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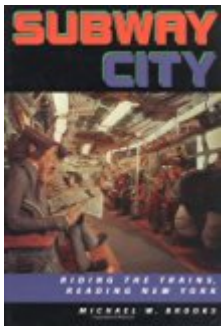
Michael W. Brooks. *Subway City: Riding the Trains, Reading New York.* New Brunswick, New Jersey, London: Rutgers University Press, 1997. xiv + 252 pp.p $35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8135-2396-5.



Reviewed by Zachary M. Schrag

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Each year, more than a billion people ride the New York City subway. The subway made New York what it is today, allowing skyscrapers to sprout in midtown Manhattan and residential neighborhoods to bloom in Harlem and Queens. Along with the Statue of Liberty and the Empire State Building, it is one of the city's most recognizable landmarks. A vital system in the life of the nation's cultural capital, it has inspired several scholarly and popular histories, including Clifton Hood's *722 Miles* and, most recently, Stan Fischler's *The Subway: A Trip Through Time on New York's Rapid Transit*.[1] So elaborate a machine, so great a factor in the daily lives of so many people could never be just a means of getting from the Bronx to the Battery.

In *Subway City: Riding the Trains, Reading New York*, West Chester University English professor Michael W. Brooks adopts a task different from that of previous scholars. Rather than writing about the subway itself--the trains, tracks, stations, and tunnels--or the political machinations behind its construction, he traces the history of the subway's image. This approach puts him squarely in the "myth and symbol" school of American Studies, following such scholars as Henry Nash Smith and Leo Marx in his attempt to trace the development of ideas about a phenomenon by examining a variety of literary, artistic, and journalistic sources. Asking why "the most common images of the New York City subway system are astonishingly negative," he finds that the subway is the ultimate symbol of New York City itself, and that "they can only be reborn together."

Subway City spans more than a century, from the first proposals for rapid transit in the 1870s to the revitalization of the subway in the 1980s and 90s. Some chapters are chronological and narrative, others more thematic. Almost half of the book analyzes images by reasonably highbrow artists: novelists, poets, painters, photographers, and sculptors. Brooks casts a wide net and hauls in an impressive range of works that touch upon New York's elevateds and subways. William Dean Howells, John Sloan, Hart Crane, Walker Evans, Ralph Ellison, and scores of lesser-known artists all appear, their visions persuasively interpreted.

Eighty-two black-and-white plates are well-chosen and well-placed to support the text's argument.

Brooks finds several common archetypes: the trains as progress, traction magnates as robber barons, the riders as the democratic crowd or threatening mob, straphangers as corpses, construction workers as heroic proletarians, and, most disturbingly, the entire system as a subterranean Hell, a notion that resurfaces every decade. Brooks shows how easy it is for artists to project their own visions of humanity onto the endlessly varied stream of riders. Elmer Rice's 1925 play, *The Subway*, portrays a place of noise and danger, particularly for a vulnerable young woman, crushed by men both physically and mentally. In contrast, sculptor Red Grooms's 1976 installation, *Subway*, shows a colorful carnival, the epitome of a Manhattan that is, in Brooks's words, "so eye-poppingly awful, so extravagantly profuse in its energies, that it ought to be relished."

Brooks's readings are careful (for one line of poetry, he produces three relevant meanings of "scuttle" and two of "yawn"), and his arguments are often insightful. For example, he delineates the complex dance between subway and skyscraper. Horizontal and vertical, disappointment and progress, dark and light--these two symbols of Manhattan have wrestled in the imagination for decades. The irony, of course, is that one could not exist without the other; the density produced by the skyscraper makes the subway both possible and necessary.

Interspersed among these chapters of the artistic image of the subway are sections on the journalistic view. Describing the magazine articles that covered the planning and construction of New York's first elevateds and subways, Brooks demonstrates the inseparability of machine and image. Inventors and speculators hoping to build a new system had to put as much effort into publicity as into engineering, to reassure a public worried about pollution from steam engines, streets darkened by elevated tracks, and water mains disrupted by tunnel construction. The pamphlets and carefully planted magazine articles countered such worries with utopian visions of transit. In an 1870 story in the *World*, a new Rip van Winkle falls asleep in 1870 and awakes 30 years later to find a second tier built atop Broadway and other major streets. These arcades have emptied downtown Manhattan of its residential population, reformed city government, and eliminated crime. As the story's narrator concludes in a burst of technological optimism, "Thus Hegelianism begins to enter practically into the solution of the problem of man."

Other sections based on the press follow well-traveled tracks. The chapters on the political battles over subway construction and the call for municipal operation and on professional planners' debates over the future of New York generally retell stories that have been more thoroughly and clearly presented elsewhere. The story of William Randolph Hearst's demagogic charges of corruption in subway operations and construction, for example, differs little from those told by Joel Fischer in his dissertation and by Clifton Hood in his book, *722 Miles*.[2] Brooks gives the events his own cultural-history spin by analyzing editorial cartoons from Hearst's newspaper and the public-relations counterattacks by the subway companies, but the result is little different from accounts relying solely on words. Likewise, his brief chapter on the subway as seen by such planners as Lewis Mumford and Thomas Adams appears to be a strained attempt to emphasize the role of the subway in the minds of visionaries who thought about entire metropolitan regions, from housing to agriculture to beaches and from New Jersey to the Hudson Valley. Their story has also been told, for example, by David A. Johnson in *Planning the Great Metropolis: The 1929 Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs*.[3]

In his final chapters, Brooks traces the subway's reputation as a dangerous place, from the

1940s, when real security systems seemed unnecessary, to 1984, when a white man named Bernard Goetz could gain sympathy from thousands of New Yorkers for shooting four black teenagers whom he felt were threatening him. The tremendous popular support for Goetz among New Yorkers who felt ready to take up arms against urban crime was, Brooks writes, "the nadir of the subway's evolution as an urban symbol." Now underground crime is falling, the graffiti has been scrubbed off, and stations are being remodeled. Some even have their own art installed. This, Brooks hopes, signals a revitalization of New York City, though it may take some time for the image of the subway to improve to match the reality.

Compared to the thorough sections describing high art, these sections on journalism are spotty. Brooks is careful to present the views of several New York newspapers, for example, but he does not read the papers of other cities. How do newspapers from Omaha or London report crimes in the New York subway? How were the New York subways used as both a model and a cautionary tale when the subways of San Francisco, Washington, and Atlanta were being planned? What is the role of the subway in the new Las Vegas casino, New York, New York? One might argue that Brooks's goal was not to present the outsiders' vision of New York, but if that is the case, his numerous discussions of Hollywood films (created for a national and international market) have no place here. Almost absent are the outer boroughs, which make only cameo appearances. The real consolidation of New York took place largely underground and underwater, and more attention to the New York beyond Manhattan would have been helpful.

As many writers have pointed out, the challenge with myth-and-symbol methodology is determining what works are representative of more than one individual's mind. Brooks makes no explicit attempt to engage that challenge, and though his stated intention is to determine the place of the subway in "the New York imagination," he never explains what comprises that imagination. He does balance male experiences against female, and white against black, but he does not weigh the work of artists, poets, and novelists against that of tabloid reporters. And what is the place of primary documents, such as the Goetz trial documents Brooks cites? Brooks's failure to directly address these questions is particularly frustrating because of the almost complete absence of voices of ordinary subway riders--those who do not professionally manipulate symbols, whether on canvas or newsprint, and who ride the subway not to observe humanity but to get to work. At one point, Brooks tantalizingly mentions that in 1917 7,000 riders wrote the Interborough Rapid Transit company (IRT) suggesting potential improvements, but does not quote any or say if the letters survive, or mention any more recent opinion surveys. Without such evidence we have no sense of how closely the images put forth by John Dos Passos or WPA artist Dan Rico matched the impression of the typical commuter.

Even the analysis of highbrow art, the strongest part of the book, is diminished by the attempt to force a chronological arrangement on the material. In one of his best chapters, "The Subway Crowd," Brooks shows how artists have portrayed, positively and negatively, the mixing of peoples, classes, sexes, and races in the intensely democratic space of a subway car. It is a pity he limits this chapter to the period 1920 to 1950, when works from the nineteenth century to the present day grapple with the same themes, often in the same ways. Coverage of these earlier and later artists are cut off by unrelated chapters detailing newspaper coverage of underground corruption and crime. A far better organizational scheme would have followed John Stilgoe's ***Metropolitan Corridor*** (on railroads) or David Nye's ***Electrifying America*** (on electricity).[4] Like ***Subway City***, these books measure the impact of a technology

on the American psyche, but their thematic organization is much more effective.

Brooks and his publisher would have also done well to work harder at post-production. The index is inadequate, consisting almost entirely of the names of people and the titles of books, serials, and works of art and omitting references to extensively covered subjects such as graffiti, the IRT, and Tammany Hall. Even the titles of many of the works mentioned are not indexed. I also noticed a few minor errors: Mayor John Purroy Mitchel's name is consistently misspelled. Elsewhere, Tammany boss Charles Francis Murphy becomes John Francis Murphy, historian Sy Adler becomes Cy Adler, and a reference to Walker Evans becomes one to Reginald Marsh.

Despite these flaws, ***Subway City*** is an impressive accomplishment. The core of the book, covering the work of professional artists, is well argued and goes far to show that the subway exists not merely on a physical plane, but "has always generated meaning far in excess of its straightforward role as a means of rapid transit." For planners, politicians, artists, historians, or anyone else preparing to enter the realm of meaning, ***Subway City*** is a handy map to have.

Notes

[1]. Clifton Hood. ***722 Miles: The Building of the Subways and How They Transformed New York***. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993. Stan Fischler. ***The Subway: A Trip Through Time on New York's Rapid Transit***. Flushing: H & M Productions, 1997.

[2]. Joel Fischer. ***Urban Transportation: Home Rule and the Independent Subway System in New York City, 1917-1925***. Ph.D. diss., St. John's University, 1978.

[3]. David A. Johnson. ***Planning the Great Metropolis: The 1929 Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs***. London and New York: E & FN Spon, 1996.

[4]. John R. Stilgoe. ***Metropolitan Corridor: Railroads and the American Scene***. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983. David E. Nye. ***Electrifying America: Social Meanings of a New Technology***. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990.

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