

Document Citation

Title	Unforgettable films: Pickup on south street
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Source	<i>Publisher name not available</i>
Date	
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Pickup on South Street, Fuller, Samuel, 1953

Pickup on South Street. 1953. Directed by Samuel Fuller. Starring Jean Peters, Richard Widmark, Richard Kiley and Thelma Ritter.

This is arguably Sam Fuller's best picture, as well as Jean Peters's best role. I like it when lusciously beautiful women play down, act cheap and are good at it. This is one of the films that created the French nouvelle vague cinema. It's very European, really, in its long sequences, its music, its wan approach to life. Certainly a stark contrast to other American movies of the early '50s. The plot is a McCarthy Era potboiler: a cannon--a pickpocket--played by Widmark, lifts a wallet from a courier--Jean Peters--on a subway train in New York. The wallet contains a strip of microfilm that's headed into the hands of foreign agents. The Feds are trailing her and get derailed when the snatch is made. The rest of the play involves their finding him and recovering the microfilm. They make patriotic noise, separating grifting from the good of the country, etc., but the real business here is the ambience.

Sweaty, grainy black and white. Widmark, a three-time loser, lives in a bait shack on South Street under ~~the Manhattan~~^a Bridge. A federal agent, aided by the New York City cops, locates Widmark (Skip McCoy) through a grass named Moe, played perfectly by Thelma Ritter. This is Ritter's best performance, even better than her turn as Bette Davis's assistant in All About Eve. Moe is a snitch, but a respected one. As Widmark says, "Moe's gotta eat, too." She's saving up to buy a classy burial plot on Long Island. "It would just about kill me," she says, to be buried in Potter's Field. Ironically, it's Widmark, ~~the~~ whom she's fingered, who saves Moe from just that fate.

The best and most beautiful scene in the movie is where Moe comes back late at night to her Bowery room--she sells bad ties for a dollar each--snaps on a light, kicks off her shoes from her tired feet, turns on the phonograph to play a sentimental old ~~fake~~ fake-French tune, flops down on the bed, and only then notices a man's shoed feet propped next to her. It's all done in one continuous shot, with the camera moving to accommodate her own movements, giving her enough room, and ending in a grand sigh. Moe is confronted by Richard Kiley, the traitor who sent Peters on the mission in the first place, and of course it ends with his murdering her. "I'm so tired, mister," Moe says. "You'd be doing me a big favor by just shooting me in the head." But she won't tell Kiley what's going on, how the cops have Peters and ^{where} ^{lives} Widmark. Moe's a patriot. The phony Frenchman's voice comes up, the deadly sentimentality of the scene overwhelms even the ghosts of Edith Piaf and Maurice Chevalier, and Moe catches a fast freight on the railway to grifters' heaven.

Jean Peters, who later married Howard Hughes, looks great here. She's a pushover, an easy dame, who's doing a last favor for ex-boyfriend Kiley. She falls for snakey Skip McCoy, even though he treats her worse than Kiley does, but that's what turns her on. And she acts the part without a hitch. The only minor flaw here is that she pronounces Houston Street like the city; in New York, they say "How-stun" Street. I don't understand how Fuller, an East Coast guy, could have let that one slip by. It's like Bogart in Key Largo or To Have and Have Not, I forget which one now, saying Key West conch instead of "conk." Happens to the best of 'em, I guess.