

Review #75 : *Side Street* (1950)

Farley Granger and Cathy O'Donnell

TRAILER

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zR7gRki-XKM>



In the opening voiceover of **Anthony Mann's** *Side Street*, New York is described as an 'architectural jungle', and 'the busiest, the loneliest, the kindest and the cruellest of cities'. With its realistic on-location setting, and Mann's particular brand of visual genius, *Side Street* is, above all else, about the **isolation and beauty of New York City**. The film opens with a spectacular aerial view of the Empire State Building, with Broadway careening down on the diagonal, creating geometric shapes and shadows in-between, buildings seeming foreshortened from that view. Helicopter shots of this kind were new at the time; they are vast, impressive, showing the city, its waterfront, its grids of organized streets, from far above. **Man is small, insignificant, helpless against the giant forces** working against him.

SYNOPSIS

Farley Granger plays Joe, a mailman, married to Ellen (**Cathy O'Donnell**), and they are expecting a baby. After a series of financial hardships, Joe and Ellen have moved in with her parents. Ellen is due to have her baby any day, but they can't afford a proper doctor, and instead she has to go to free clinics to get her checkups. In the beginning, Joe isn't a desperate man : **he does what he has to do to maintain his job, he suffers in silence** under the nosy presence of his in-laws, and he hopes that maybe, someday, he can save up enough money so that he and Ellen can have their own place.

However, when temptation arises in the form of \$200 dropped on the floor of an attorney's office where Joe delivers the mail, he finds it hard to resist. He returns to the office later, discovers the lawyer is absent, opens the filing cabinet where he saw the money put away, and takes the envelope. Once he is alone and opens the envelope, he doesn't find only \$200. He finds \$30,000 to be exact.

And so begins **Joe's long dark descent into trouble**. The money he has stolen is part of a **blackmail scheme**, worked up between the corrupt lawyer (**Edmon Ryan**) and an ex-con named George Garsell (**James Craig**). Yet unaware of any of the circumstances surrounding the money, Joe **immediately becomes haunted with guilt at what he has done**. Contrarily to *They Live By Night, Side Street* depicts a **deeply moral world**. The impact on Joe's conscience from his theft is immediate. He can't look his in-laws in the eye, he can't confide in his wife, he doesn't know what to do, and Farley Granger, as always, plays the perfect everyday guy, not all that bright, perhaps a bit gullible, and panicked like a wolf in a trap, as he tries to find a way out of the mess.

Dead bodies start to pile up. The criminals are looking for Joe, and Joe is looking for them because he wants to return the money. He must return the money, if he is to have any chance at all to live a normal life again. Unfortunately, he has entrusted the wad of cash to a bartender he thought he knew, but when he returns to the bar he finds it under new ownership. *Side Street* becomes a **race to the finish**, as the cops and Joe, separately, try to put together the pieces of the crime. Joe's wife has her baby, and Joe confesses to her, finally, what he has done, and she begs him to turn himself in. If he could just explain what had happened ... surely they would believe him ?

There is not the same **inevitability** to events here than in *They Live By Night*, this **fatalistic sense** that no matter what one does, it will not make a difference. However Joe's attempts to track down the blackmailers in order to return the money, only looks like guilt to the cops who are following him, and so *the more Joe tries to do right, the worse it looks...*

One of the things that really struck me about *Side Street* was its **overt awareness of financial realities and how these things operate on the characters**. It exists at all levels of the film. Joe's father-in-law was just demoted at his job, forced into a lower-level position : it was either that or be fired. A cop on the beat confesses to Joe early on in the film that he is retiring the next week and hopes to move to Florida. He should be able to make a living 'on half pay'. Even one of the blackmailers gushes excitedly that with the money they have stolen he will be able to pay for his kid's college education. Granger's character is not alone in his desire for a better life, for some ease and comfort. He says to his wife, when he confesses :

'I had this stupid notion that a couple hundred dollars could cure everything. You wouldn't have to have the baby in a charity ward. I'd built up a feeling of shame because everywhere I turned people had things I wanted you to have. I hated to admit, I was a flop.'

The final sequence goes down in front of the **Subtreasury Building** in lower Manhattan, a potent evocation of the **financial stresses** evident in *Side Street*. It just *had* to end there...

Granger turns in a fine performance, and **his increasing guilt and panic are palpable**. He spends much of the film clammy with sweat, as he tries to undo his own wrong, going **deeper and deeper into the vortex**. There is a beautiful close-up when he first sees his baby son, in the bassinet at the hospital, and he is in awe of the baby's tiny fingers, his beauty, the miracle of him, all of that is on Granger's face, but immediately on its heels comes guilt, loss, grief. *What has he done?* It's a tough close-up, and Granger breathes real feeling into it.

Jean Hagen has a terrific *cameo* as a tired drunk nightclub singer named Harriet, an old girlfriend of the ex-con. Joe tracks her down, in his search to find the blackmailers. When he meets her, she sits alone at her table, suspicious of everyone. She is seemingly a tough dame and yet, when she realizes she has a chance to get back together with the ex-con, she leaps at it, even if it means betraying Joe. Harriet is not a bad girl, just sour with disappointment, full of bitter memories and willing to do anything to get back into the charmed circle. It's a touching portrait of what it means to be forgotten in the big city. *How easy it is to be lost...*

The final car chase is a masterpiece. Filmed on location in New York, it shows **Anthony Mann's** strength as a director, his visual style. He switches from low angles to high, creating a **radical disorienting effect**. The camera is low on the cobblestones, as the cars go careening by, and then, suddenly, the camera is high above, 30 stories up, looking down on the events from afar, a symmetrical depiction of New York from the first shot of the film. Only now New York does not seem grandiose and welcoming, white buildings visually collapsing into shadowed buildings, layered over one another as far as the eye can see... Now it seems **claustrophobic, a huge maze**, with narrow streets closing in like wind tunnels. When Mann suddenly decides to change the angle, going from low to high, it's so effective, highlighting Granger's **ultimate desperation in being so anonymous and small**, that I am surprised it is not imitated more often. It's one of the best car chases I've ever seen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6prmCHjfBI8>

Ultimately, Joe's tragedy, combined with terrible bad luck, is to be a **dreamer**. His dreams are modest however, like most people's. *He would like a house of his own, he would like to be his own man, he would like to provide for his family.* Everyone else in the movie, cops, criminals, nightclub singers, have the same goals. However, one step wrong on that very human road to a better life, can lead you, inexorably, into the underworld. Manhattan is a dark cramped world of nothing but side streets. Side streets that could, if you take the right one, lead you to escape and freedom. *But which one ? In that maze, how can you tell ?*

REVIEW

Side Street is easy noir, plugging about amidst gangsters, call girls, crooked lawyers and lead-belly cops. But Mann dresses it up in **enough romance and nervous morality** that the movie works as straight-up melodrama. It embraces the 1950s as the new decade in crime flicks.

Side Street is a **small movie with big ideas**. Most of it takes place in daylight. It's not all shadows and pale moon, or foggy exhausts and trailing cigarette smoke. It's traffic jams, pedestrians and park benches under bright sun. It's criss-crossing bleeds of light through train tracks, flanking clean architecture and vibrant thoroughfare. The lighting schemes are reminiscent of *The Stranger* (1946) directed by **Orson Welles**.

Mann cleverly strings together scenes enclosed in boxy interiors against bits of the city's landscape. Most of times, the camera stays tight, **detailing the faces and neat interactions between persons and environments**. Each scene is framed as a piece of its surroundings. The street corners stretch just out of frame and the actors fill the spaces as if constructed solely for the movie. **There's great realism in the stylish construction**. One of the film's toughest shots involves the morning milkman cheerfully peeking through the rear window of a car while Garsell strangles Harriet to death in the back seat. This reminds us that **the rest of world goes on while these two nobodies struggle** in it.

Ultimately, *Side Street* succeeds on the backs of **Farley Granger** and **Cathy O'Donnell**. They previously played a couple in *They Live by Night* (1947) and re-ignite their chemistry here. Joe is a loser by the measurement of wealth, but a **champion of the heart with an honest and unravelling conscience**. And O'Donnell's Ellen caresses Joe's soul. We believe every second of their relationship and looming parenthood. Every hug, kiss and tear. Mann crafts their romance through the lens of crime. Think about it : the kicker to the whole thing is that Joe just wants to buy Ellen things that other people have...

