

Subversive Visions: America on Film, 1949-1957

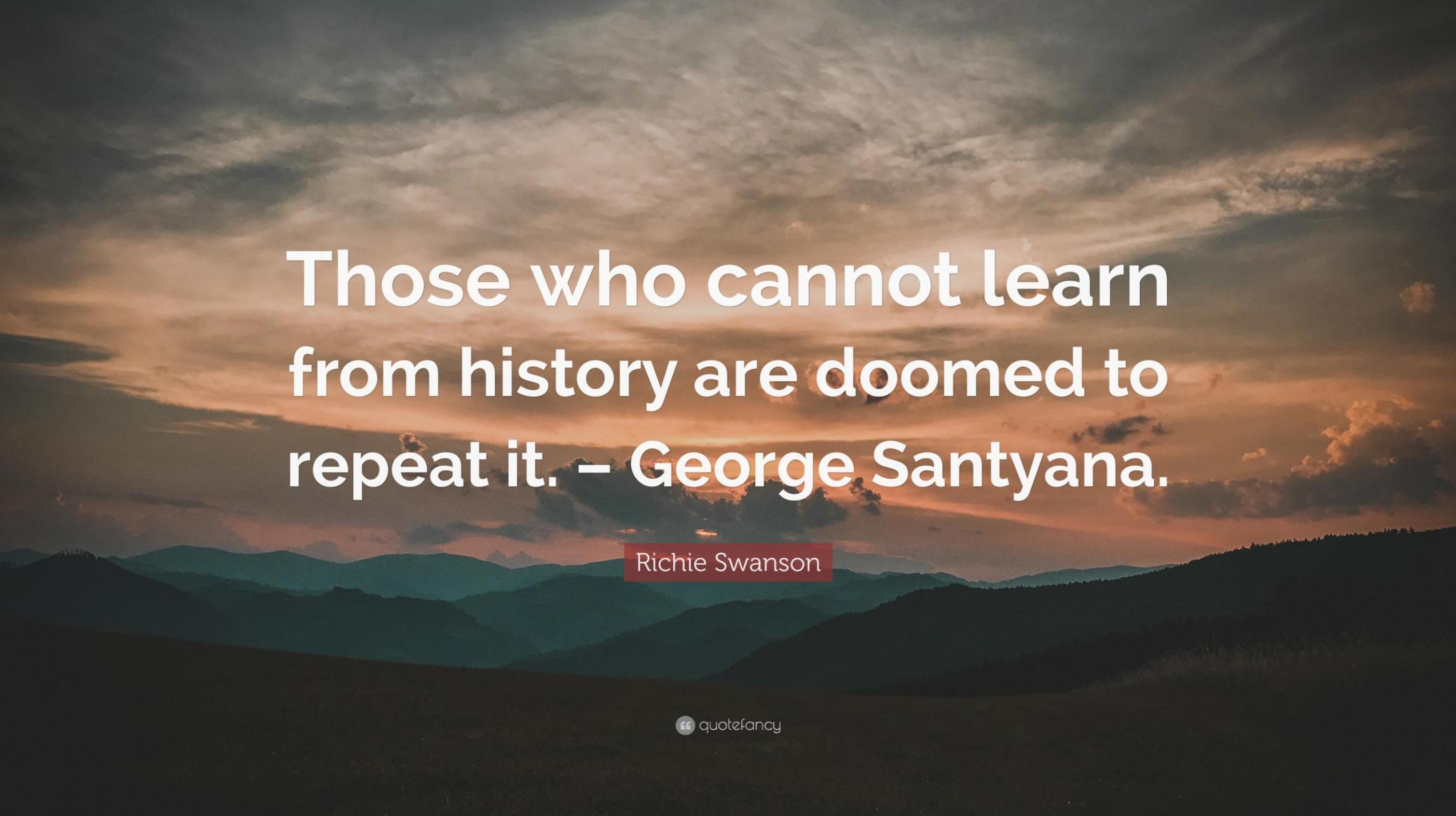
- **Three films that expose the hidden tensions of America's past and present.**





**The more things
change, the more
they are the same.**

Alphonse Karr

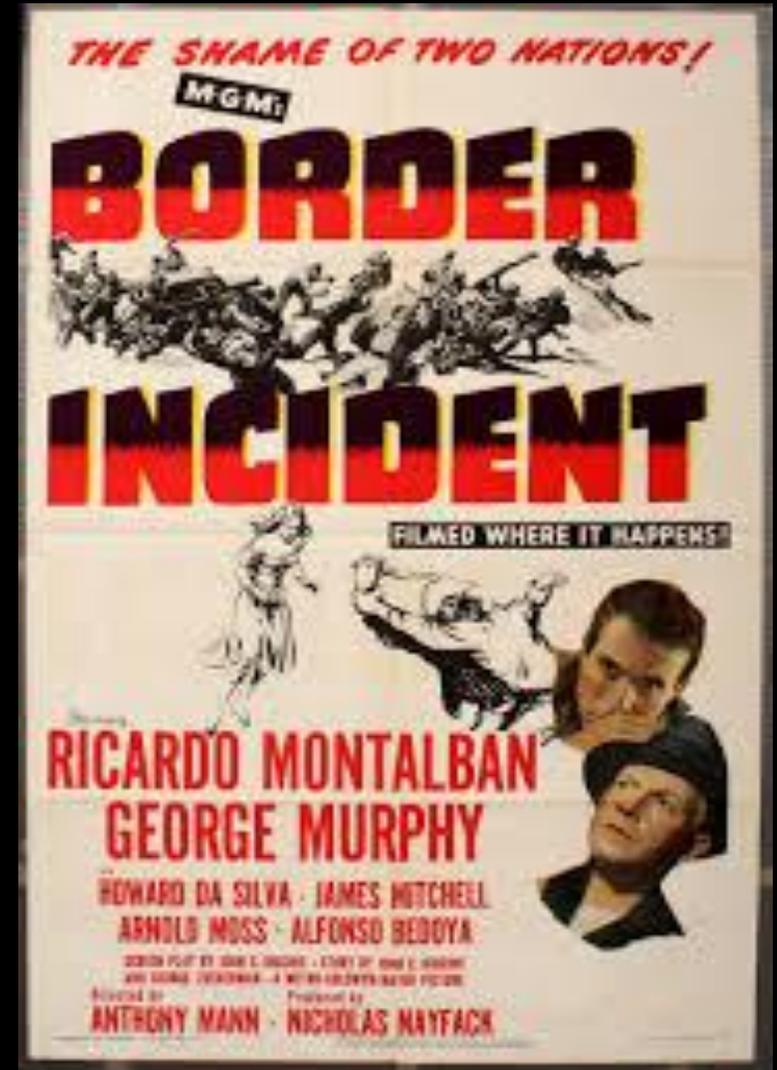


Those who cannot learn
from history are doomed to
repeat it. – George Santyana.

Richie Swanson

Border Incident (1949)

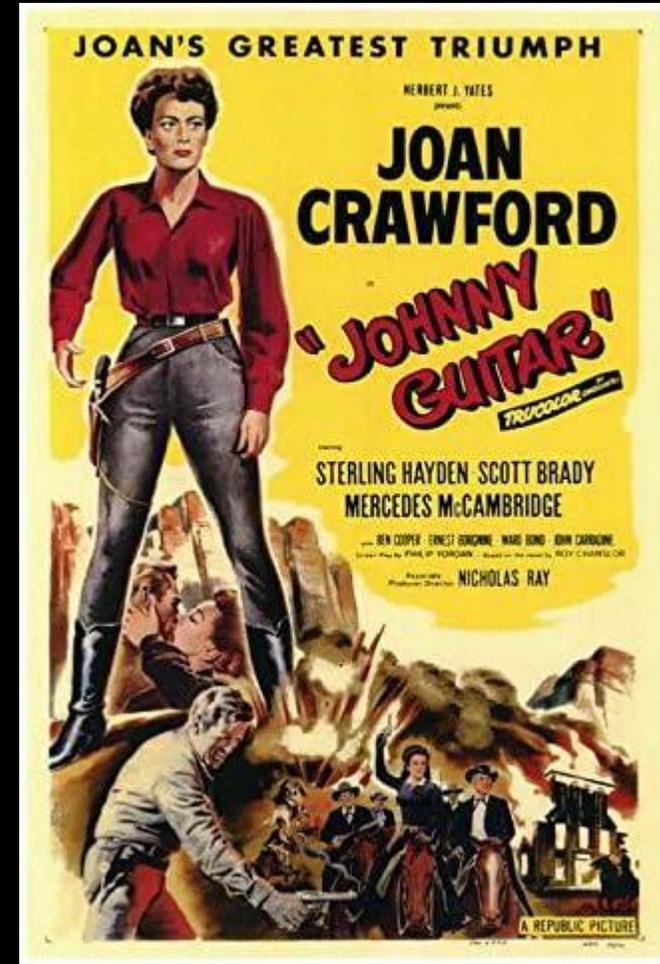
- A gripping noir about
- Crime,
- Immigration
- and
- Justice on the
- U.S.-Mexico border.



“I never met a woman who was more a man.”

Roger Ebert: “One of the most blatant psychosexual melodramas ever to disguise itself” as a western...also **one of the boldest and most stylized films of its time, quirky, political, twisted.** “

“an allegory squarely aimed at the House Un-American Activities Committee,”



1957

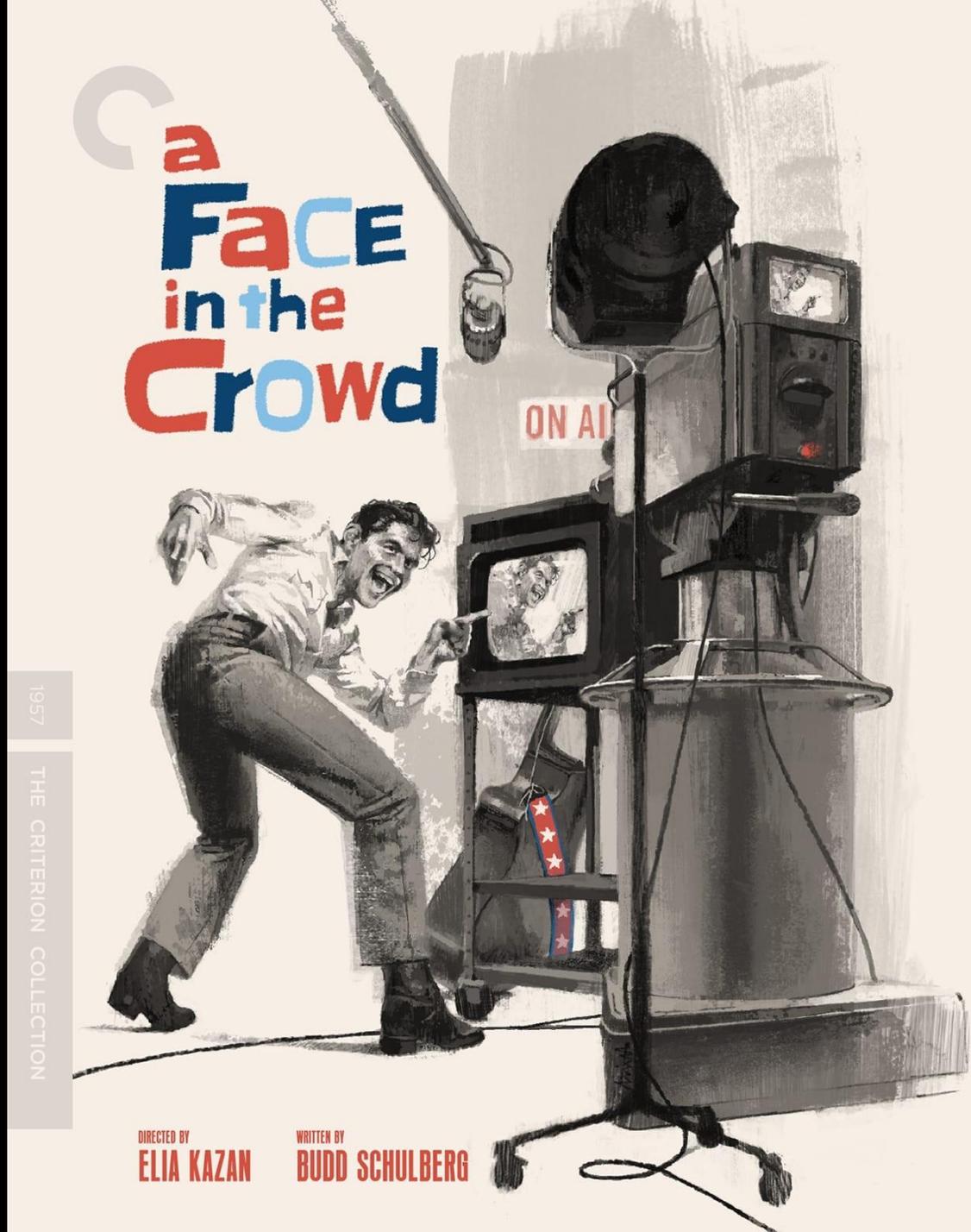
“raw, penetrating, and terrifying portrait of humanity.”

“a devastating commentary on hero-worship and cults of personality”

“surprisingly relevant to modern media and politics,”

“Andy Griffith’s performance is mesmerizing “

“a hidden classic”



Our first movie
is a film noir
so...

SCOURGE OF THE RIO GRANDE!

VICTIMS OF THE QUICKSANDS!

**ASTOUNDING DRAMA! BOLD!
BREATH-TAKING!**

M-G-M brings to the screen a daring expose...
shocking... chilling... thrilling... told of the
heroes who risk their lives to blast out the lairs
of the flesh-mongers!

"BORDER INCIDENT"

SMUGGLING OF HUMAN CARGOES!

FILMED WHERE IT HAPPENS!!!!

HEROES VS. HUMAN VULTURES!

M-G-M presents **"BORDER INCIDENT"** starring RICARDO MONTALBAN • GEORGE MURPHY
with HOWARD DA SILVA • JAMES MITCHELL • ARNOLD MOSS • ALFONSO BEDOYA • Screen Play by John C. Higgins
Story by John C. Higgins and George Zuckerman • Directed by ANTHONY MANN • produced by NICHOLAS NAYFACK • A METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER PICTURE

MGM
25th
Anniversary
1924-1949

...

**Welcome
to...**





FILM NOIR

- **Border Incident** (1949) is a taut, **semi-documentary** crime thriller that occupies an **important place in postwar American cinema**. The movie **blends noir aesthetics with social realism** to explore
 - **labor exploitation,**
 - **cross-border corruption,**
 - **and the limits of postwar liberal optimism.**



• 1. Historical and Political Context

• Released in 1949, *Border Incident* reflects several intersecting anxieties of the late 1940s:

- **A) Postwar labor shortages** in American agriculture
- **B) The Bracero Program** (1942–1964), which brought Mexican laborers into the U.S. under temporary contracts
- **C) Growing concern over organized crime's infiltration** of legal institutions
- **D) Early Cold War** interest in international cooperation versus nationalist suspicion



• The film's premise—**Mexican and American law enforcement cooperating to dismantle a human-trafficking ring—was unusual for its time.** In an era when Hollywood often trafficked in ethnic caricature, *Border Incident* presents Mexican officials as competent, ethical, and equal partners. This alone gives the film a quietly progressive political dimension.



- However, the film stops short of challenging the structural inequities of the Bracero system itself.

Exploitation is framed as the work of criminals, not as a consequence of policy—a limitation that reflects the era's constraints.



• 2. Semi-Documentary Style and Noir Aesthetics

- *Border Incident* belongs to the postwar cycle of semi-documentary crime films
- **Visual Style**
- Shot largely on location in California and Mexico
- Stark high-contrast lighting, especially in night sequences
- Deep shadows and low-angle shots evoke classic noir fatalism
- Anthony Mann's direction emphasizes physical danger and claustrophobia, the farmland—normally associated with abundance—becomes a site of entrapment and death.





- **Narrative Tone**
- **Procedural and methodical** rather than emotionally expressive
- **Violence is sudden and brutal, not stylized or glamorous**
- **The film's pacing reinforces the sense that institutional justice moves slowly, while crime moves efficiently**

- **3. Themes**

- **a. Exploitation and Dehumanization**

- At its core, *Border Incident* is about the reduction of migrant workers to interchangeable labor units. They are trafficked, robbed, and murdered with impunity. Yet the migrants themselves are largely voiceless.



- **b. Masculinity and Moral Duty**

- The protagonists—played by Ricardo Montalbán and George Murphy—embody a postwar ideal of restrained, professional masculinity. They are not loners (as in classic noir) but agents of the state. Still, Mann infuses the film with noir pessimism by emphasizing how easily these men can be isolated, betrayed, or erased.
- Heroism here is not triumphant; it is procedural and sacrificial.



5. Limitations and Critique

Despite its strengths, *Border Incident* has notable limitations:

- **Migrant workers remain largely symbolic** rather than fully realized characters
- **Structural critiques of U.S. agricultural labor practices are muted**
- **The film ultimately reassures audiences that crime is an aberration, not systemic.**

These shortcomings do not negate the film's achievements, but they do **reveal the boundaries of liberal social criticism in classical Hollywood.**

6. Legacy and Significance

Border Incident stands as:

- One of Anthony Mann's most socially conscious films
- An early Hollywood attempt to address human trafficking and migrant exploitation.
- A bridge between classic noir and later, more openly political crime cinema.

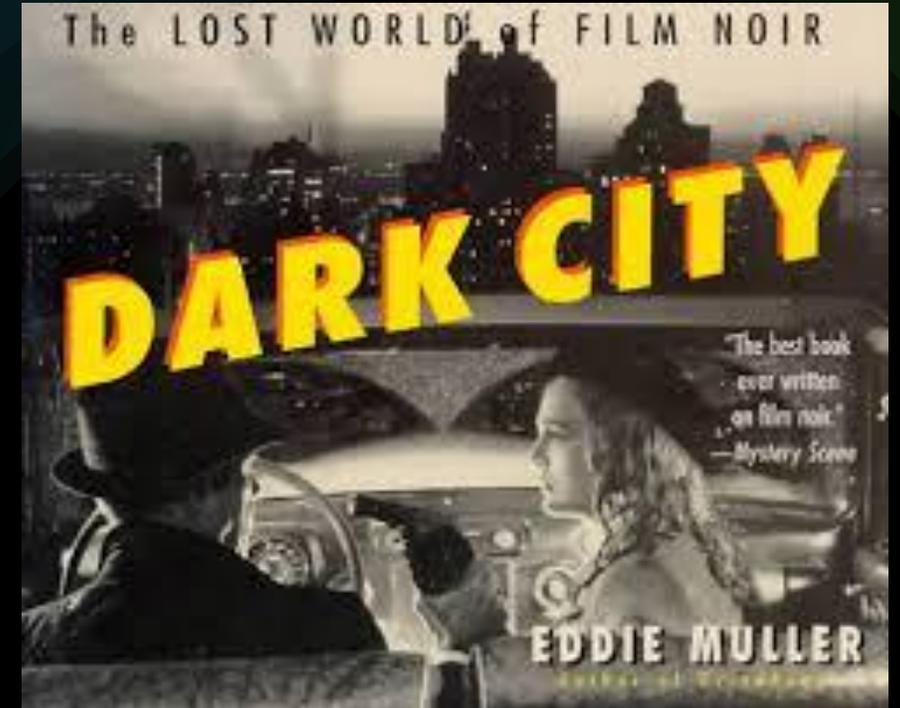
Viewed today, the film feels unnervingly contemporary, particularly in its depiction of labor vulnerability and border politics. Its refusal to offer easy catharsis gives it enduring moral weight.

Final Assessment

Border Incident is a grim, disciplined, and morally serious film that uses noir techniques to expose the human cost of economic exploitation without fully interrogating its causes. Its strength lies in its atmosphere, realism, and ethical sobriety; its weakness lies in its limited imagination of justice beyond law enforcement.

In short, it is a socially aware noir that dares to look hard at suffering—but not quite hard enough to indict the system that produces it.

- **Border Incident...is undermined by its association with the Federal government. In exchange for the imprimatur of the Justice Department and the Immigration and Naturalization Service, the film was obligated to show criminal labor practices as the work of a few small renegades. In 1949, unlike today, the trail of a crime could never lead to corporate America. Border Incident ends with the voice of authority assuring us that the crisis of illegal farm workers has been alleviated through the dedicate work of agents like George Murphy and Ricardo Montalban.**



- **BEFORE**
- **THE**
- **MOVIE**



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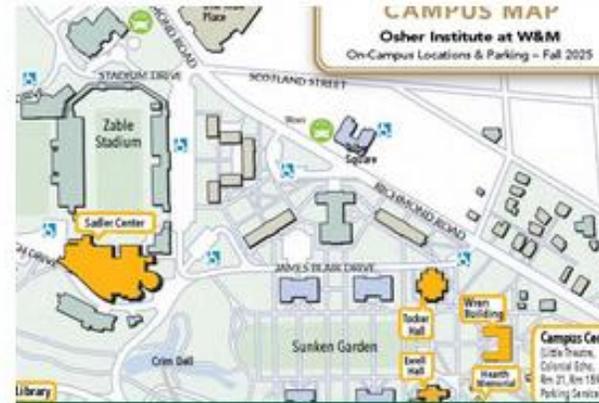
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(with John Quincy Adams)

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(with Martha Washington, Thomas Jefferson & James Madison)

The Bracero Program

- The Bracero Program (1942-1964) was a U.S.-Mexico agreement bringing millions of Mexican men to the U.S. for temporary, short-term agricultural and railroad work, addressing wartime labor shortages but becoming the largest guest-worker program in U.S. history, marked by promises of fair treatment and wages that often contrasted with poor conditions, wage theft, and exploitation, sparking labor activism before its eventual end due to worker and organizer pressure.



KEY ASPECTS:

- **Origin:** Created during World War II (1942) by **President Franklin D. Roosevelt** to fill crucial labor gaps in agriculture and railroads as U.S. workers joined the military or went into war industries.
- **Agreements:** Called the "**Mexican Farm Labor Program**," it promised braceros (day laborers) **fair wages, housing, sanitation, and protection from discrimination**, with some wages saved in Mexico.
- **Scale:** Over 4.5 million contracts were issued, making it the **largest guest-worker program in U.S. history**, with California being a major recipient of this labor.
- **Reality vs. Promise:** Despite the agreements, many braceros faced **exploitative conditions, wage theft, poor living standards, and discrimination**, with employers benefiting from cheap, controllable labor



End of Program (1964)

- **Renewed after the war but faced growing opposition from activists, labor organizers, and religious groups due to widespread abuses, leading to strikes and its eventual termination, writes the National Park Service and Britannica.**



- **Legacy:**

- **The program reshaped agricultural economies, influenced immigration patterns, and fueled the farmworker movement led by figures like Cesar Chavez, leaving a complex legacy of economic contribution alongside significant human rights struggles, says the National Archives and YaleNews.**





- **Former bracero (86 years old) doesn't want the program to return. 'People will be treated like slaves'**

Alvarado at 21 was part of the Bracero Program in the 1960s, which allowed millions of Mexican men to work legally in the United States on short-term labor contracts.

"If that happens (the program returns), those people will be treated like slaves," the ex-bracero responded. "Just like what happened to us."

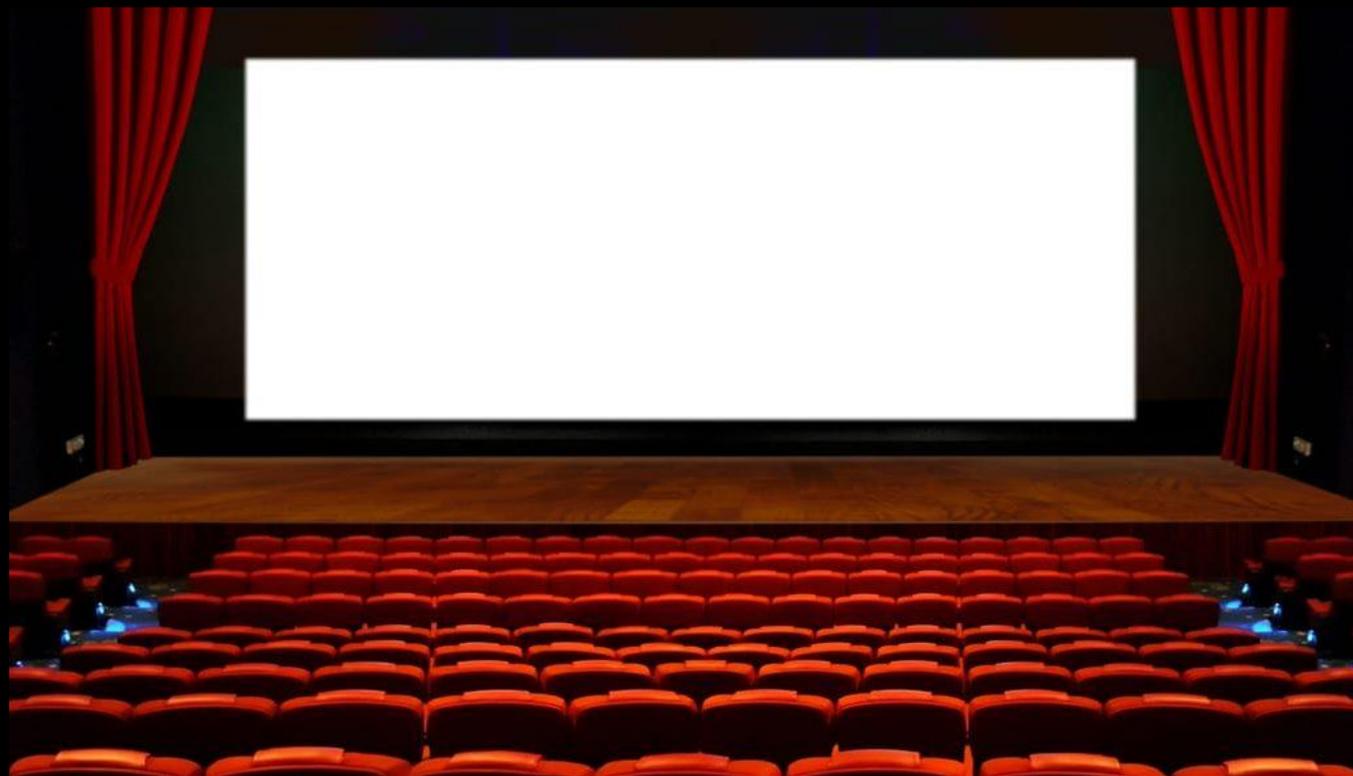


TCM

NOIR ALLEY

WITH EDDIE MULLER

After the Movie



A Climate of Fear grows...

- **1. Reports of Soviet repression in Eastern and Central Europe** in the war's aftermath added more fuel to what became known as the "**Second Red Scare.**"
- **2. The growth of conservative political influence and the Republican triumph in the 1946 Congressional elections, which saw the party take control of both the House and Senate, led to a major revival of institutional anticommunist activity, publicly spearheaded by HUAC.**

- **3. 1947:** The following year, the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals (MPA), a political action group cofounded by Walt Disney, issued a pamphlet advising producers on the avoidance of "subtle communistic touches" in their films. Its counsel revolved around a list of ideological prohibitions, such as ...

**"Don't smear the
free-enterprise
system ...**

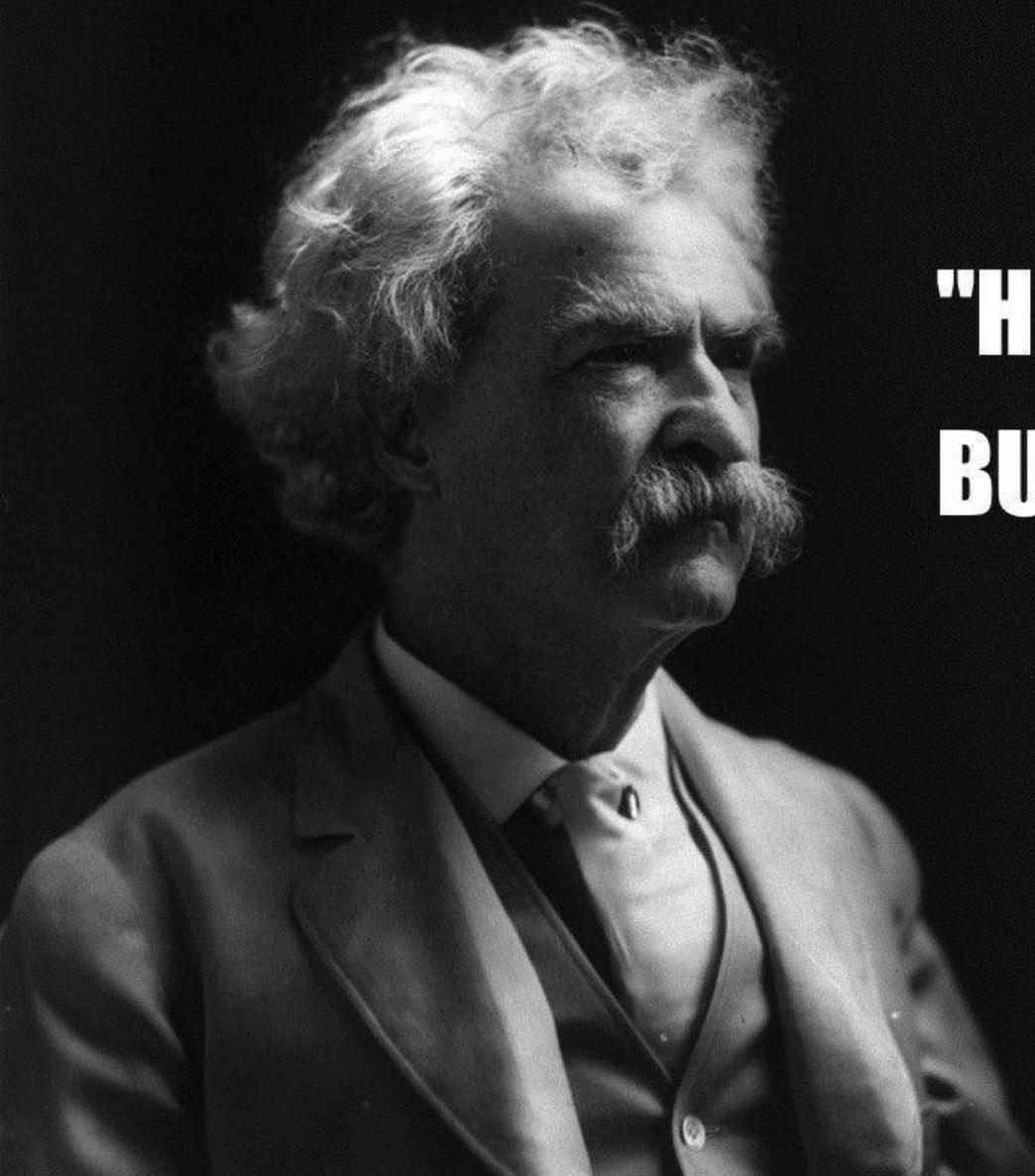
**Don't smear
industrialists ...**

**Don't smear
wealth ...**

**Don't smear the
profit motive ...**

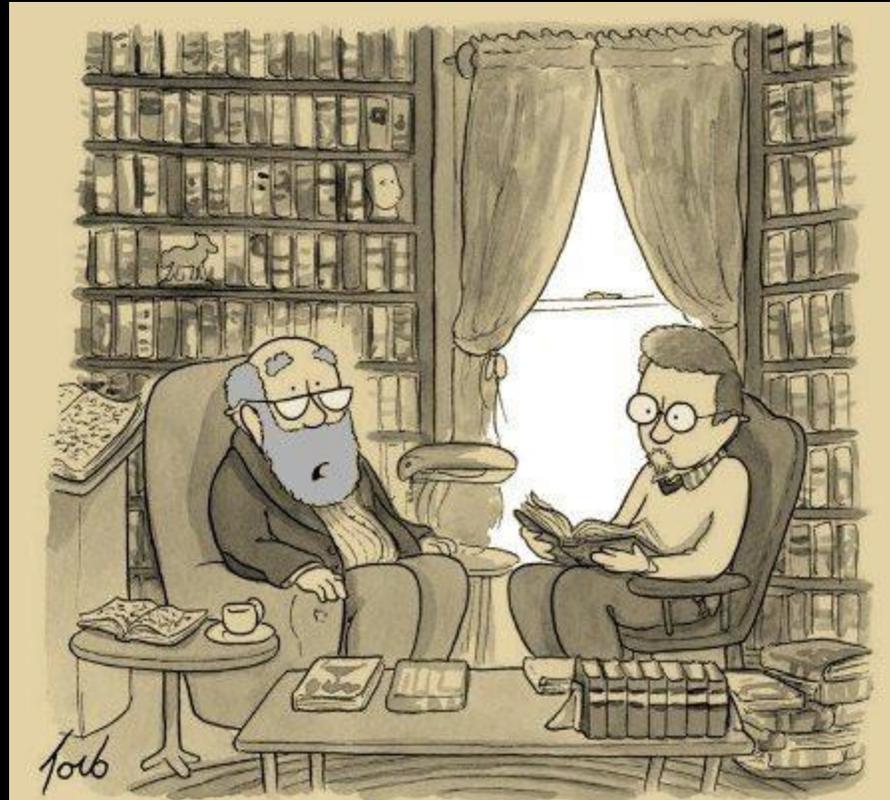
**Don't deify the
'common man'
...**

**Don't glorify the
collective".¹**



**"HISTORY DOES NOT REPEAT ITSELF,
BUT IT DOES RHYME."**

- MARK TWAIN



“Those who don’t study history are doomed to repeat it.
Yet those who *do* study history are doomed to stand by
helplessly while everyone else repeats it.”

- **And Next Week**

TFH

