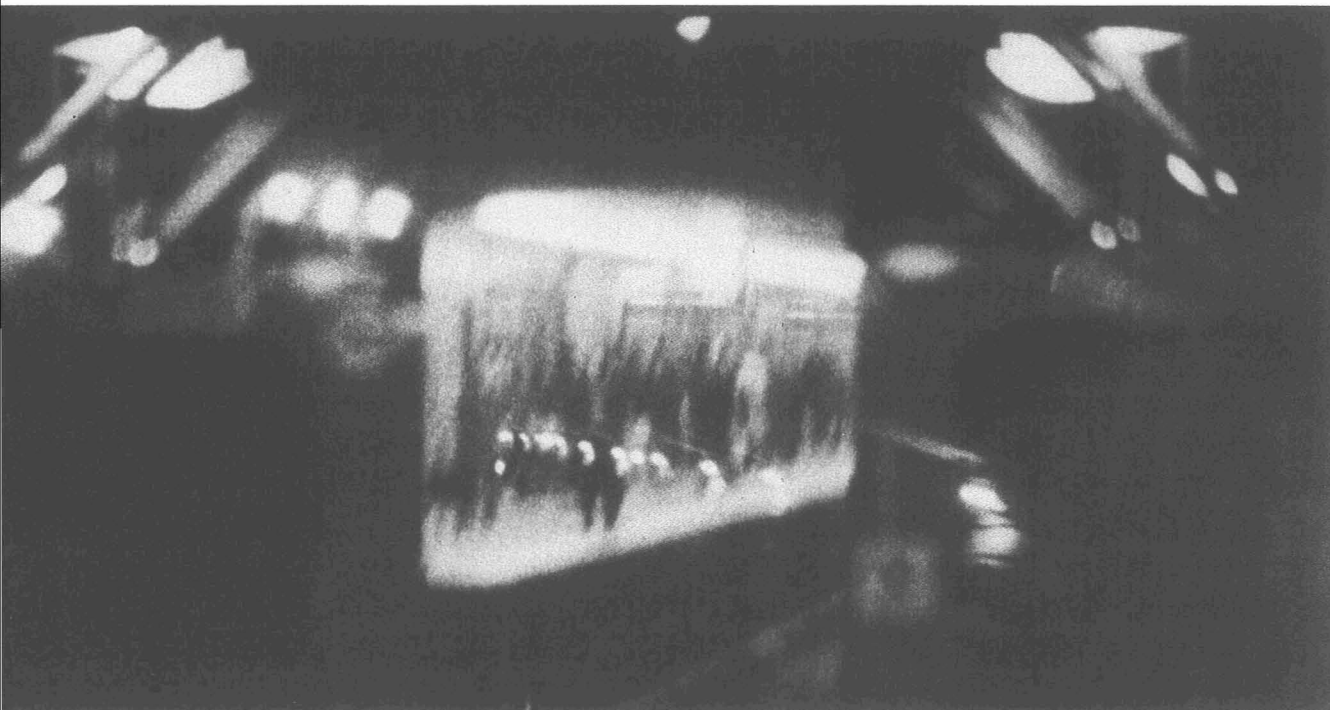


SUBWAYS AND HEALTH

LANG BAKER

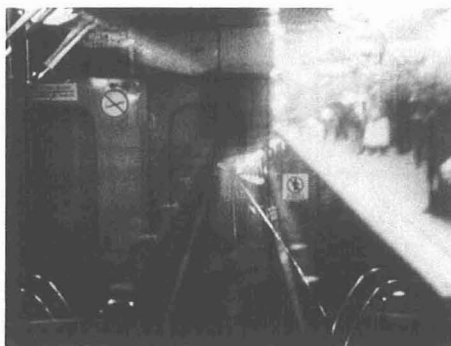
FILM STILLS FROM

PREFLEX 1989 BY TOMM JURANKA



I The illuminated interior of the subway car is a surface constituted in order to guarantee the exchange of bodies, their transference from here to there within an apparently neutral vehicle.

The appearance of neutrality is here conditioned upon the efficiency – the speed – of the vehicle. Electricity renders thinkable such neutrality because it manifests a speed of transference through an abstract unit of information, increasingly abstract, increasingly emptied and so, apparently, increasingly neutral; simply a transference from here to there, from day to night, from surface to depth.



II Electricity is a vehicle that justifies a certain phantasmic ideal: the co-presence of the universe with itself at each point, at each spatial/temporal point of presence. Each instant would thus present, enclose, re-present the totality of possibilities of surfaces, bodies and things as an encapsulated potential. This phantasm inaugurates an historical model inasmuch as it appears as a futural progression – the progressive diminution of the inefficiency of signals produced through the vehicle of a flame or passed by the old circuits (e.g. by horse, as sound through the air, or in letters). The phantasm inscribes its trajectory technologically, as evidenced in the transition from the heat filament bulb to neon-type gas tubes, the technology thus manifesting a spatial generalization of the electrical effect. The filament radiates light, the gas tube disperses the centres of radiation themselves throughout an enclosed space. This shift also constitutes the parameters and imperatives of a certain memory structure. The neon's claim to speed is dependent upon its appearance as speed, however, the oscillations within the tube are not quite fast enough to escape detection by the eye and ear and, unlike the old heat filament bulb, these oscillations can be registered as that irritating neon hum. The neon thus flaunts its binary ruse of illumination and blackout.

The co-extension of the world with itself at each point repeats the potential stagnation of time; time and history are coded and articulated within the neon interrogation of appearance. The surface in the subway car is then as much a mouldy atlas: the glue long since disintegrated, the back of the book long since disappeared, the pages stacked on top of one another between detached covers.



III In its mode of (neon) re-articulation, these 'afterwards', these approaching histories that appear in the subway car would have nothing in common with the flesh and materiality which has always appeared as the 'event', the history, of the earth. Then distance, absence, remained possible. Even displacement, shifting. However, here there is no longer the recognition of such a distance that would constitute something like the displacement or sublimation of death. The reproduction of absence, like the four-out-of-six advertisements that deal with disease or poverty, inverts the relationship between surface and texture. The four-out-of-six advertisements, like the "no smoking" sign, are dependent upon the recognition of a flesh that would decay, atrophy, a duration of the body within the circuit and co-present with it. This is a resistance that inhabited the body at a time when the concepts of the 'resisted' – an "ill", an "error", an "outrage" – had not yet fragmented into a disjunction of 'life style' set over and against the old self-recognition. Indeed, the train doors open and shift back into place, the riders will get to where they are going. Are they not then displaced? Better yet, are they not displacing themselves?

No doubt, and this, indeed, raises the question about their desire(s), however self-evident it is that one normally gets into the subway in order to get off. These signs dealing with disease and poverty seek not so much empathy or even pity as they seek to insinuate themselves into an exchange from here to there.

IV To get into the subway one must pass a token to a guard (sometimes in the guise of a machine). An elaborate system of tunnels have been designed (at great expense) to ensure that people will pass their token, or flash their identification cards. The requirement is a screening device, although one which functions at a minimum for the subway operates at financial losses – it is run by the state and subsidized through taxation. The subway's immune system, its built-in resistance, thus produces the user as a liability. Indeed the subway would be more easily run without people but for the token they pass which, too, subsidizes the subway. Subway engineers, doing away with people, might find it easier to improve service – for instance they might shorten the time it takes to open and shut the doors, thus covering more stops in less time. One might have a very small and simple tunnel running to the surface, or perhaps just use a telephone as a timing device.

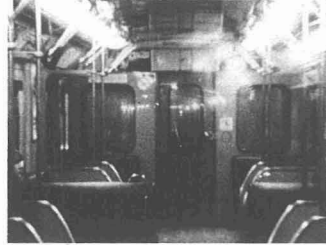
But such talk is utopian. The subway, like all organisms, is subject to parasites and invasions, hence it requires an immune system that presupposes its breakdown, its inefficiency. People stick in the doors, some fall on the tracks, some smoke, children swing on the handles.



V The neon shines through four-out-of-six advertisements from behind, intensifying the on/off of that pre-existing space of bodies. If we put the two types of signs (the “no smoking” sign illuminated by the old heat bulb and the four-out-of-six advertisements radiating the neon on/off) on the same plane of production (e.g. in the same subway car) we can uncover the operations of another immune system, although here it is one that operates on the assumption of the breakdown of the first (a breakdown that is carefully accounted). Illuminated by the old heat bulb, the “no smoking” sign is the sign of a body that sought to accelerate its production, to increase its rate of processing messages. It must account for its own status as a parasite, an indeterminacy, a body that must speed up. It is called to account for its own status as an exemplary parasite inhabiting the very medium of transmission: smoke in the air diffuses the immediacy of the electrical message, renders it imperfect. It is taken as *the* risk to the health of the bodies that seek to realize the electrical co-presence, the immediate exchange. The four-out-of-six signs on poverty and disease come later (indeed as advertisements must sustain the claim of being ‘of late’). As ‘later’, they articulate an infinite regress that inhabits the relation of the first sign/light/bodies. For not smoking will not be sufficient, the bodies will not be capable of matching the co-presence of the electrical signal. The light from the heat bulb can only reveal the failure of these bodies, and to this extent the failure of the electrical message. It is this failure that is already remarked in the “no smoking” sign.

VI The accelerated bodies cannot stave off their accelerated condition of obsolescence, of failed transmission. It is this failure that comes to appear as the parasite, the breakdown of the system. Such bodies become overheated, paranoid, they break down, exhausted, collapsed. Such bodies are to be found semi-conscious on subway floors or in front of TV screens, sometimes they throw themselves in front of trains or commit violent acts, damaging other bodies.

The police, the doctors, the psychiatrists, the script writers, the electricians all set to work on these bodies. They speak to one another, experiment, collect information, fictionalize, devise new immune systems. These bodies are obsolete. They get in the way; the “no smoking” sign does not work, it is no longer sufficient. Hence this body, through this body of technicians, devises a way to get rid of itself.



VII The body is conditioned upon disposability as distinct from efficiency *per se*; this is its paradoxical escalation. The body that can repeat its processes of decay is an invested body, a body forever in a state of displacement within the economy of that previous collapsing body. The investment of all the machines of government, discourse of experts and the cultured, guarantees its circuit within the production of a beginning and an end. Inasmuch as the on/off already enforces a temporal horizon and disjunction, the subject, the 'individual' is no longer required as the ultimate circuit of temporality, as the guarantor of the co-presence of past, present and future. This disjunction which could still appear between a subject (a smoking subject, an eating subject, a subject that might live or die) and the immediacy of the electrical message is disinvested, 'called in' in the manner of a loan payment that falls due.

VIII This disinvestment nevertheless inscribes bodies, and to this extent desire is itself produced along this surface of repeated collapse. Thus disinvestment re-appears as investment in decay, disease and poverty, these maintained as the necessary effect of that disinvestment. We are no longer within the horizon of a body that seeks to perfect itself as circuit, as co-presence. Such bodies appear, in the day/night of the neon, as the residue of that decay which has been bordered, a trace without history in which bodies still had something to do, whether it be get in the way or get out of the way, an inclination of redundance or a redundant inclination.

