Rules of the Road (Su Friedrich, 1993).
Part of the program Dykes on the Road
Tues. Nov. 9, 7pm at Chicago Filmmakers.

It’s always disappointing to see New
Yorkers give in to the automobile; of all
people, they should know better. Su
Friedrich’s narrator, conflicted because of
the ecological implications, gives in with¬
out much of a struggle, glorying in her
ability to drive out to the country at a
moment’s notice and the luxury of drag¬
ging two tons of steel two blocks to the
laundry just to wash a few pounds of
clothes. The implication is that doing
without a car is a sort of asceticism that
flesh-and-blood humans can’t maintain
against the irresistible temptations of an
automobile.

Friedrich’s car fetishism digs a bit
deeper, however. The story is about a les¬
bian relationship ultimately symbolized
by a beige station wagon with fake wood
panelling. The narrator’s lover buys it;
they share it, take trips in it, and argue in it
(their reckless driving during the fights
says something about the sometimes self¬
destructive desperation of relationships
at the same time that it highlights the dan¬
ger of letting people operate such lethal
machines). The smell of the car is the
lover’s smell (such is the effect of
cigarettes); their time together is time
spent in the car. When they break up, the
narrator is haunted by beige station wag¬
ons, each one a painful reminder of her ex¬
lover.

Visually, the film is a series of pans that
center on station wagons—dozens of
them, sometimes four in one shot, as the
filmmaker replicates the obsessive fixa¬
tion of the narrator. The lack of any identi¬
fiable people highlights the use of objects
as representations of humans. The tech¬
nique works surprisingly well, especially
as one becomes amazed and disgusted at
just how many of these early 80’s mon¬
strosities exist. Recommended.—MR