KINONIK

THE OX-BOW INCIDENT (1943)

Directed by William Wellman

WEDNESDAY August 12th 7PM

SATURDAY August 15th 2PM / 7PM



Over a two-week stretch in late June and early July, the president used the word "communist" 81 times. Not to describe an ideology or a geopolitical rival but to designate an enemy: a category of American citizen whose guilt requires no evidence because the label is the evidence.

William Wellman understood this in 1943. **The Ox-Bow Incident** is widely considered one of the first psychological Westerns. This was the moment the genre stopped asking what men do and started asking why they do it, and whether they can bear knowing. A rancher has been murdered — maybe. Word reaches a small Nevada town, and before anyone can verify the claim a posse forms. They ride into the mountains, find three drifters with the dead man's cattle, and hold a vote. The drifters say they bought the cattle legally, but almost nobody is interested.

Henry Fonda's Gil Carter knows something is wrong. He argues, he objects, he appeals to procedure and decency. He does everything short of the one thing that would matter, which is to put his body between the mob and its victims. His conscience is ultimately a spectator. Dana Andrews, as the most articulate of the accused, gives a performance so measured and so quietly desperate that it becomes nearly unbearable.

What makes the film devastating rather than merely bleak is its precision about how the mob actually operates. Nobody in the posse is a monster. Nobody is driven by bloodlust. Each man is simply watching the others, performing resolve because everyone else is performing resolve. What happens isn't a breakdown of social order but an emergence of its evolutionary roots.

In 2004 James Surowiecki published The Wisdom of Crowds and launched a thousand TED talks. What nobody quoted was the precondition: the judgments have to be independent. The moment people start watching each other you don't get aggregated wisdom, you get a posse. This year people placed over a million dollars in bets on whether wildfires that killed 31 people would reach specific Los Angeles neighborhoods. A platform called WyldFyre launched with the tagline: "You can't predict fire. But you can trade on it." The mob never disbanded: it got financial incentive, and an app.

Seventy-five minutes long, eighty-three years old, **The Ox-Bow Incident** has not aged a day.