KINONIK

PICKUP ON SOUTH STREET (1953)

Directed by Samuel Fuller

WEDNESDAY October 7th 7PM

SATURDAY October 10th 2PM / 7PM

16mm - B&W - 1h 20m



A pickpocket lifts a wallet on the subway and comes up holding microfilm Hoover and the Commies will both kill to get back. He couldn't care less about the Cold War — he just wants his cut. Samuel Fuller shoots the whole Red Scare as a grubby street hustle, and Thelma Ritter walks off with the picture as a worn-out stool pigeon saving up, tip by tip, for a decent burial. Tabloid pulp with a switchblade in its sock.

Fuller opens with a train screaming through the dark, then cuts into a packed subway car and lets the scene play out almost without a word. A woman hangs from a strap. Two men in hats watch her. A third man, pressed against her in the crush, watches her handbag. His fingers go to work under a folded newspaper while the onlookers never notice him at all.

That's Skip McCoy, Richard Widmark at full sneer, and the wallet he lifts holds microfilm that the Feds and the Reds would both kill for. Skip, who lives in a shack and keeps his beer chilled in the East River, doesn't much care which side wins or what flag is waved in his face. He just wants to know what the film is worth.

Garden-variety noir drifts in on cigarette smoke and voiceover, already resigned to how the story ends. Fuller's comes at you like a tabloid front page. He crowds the camera so close to Widmark and Jean Peters that a kiss and a shakedown look exactly alike; lets a beating play out in one unbroken take with the actors themselves taking the falls; and shoots a subway-station brawl from high overhead so you watch the whole thing tumble. Nobody narrates and nobody broods. People lie, haggle, slap, and keep moving.

Fuller had covered crime for a New York tabloid at seventeen, and he knew this world from the precinct side: the pickpocket squad, the dips who called themselves cannons, the cop who could name a thief by the way he worked a crowd. Mostly he knew the economy of the informer. Thelma Ritter's Moe sells neckties out of a suitcase and names out of her memory, for whatever the traffic will bear, and every dollar goes toward a burial plot so she won't end up in Potter's Field.

Fuller maintained it was a yarn about marginal people, nothing more, nothing less. He was right... just not in a way that lets anyone off the hook. Pickup on South Street is a film about prices. Everyone in it has one, the patriots included, and the flag gets waved hardest by whoever's holding the checkbook. Fuller learned in the precincts what the rest of us keep relearning, these days during state-sponsored commercial breaks: when the government goes shopping, it starts at the margins.