ⁱⁱ⁾. On the visual front, the new cover artists instead focused on the new obsession of the American middle class: the pet. Dogs and cats invaded the covers, sometimes literally overshadowing their masters to signal their increasing power in the dynamics of the American family (fig. 10) ⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾. But pets were not just replacing wild and rural animals in postwar America: they were one of the causes of their disappearance. The A. J. Liebling's short story "The Mustang Buzzers," published in the magazine in 1954, satirized the decline of the frontier with the chronicle of the hunting of wild horses in a Nevada reservation to provide for pet food. Cowboys still had a go in the wild lands of the West to make sure that all cats and dogs were fed appropriately, mustang meat being cheaper than that of reared horses. "And what will happen when the horses are *all* gone?" asks a woman moved by the melancholy sight of a captive mustang. "Then them cats of yours will have to get used to these ten-cent cows, Ma'am" replies the cowboy, pointing at the next animal that was already on the verge of vanishing ^(iv).

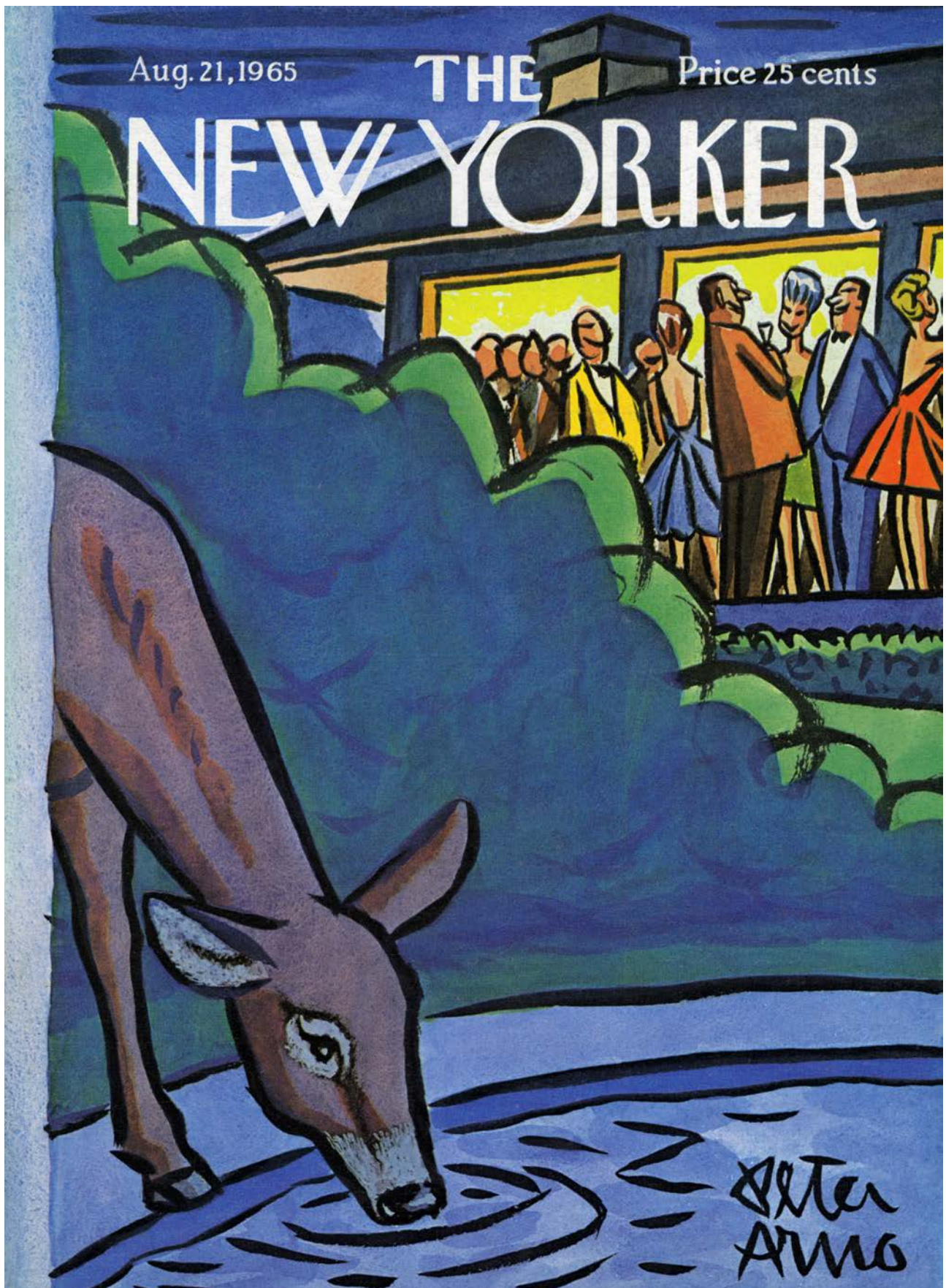


Fig.9 Peter Arno

Untitled Cover Illustration, The New Yorker, 21 Aug 1965, print, 20.3x27.9 cm © Courtesy of Condé Nast

PRICE \$3.95

MAR. 10, 2003

THE NEW YORKER



Fig.10 Mark Ulriksen

Untitled Cover Illustration, The New Yorker, 10 Mar 2003, print, 20.3x27.9 cm © Courtesy of Condé Nast

Despite wilderness being pushed out of the scene, the idea of pastoralism was harder to let go. William Steig would keep up the tradition of drawing cows in his covers, the last remnant of a past generation. His cows, however, are very different from the ones seen so far: they are now a vanished animal, blankly staring at the spectator from the enclosed space of a barn, or wistfully looking at a singer who is probably reminiscing about the good old days when the country still held a place in the American imagination. Or, they can ironically peep out behind the personification of America proudly holding the Star-Spangled Banner to celebrate Independence Day, a phantasm of the pastoral dreams that guided the signers of the Declaration. These cows have become ghosts. As such, they can also be found in the realm of dreams and fantasy, completely unrelated to historical reality: symbolizing motherhood in a timeless watercolor pasture that is typical of Jenni Oliver's dreamy style, or gliding over the moon as in a cover by John O'Brien ^(liv).

It should not come as a surprise that the last cover featuring a cow as of today (fig. 11) is by William Steig. Coincidentally, it is also the last cover illustration he drew before dying at age 95, less than a year later, after a career spanning 72 years as an illustrator for the magazine. The cover portrays a masquerade ball where all attendants are dressed as figures from a very distant, sometimes fantastic past: knights dancing with fairies, angels and queens. In the forefront of this spectral gathering, one dancer wears a cow costume, and right behind him we see the Indian, who had long entered the realm of ghosts and mythology. The vanished cow and the vanished Indian finally meet in this hereafter of popular imagery, dancing their pasts away. And this is, truly, the end of our story.



Fig. 11 William Steig

Untitled Cover Illustration, The New Yorker, 25 Nov 2002, print, 20.3x27.9 cm © Courtesy of Condé Nast.

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Endnotes

- (i). Berger, John. "Why Look at Animals?" in *About Looking*, London, Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative, 1980, 10.
- (ii). Marchand highlights that, in the language of advertising, the visual cliché of characters "gazing off into the distance with their backs turned directly or obliquely toward the reader" symbolized that "they were looking into the future." In fact, he links this visual trope with "the hallowed image of the American frontiersman, first glimpsing the westward course of the empire from the apex of a mountain pass." Marchand, Roland. *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1985, 255.
- (iii). Berger, "Why Look at Animals?," 15.
- (iv). Berger, "Why Look at Animals?," 10-11.
- (v). A good example of cows appearing in another magazine cover is the herd giving a disgruntled look at a surveyor in Amos Sewell's *Untitled Cover Illustration*, *The Saturday Evening Post* (28 Jul. 1956). However, Sewell's cover is an exception in the history of *The Saturday Evening Post*, which tended to still idealize the agrarian myth, especially Norman Rockwell's famous cover illustrations, perhaps because of its Midwestern origin.
- (vi). As Topliss highlights, the *New Yorker* "offers itself as a site of peculiar richness for an exploration of the contradictory, sometimes rebellious self-aware and inner history of the middle-class subject." And its ability to promote, but also sharply criticize the idiosyncrasies

of a highly influential portion of the society turns it into an "almost embarrassingly hegemonic document." Topliss, Iain. *The Comic Worlds of Peter Arno, William Steig, Charles Addams, and Saul Steinberg*, Baltimore, London, The John Hopkins University Press, 2005, 5-6.

(vii). Merchant, Carolyn. *American Environmental History: an Introduction*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2007, 80.

(viii). Merchant, Carolyn. *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture*, New York, London, Routledge, 2003, 149; Worster, Donald. *The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1993, 9.

(ix). John Gast, American Progress, 1872, oil on canvas, Museum of the American West, Autry National Center; Flora Palmer, The Rocky Mountains: Emigrants Crossing the Plains, 1866, color lithograph, Currier & Ives.

(x). Harrington, Jonathan. "Cow in Quicksand." *The New Yorker*, 22 Aug. 1942, 46-50.

(xi). Lippit, Akira Mizuta. *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife*, Minneapolis, London, University of Minnesota Press, 2000, 1.

(xii). Lippit, Electric Animal, 18.

(xiii). Lister, R. P. "The Patterned Fields," *The New Yorker*, 14 Sep. 1957, 133.

(xiv). Freud, Sigmund. "Mourning and Melancholia," On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia, trans. Shaun Whiteside, London, Penguin Books, 2005, 205.

(xv). Steven Stoll chronicles the clash between the rural and the wild in the American frontier in "Farm Against Forest," *American Wilderness: A New History*, ed. Michael Lewis, Oxford, New York, Oxford University Press, 2007, 55-72.

(xvi). Berkhofer, Robert F. *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present*, New York, Vintage Books, 1978, 86-87.

(xvii). Spence, Mark David. *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of National Parks*, New York, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, 12.

(xviii). For a critique of John Berger's too definite approach to chronology in the recount of the marginalization of the animal, see Burt, Jonathan. "John Berger's 'Why Look at Animals?': A Close Reading," *Worldviews* 9, no. 2, 2005, 203-218.

(xix). Turner, Frederick Jackson. "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner: "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" and Other Essays*, ed. John Mack Faragher, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1998, 31-60.

(xx). Wilson, Alexander. *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez*, Toronto, Between the Lines, 1991, 14.

(xxi). Victor Bobritsky, Untitled Cover Illustration, *The New Yorker* (28 May 1938).

(xxii). Wilson, *The Culture of Nature*, 202.

(xxiii). Hofstadter is the first to call this trope of America's self-representation "the agrarian myth," and traces its roots in the country's early agricultural origins. "The more rapidly the farmers' sons moved into the towns," he points out, "the more nostalgic the whole culture became about its rural past." Hofstadter, Richard. *The Age of Reform*, New York, Vintage, 1960, 24. Leo Marx notes that "the soft veil of nostalgia that hangs over our urbanized landscape is largely a vestige of the once dominant image of an undefiled, green republic, a quiet land of forests, villages, and farms dedicated to the pursuit of happiness." Marx, Leo. *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Idea in America*, Oxford, New York, Oxford University Press, 2000, 6.

(xxiv). Leonard Dove, Untitled Cover Illustration, *The New Yorker* (23 Aug. 1952).

(xxv). Steinbeck, John. *The Pastures of Heaven*, London, Penguin Books, 1995, 3-4.

(xxvi). Steinbeck, *The Pastures of Heaven*, 199-200.

(xxvii). Carolyn Merchant reads the shopping mall as "the modern version of the Garden of Eden," where architectural elements try to recreate a sense of outdoors and pastoral nature in the enclosed, indoor environment. Merchant, *Reinventing Eden*, 167-168.

(xxviii). According to Mullin, wild animals are now perceived as "a refuge from consumer capitalism," deriving perhaps from consumer's culture need for atonement to relieve the sense of responsibility for their marginalization and extinction. Mullin, Molly H. "Mirrors and Windows: Sociocultural Studies of Human-Animal Relationships," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 28, 1999, 216.

(xxix). Perry Barlow, Untitled Cover Illustration, *The New Yorker* (17 May 1947).

(xxx). Jackson, Kenneth T. *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*, New York, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1987, 239.

(xxxi). Merchant points out that "for many Americans, humanity's loss of the perfect Garden of Eden is among the most powerful of all stories." Merchant, *Reinventing Eden*, 3.

(xxxii). Lippit, *Electric Animal*, 187.

(xxxiii). White, E.B. "The Red Cow is Dead," *The New Yorker*, 1 Jun. 1946, 30.

(xxxiv). Swan, Jon. "A Portable Gallery of Pastoral Animals," *The New Yorker*, 4 May 1963, 44.

(xxxv). Alain (Daniel Brustlein), Untitled Cover Illustration, *The New Yorker* (27 Jan. 1951).

(xxxvi). Topliss calls him "the artist of the New Deal" to point out the difference between him and other illustrators who favored the portrayal of the New York upper-class milieu; Steig's perspective, however, comes "from a lower-class viewpoint." *Topliss, Comic Worlds*, 75, 83.

(xxxvii). Peter Arno, Untitled Cover Illustration, *The New Yorker* (20 Sep. 1941).

(xxxviii). Peter Arno, Untitled Cover Illustration, *The New Yorker* (21 Sep. 1940).

(xi). The melancholia stemming from lack of communication between man and animal has been addressed countless times in the scholarly debate, especially by Alice Kuzniar who devotes most of her book to this split. Kuzniar, Alice. *Melancholia's Dog*, Chicago, London, The University of Chicago Press, 2006. As much as the linguistic barrier inevitably lies at the heart of human-animal relationship, an excessive focus on it can limit our scope in addressing other important issues. This becomes evident especially in visual representation, where space is often a much more relevant object of analysis than speech.

(xli). Sirk, Douglas, dir., *All That Heaven Allows* (Universal International Pictures, 1955).

(xlii). Although Gemünden suggests that "the fact that the last close-up belongs to the animal and not the characters also celebrates the triumph of nature and the natural over a society that inflicted grief upon its lovers," one cannot ignore the presence of the large picture window as a dividing device. Gemünden, Gerd. *Framed Visions: Popular Culture, Americanization, and the Contemporary German and Austrian Imagination*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1998, 105.

(xliii). Lippit, *Electric Animal*, 197.

(xliv). Topliss, *Comic Worlds*, 36.

(xlv). Berger, "Why Look at Animals?," 3.

(xlii). Derrida, Jacques. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. David Wills, New York, Fordham University Press, 2008, 11.

(xlvii). Ritvo, Harriet. "The Animal Connection," *The Boundaries of Humanity: Humans, Animals, Machines*, ed. James J. Sheehan et al., Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford, University of California Press, 68.

(xlviii). Haraway, Donna. *Primate Visions: Gender, Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science*, New York, London, Routledge, 1989, 30.

(xlix). See for example William Cotton, Untitled Cover Illustration, *The New Yorker* (10 Jul. 1943); Perry Barlow, Untitled Cover Illustration, *The New Yorker* (11 Jun. 1955); William Steig, Untitled Cover Illustration, *The New Yorker* (25 Jul. 1953).

i. As Lippit explains, the vanishing of the animal is paralleled by its appropriation by reproductive media:

however, it is anthropomorphized (as in Disney's films) or turned into a symbol devoid of its animal nature (as the Christmas reindeer, or the Easter bunny). Lippit, *Electric Animal*, 184-185.

ii. James Thurber, Charles Cooke (unsigned), "Talk of the Town: the Cow," *The New Yorker*, 11 Feb. 1933, 12-13.

iii. A good example is Mark Ulriksen's Untitled Cover Illustration, *The New Yorker* 10 Mar. 2003. The rise of pets parallels the disappearance of the wild and rural animal, according to Berger, as a memento of the past lifestyle when men were used to living outdoors, in close contact with nature. Berger, "Why Look at Animals?," 12. As such, it stems from the same Freudian melancholia. They are also a way in which consumer culture adapts wildness to conspicuous consumption: in Mullin's words, "pets are commodities that many people use, like other consumer goods, as a means of constructing identities." Mullin, "Mirrors and Windows," 215-216.

liii. Liebling, A. J. "The Mustang Buzzers," *The New Yorker*, 10 Apr. 1954, 91.

liv. The cited covers are William Steig, Untitled Cover Illustration, *The New Yorker* (15 Sep. 1975); William Steig, Untitled Cover Illustration, *The New Yorker* (13 Aug. 1984); William Steig, Untitled Cover Illustration, *The New Yorker* (3 Jul. 1978); Jenni Oliver, Untitled Cover Illustration, *The New Yorker* (10 Aug. 1987); John O'Brien, Untitled Cover Illustration, *The New Yorker* (21 Nov. 1988).

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