

The Spirit is Willing, but the Flesh is Weak: Embodied Transcendence and Sacred Spectatorship
in *The Robe*

Abstract:

“The desire to *be* elsewhere without actually *going* elsewhere,” the visual theorist Alison Griffiths remarks, “seems to be hardwired into the human psyche.” The reintroduction of widescreen into Hollywood filmmaking in 1953 with the release of Fox’s film *The Robe* reshaped the ways in which spectators were encouraged to relate to the film image. Rather than relying on the voyeuristic model of spectatorship encouraged by the Academy ratio, audiences were now invited to become a physical part of the spectacle unfolding both before and around them. Through its use of widescreen, *The Robe* offers but ultimately denies the ability to transgress temporal boundaries, to encounter the redemptive moment when Christ walked the earth and ultimately broke into history and then escaped from it through the Crucifixion and His Resurrection.

As the first film released in CinemaScope, *The Robe* stages at both the narrative and technological level the embodied appeals that were key to the way in which the historico-biblical epic encouraged spectators to understand their place in time. In this paper, I draw on mid-20th Century Christian theological explorations of time, industrial and trade discussions of widescreen technologies and exhibition formats, as well as work on temporality and affect in film theory, to argue that *The Robe* provides an experience of two competing notions of time. During the film, Christ ruptures the flow of history, his Crucifixion the moment when time itself, as Christian theologians argued, comes to its fruition. At the same time, CinemaScope promised the ability to experience history at the level of bodily presence and the moment when pagan, secular history

experienced its fulfillment. One could be *there* (and *then*) and, along with the early Christian converts, physically witness the seeming transcendence of historical time. However, the sense of embodied immersion promised by CinemaScope resists the teleological thrust of narrative, which moves the characters and the spectator away from the transcendent moment of the Crucifixion, toward the death of the martyrs at the conclusion of *The Robe*. The forward movement of historical time and the embodied encounter with the past generated by CinemaScope continue to undercut the ability of the film to offer an escape from this inexorable temporality.

Sources:

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Biography:

Thomas J. West III is a Ph.D. candidate in English at Syracuse University specializing in classic Hollywood cinema. His dissertation, *History's Perilous Pleasures: Experiencing Antiquity in the Postwar Historico-Biblical Epic*, explores the genre of the historico-biblical epic and the ways in which it offers an experience of the terrifying nature of history through an appeal to the ancient world. He has published an essay on the Starz series *Spartacus* and has a forthcoming essay on the HBO series *Rome*. He also recently co-edited a special volume of the journal *Queer Studies in Media and Popular Culture* dedicated to queer histories and queer nostalgia.