

Are You Now or Have You Ever Been a Christian?: The Strange History of *The Robe* As Political Allegory

• Jeff Smith

In an essay in *Danse Macabre*, best-selling author Stephen King writes, 'If horror movies have redeeming social merit, it is because of that ability to form liaisons between the real and unreal – to provide subtexts. And because of their mass appeal, these subtexts are often culture-wide.'¹ For King, the value of these subtexts is that they endow popular fictions with a social and cultural significance that allows them to tap into the deeply held fears and anxieties of their readers. It is through these subtexts that the horror film has commented on a host of social and political issues, including scientism, racism, consumerism, conformism and, of course, Communism.

Although King only acknowledges it implicitly, these subtexts are also important to the extent that they find expression in the rhetorical form of allegory as patterns of metaphorical substitution that bridge the gap between the real and unreal, past and present. Both in the horror film and in other film genres, allegory has been a privileged mode of interpretation in relation to films made during the blacklist period. As such, it seems appropriate to investigate the use of allegorical interpretation as it has been applied by film historians and critics to Hollywood films of the 1950s. Through this analysis, I hope to reveal the particular biases and assumptions of blacklist allegories as well as the extent to which this type of interpretation has informed the reception of 1950s films. More specifically, I wish to address several questions about the validity of allegorical readings of the blacklist. Is there a basis for such allegorical interpretations? What is the place of authorial intention and audience reception in the encoding and decoding of blacklist allegories?

What does this reading strategy tell us about the politics of the films' makers? Does this reading strategy privilege certain meanings of the text over others of equal significance?

In an essay on the nature of historical allegory in film, Ismail Xavier discusses two traits of allegory that help to explain why it serves as a favored mode of interpretation at particular historical moments. First, Xavier notes that allegorical expression is especially prevalent during times of political repression since the disguised nature of allegory allows it to communicate political dissent in a manner that circumvents systems of institutional censorship. Secondly, Xavier also notes that history itself is used as a form of allegorical expression within the genre of the historical film. Describing these as 'pragmatic allegories,' Xavier suggests that historical novels and films take on allegorical significance insofar as the depiction of past events serves as a means of offering 'disguised comment on the present.'²

Both of these points help account for the prevalence of allegorical interpretation in films made during the Hollywood Blacklist. The blacklist certainly seems to fit Xavier's first criterion in that it is generally understood as a form of political censorship designed to silence both radical leftists and liberals, both of whom had hoped to use the cinema as a means of exploring social issues during the immediate postwar period. Moreover, Xavier's notion of 'pragmatic allegories' also explains how certain historical films have been read as allegories of both the Hollywood Blacklist and the Cold War politics that helped create it. Not surprisingly, a diverse group of historical films have been

subjected to this type of interpretive strategy, including *Reign of Terror* (1949), *Quo Vadis* (1951), *Viva Zapata* (1952), *Julius Caesar* (1953), *The Robe* (1953), *Spartacus* (1960), and *El Cid* (1961).³ In these films, the political and religious conflicts associated with the French Revolution, the Mexican Revolution, Ancient Rome, and 11th Century Spain are used to offer disguised commentary on the contemporary debate regarding the threat of Communism to American political institutions.

Xavier also notes two particular strategies employed in encoding a text as allegorical. The first involves the creation of national allegories through the use of an individual who stands in for a larger social class or political group and who embodies particular traits associated with a particular national imaginary. The second involves creating a sort of one to one correspondence between particular features of the text and the specific circumstances of the text's historical context. These strategies may be used separately or they may be combined as they are in allegorical readings of L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* (1903). According to this interpretation, *Oz* is a metaphorical reworking of early 20th century debates about the gold standard as the basis of the American economy. Baum's story is figuratively linked to these issues through the name 'Oz' as a commonly understood abbreviation for ounce and through the 'yellow brick road' as a metaphoric representation of the gold standard itself. Moreover, the characters themselves are seen to symbolize particular historical personages or political interest groups. The Wizard stands for President William McKinley while the Cowardly Lion represents his rival, William Jennings Bryan. Likewise, the Tin Woodsman and the Scarecrow stand in for industrial laborers and farmers, respectively. As this example indicates, such allegorical interpretations are frequently tied to their particular historical moment. Philip L. Gianos points out that this metaphorical dimension of *Oz*'s narrative was probably lost on most viewers of the film adaptation produced in 1939 and is almost certainly absent in the experience of contemporary viewers of the film.⁴

As a particular type of interpretation, allegorical readings of historical films also share a great deal with the practice of film interpretation more generally. As David Bordwell has argued, interpretations of films are often produced by mapping specific features of the text according to semantic fields furnished by a particular theoretical paradigm, by a facet of the film's historical context or even by the analyst's own individual agenda.⁵ In the case of historical allegory, the superordinate semantic field that organizes all of the other interpretive elements is the binary opposition between past and present. Using this master opposition, the analyst simply maps the points of correspondence between specific features of the text and the particular facets of the film's present historical context that they seem to symbolize. Unlike other kinds of interpretation, though, the emphasis on historical context as a frame of reference places a certain check on the text's interpretive potential.

In this essay, I will organize my discussion of allegory around *The Robe* as a particular case study of blacklist interpretation. While the film shares the outwardly conservative tone of other Biblical epics, *The Robe* has received attention from several scholars, who see it as an implicit critique both of the blacklist and of dominant American Cold War ideology. John Belton, for example, argues that the film 'casts Caligula as a witchhunting, McCarthyesque figure and the Christians as persecuted victims of his demonic attempts to purge the Roman empire of potential subversives.'⁶ Belton's reading is echoed by Bruce Babington and Peter William Evans, who note the historical parallelism inscribed in the coincidence of *The Robe*'s production with the second round of hearings conducted in Hollywood by the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) in 1951. Further, Babington and Evans call attention to the contemporary resonance of Tiberius' order to Marcellus to collect information on the early Christians. Says Tiberius, 'I want names, Tribune, names of all the disciples, of every man and woman who subscribe to this treason.'⁷ Both of these readings of *The Robe* depend on a pattern of binary oppositions that are similar to the one listed below:

Table 1

Past	Present
Ancient Rome	USA
Christians	Communists
Roman Tribunals	HUAC
Persecution	Censorship
Crucifixions	Blacklisting

In making their case for an allegorical reading of *The Robe*, however, both Belton and Babington and Evans make reference to screenwriter Philip Dunne's background as a noted Hollywood liberal. Dunne was one of the founding members of the Committee for the First Amendment, a group of Hollywood liberals that protested on behalf of the nineteen 'unfriendly' witnesses who were scheduled to appear before HUAC in October of 1947. By referencing Dunne's political credentials, these scholars introduce the possibility that *The Robe's* use of allegory constitutes an intentionalist discourse by, ever so subtly, suggesting that the homologies between past and present may have been planted by Dunne as part of the screenwriting process. This in itself should not be surprising, however, since, as Ismail Xavier notes, allegorical discourse is often understood within a framework of intention-utterance-interpretation that presumes that the text contains indices of allegorical intention.⁸ Belton pushes the point of intention even further, however, by calling attention to Dunne's claim that he rewrote an existing script by a blacklisted writer. By prefacing this observation with the claim that Hollywood's radical left used the Biblical epic to 'make a case for the Hollywood Ten and the evils of repressive government,' Belton gives at least some credit for *The Robe's* allegorical meanings to the unnamed writer of Dunne's autobiography.⁹

Dunne's account of *The Robe's* production history, and the corresponding role of a blacklisted writer in that history, is almost too good to resist. The readings of the film based on this account suggest that one of those persons silenced by HUAC had nonetheless found a disguised way to critique government repression. More importantly, by endowing the unnamed

screenwriter with a kind of subversive agency, these accounts further suggest that the radical left tweaked the collective noses of Hollywood by using its norms and conventions of representation in a manner that counters the ostensible interests of those who instituted the blacklist in the first place.

There is just one problem with this account, though. While it is true that early drafts of *The Robe* were written by a member of the Hollywood Ten, Albert Maltz, the screenwriter completed work on *The Robe* in September of 1946, more than a year before his HUAC testimony and the subsequent issuance of the Waldorf Statement by the studios. This chronology, thus, turns common sense causation on its head insofar as it places the imputed effect of the blacklist – the screenplay and film that is seen as a reaction to it – before its supposed cause. As such, it raises an important question about *The Robe*: can we still see the film as blacklist allegory?

If the earlier allegorical interpretations of Belton and the others are to hold up, then the following interrelated assumptions that implicitly support these readings must prove to be true:

1. Since Albert Maltz wrote the screenplay prior to the institution of the blacklist, he must be consciously or unconsciously responding to the broader political pressures of his era, the same pressures that ultimately led to the Hollywood blacklist in 1947.
2. Albert Maltz must be the sole – or at least the primary – source for these allegorical meanings. If other persons, especially those whose politics are less radical than Maltz's, contribute to the film's allegorical subtext, then the argument that Maltz was using the screenplay as a political forum is weakened.
3. Albert Maltz's contributions to the screenplay must have survived the processes of revision and translation to the screen. Even though Belton acknowledges the work of Philip Dunne, there is a tacit assumption that Maltz's political message survived the revision process relatively unscathed. Since these earlier interpretations only examine the finished product, they assume that *The Robe*

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as it appeared on screen is more or less the same as *The Robe* of Maltz's early drafts of the screenplay.

To test these three assumptions, let's examine them against the historical records that detail *The Robe*'s production.

A. The *Zeitgeist* Thesis

One way to salvage the historical narrative sketched out by Dunne and others might be to reread the role of intention to suggest that Maltz presciently offers a cautionary tale about the Red Scare by situating his adaptation of the Lloyd Douglas novel within an allegorical framework. Certainly, one might make a *prima facie* case for such a possibility since by 1946 there had been some indications of an impending shift in American politics. Winston Churchill had given his famous 'Iron Curtain' speech in July of 1946 and problems within the Screen Writers Guild and the Hollywood Writers Mobilization had signaled a rift between liberals and radicals within the industry.¹⁰ Besides the immediate postwar context, there already had been several state and federal government actions taken to limit the influence of Communism on American life. HUAC had been investigating Communism on and off since 1938. In 1940, Congress passed the Smith Act, an anti-sedition law that outlawed the advocacy of government overthrow. Furthermore, the Tenney Committee conducted investigations of Communists in Hollywood during the early 1940s and the right-wing Motion Picture Alliance for American Ideals was established in 1944.

While one cannot entirely dismiss the possibility that Maltz's screenplay was a response to events that foreshadowed the eventual blacklist, there are several things that complicate this account. First of all, a problem with the 'foreshadowing theory' is evident in the subplot involving Marcellus's efforts to gather the names of early Christians. This subplot is cited by Babington and Evans as some of the clearest evidence in *The Robe* of allegorical intention. Unaware of the chronology of *The Robe*'s

production, these critics attribute the import of this subplot to screenwriter Philip Dunne and assume that he consciously strove to draw parallels between Tiberius's charge to gather the names of early Christians with HUAC's investigations of Communists in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

Yet, this subplot appears to be wholly Maltz's invention rather than Dunne's. Perhaps more importantly, the notion of 'naming names' would have far less political resonance when it was introduced to the screenplay in 1945 than it would have just two years later. Indeed, the issue of informing would not really become a major theme of blacklist allegories until 1951, the same year of Larry Parks' infamous appearance before HUAC where he pleaded with the committee to avoid the stigma of being a stoolpigeon. In a now notorious exchange, Parks begged, 'Don't present me with the choice of either being in contempt of this Committee and going to jail or forcing me to really crawl through the mud to be an informer. For what purpose?'¹¹ Parks's question will linger over several films interpreted as allegories of informing, such as Alfred Hitchcock's *I Confess* (1952) and Elia Kazan's *On the Waterfront* (1954), but the specific practice of clearing oneself before the committee could not have been anticipated by Maltz back in 1945. While it is true that Maltz's screenplay might still be seen as an augury of things to come, the subplot of 'naming names' cited by Babington and Evans cannot be read retrospectively as evidence of authorial intention.

Another problem with the '*zeitgeist*' theory is that it ignores other allegorical readings of *The Robe* that are more directly related to the historical context surrounding Maltz's work on the screenplay. For example, since Maltz's first draft was completed during the final stages of World War II, one might just as easily read the film as an allegorical critique of Italian fascism and its hopes of restoring Italy to the glory of the Roman empire. This analogy also depends on the juxtaposition of past and present, but it puts Fascist Italy in place of the United States in terms of the binarisms established by the pattern of substitution:

Table 2

<i>Past</i>	<i>Present</i>
Ancient Rome	Fascist Italy
Christians	Communists
Roman Tribunals	Brownshirts
Underground Caverns	'Underground'
	Italian Resistance
Crucifixions	Firing Squads

There are several factors that might support this type of allegorical interpretation. For one thing, anti-Fascism was a major political cause for the Hollywood Ten. As members of the Popular Front, many of them participated in the activities of political interest groups, such as the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League. Moreover, in their failed defense during the HUAC investigations, several members of the Hollywood Ten compared the committee's ostensible interest in censorship with similar types of actions taken by Fascist governments. In his prepared statement, Dalton Trumbo likened the investigation to the Reichstag fire saying, 'For those who remember German history in the autumn of 1932 there is the smell of smoke in this very room.'¹² For another, in his subsequent screenwriting work, Maltz gained notoriety for his exploration of the perils of Fascism. Shortly after his work on *The Robe*, Maltz would coauthor the screenplay for *Cloak and Dagger* (1946), a film that was, according to Bernard F. Dick, 'simultaneously an attack on fascism, a tribute to the Italian Communist resistance, an exaggerated account of Germany's attempt to manufacture an atomic bomb, and a plea that the atomic age would not get off to as bad a start as Hiroshima seemed to indicate.'¹³ After *Cloak and Dagger*, Maltz wrote the screenplay for *Crossfire* (1947), a film that received Oscar nominations and was marketed to audiences as a social problem film dealing with the issues of anti-Semitism and domestic fascism. Lastly, although it is a small point, in *The Robe*, Maltz's early descriptions of Rome's majesty are suggestive of Fascist Italy's interest in monumental political symbolism. Consider page 2 of Maltz's first draft:

As Caligula's voice continues, CAMERA SLOWLY MOVES UP TO the doorway and FOCUSES ON a carved stone Roman Eagle. The claws of the Eagle are holding the 'fasces with the ax.' Rays of carved lightning emanate from the fasces.

It is worth noting here that Maltz's description makes explicit reference to the etymological root of 'fascism,' namely the fascis. In ancient Rome, the fascis was a bundle of rods that contained an axe and served as a symbol of power when displayed for Roman magistrates. The combination of the fasces with the Roman Eagle and carved lightning takes on contemporary resonance here as implicit references to the Iron Eagle of Nazi symbolism and the awesome force of the German blitzkrieg or 'lightning war.' For all of these various reasons, one is tempted to conclude that Maltz's intentions were not to use *The Robe* as a critique of American anti-Communism, but rather as a critique of Italian Fascism.

In sum, while it is virtually impossible to disprove the claim that Albert Maltz was consciously or unconsciously acknowledging the possibility of political repression after the war, it seems far more likely that his early drafts of *The Robe* were a response to more proximate historical circumstances, namely the rise of Italian Fascism prior to World War II. For this reason, one might reject Maltz as the source of *The Robe*'s allegorical subtext *tout court*. Yet, *The Robe*'s status as blacklist allegory does not depend solely on Maltz's participation. Although it lacks the narrative appeal of Belton's account, which casts Maltz in the role of court jester thumbing his nose at Washington's power structures, it is possible – perhaps even likely – that others, such as author Lloyd Douglas, screenwriter Philip Dunne, director Henry Koster, and producer Daryl Zanuck, contributed to the allegorical meanings of *The Robe*. It is this issue – the role of adaptation and revision – that I will take up in the next two sections of this essay.

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• Posing for a publicity shot, *The Robe*'s producer, Frank Ross, studies the screenplay of Lloyd C. Douglas' novel (foreground).

B. Maltz as Primary Source of *The Robe*'s Blacklist Subtext

In addition to the previously cited problems of chronology and causation, another problem

emerges with respect to these accounts of *The Robe* as blacklist allegory, namely the problem of adaptation. While some of these earlier interpretations either implicitly or explicitly

acknowledge that *The Robe* is an adaptation of a pre-existing source, they quite explicitly suggest that writers personally invested in the blacklist utilized this material to fashion a critique of early 1950s political repression. Indeed, any implicit claims for Maltz and Dunne's authorial agency depend on the tacit premise that they were the primary sources for *The Robe*'s blacklist subtext.

Yet at least some of the elements that critics have cited in support of *The Robe* as blacklist allegory were already present in Douglas's novel, which was published in 1942. In fact, Douglas refers quite specifically to blacklisting early on in the novel when Senator Gallio's wife, Cornelia, expresses fears that the family will be socially blacklisted if her husband continues his outspoken criticism of the government. Beyond this reference to blacklisting, however, the novel contains several moments that characterize early Christians as a perceived threat to the Roman government. For example, Caligula's speech in the final scene of the film, which refers to Christians as 'seditionists,' comes directly from the Douglas's novel. Similarly, in Chapter X, in a report to Tiberius about Jesus's crucifixion, Senator Gallio describes Christians as a 'small but turbulent revolutionary party.' Later, in Chapter XXI, in a dialogue with Diana, Tiberius characterizes the Jesus movement as having in it 'the seeds of revolution,' and further suggests that it has aspirations of overthrowing the Roman Empire, albeit not by force. Finally, and most tellingly, a radical egalitarian spirit is strongly evident in the plan Stephanos recounts to Demetrius late in Douglas's novel:

'The whole plan was unsound,' he explained disconsolately. 'Simon announced that any Christian might sell his property and bring the proceeds to the Ecclesia with the promise that his living would be provided for.'

'No matter how much or how little he had?' queried Demetrius.

'Right! If you owned a farm or a vineyard, you sold it – probably at a sacrifice – and brought Simon the money. If you had nothing but a few chickens, and a donkey, you came with the money you'd got

from that. And all would live together in brotherly love.'¹⁴

While the plan itself is hardly a strict application of Marxist theory, its notion of communal property and provisions would undoubtedly seem vaguely 'Communitistic' to HUAC investigators just a few years later. In its own way, it is not unlike the 'Share and share alike' line from *Tender Comrade* that Lela Rogers found so objectionable as a 'friendly witness' testifying before HUAC in 1947.¹⁵

When comparing the film to the novel, it becomes clear that determining the intentions of *The Robe*'s screenwriters is problematized by the process of adaptation. If the elements that support the allegorical readings of *The Robe* are already present in Douglas's novel, then it is difficult to wholly subscribe to a theory that it was Maltz's or Dunne's intention to warn viewers of the evils of repressive government. This is especially true when one considers that a third party, producer Frank Ross, assigned the task of adapting the novel to Maltz and then later, Dunne. Because the decision to work on *The Robe* was not entirely in their control, Maltz and Dunne could scarcely have the foresight to know that a film version of *The Robe* would be a potential vehicle for political commentary by the 1950s.

C. The Problem of Revision

Besides the problem of adaptation, a third problem with the earlier accounts of *The Robe* as blacklist allegory emerges in the issue of screenplay revision. As we all know, a typical Hollywood screenplay undergoes several stages of revision in the process of making it to the screen. Often, a writer completes several drafts of a screenplay only to have it handed over to other writers, who then takes the producer's notes and do their own 'pass' on the project. The new screenwriters may be used to do a 'polish' job, to punch up the dialogue, to solve particular story problems, or even to write a completely new draft based on the previous writer's material. Once the screenplay is made into a

shooting script, the actors and directors may still make other changes on the set during the process of the film's actual production. In fact, while much of this work goes uncredited, it is not uncommon to have as many as a dozen different people contributing to the final shape of a screenplay as it is brought to the screen.

Here again, while Belton's interpretation of *The Robe* as blacklist allegory acknowledges Philip Dunne's role as the credited screenwriter for the film, he implicitly assumes that Dunne's work more or less preserved Maltz's original vision, and that his own contributions to the screenplay did little to add to the film's political subtext. Indeed, if it were shown that several of the allegorical elements were contributed by Dunne rather than Maltz, it would considerably weaken the narrative of political subversion that animates this particular interpretation of the film.

Despite the strange timing of Maltz's work on *The Robe*, his scripts contain several apparent references to the blacklist, many of which were cut from the screenplay during the revision process. For instance, while Caligula's final speech makes reference both to Christian sedition and to Spartacus, who by 1953 was viewed as a kind of Marxist hero, the same scene in the screenplay includes three additional references to Christian sedition that were cut from the final film, including Marcellus's denial that he is a seditionist or that he is personally engaged in a plot to overthrow the state.¹⁶ (Instead, Marcellus says that Christians as a group are not engaged in such a plot). Moreover, in a scene in which Marcellus is being transported back to Rome to face trial, Maltz includes a line of dialogue that appears to be precisely the kind of 'subversive propaganda' that made HUAC appoint itself media watchdog. In the scene, a young boy brings dinner to Marcellus's cabin, but is asked by the guard whether the prisoner had already received a tray of food. When the boy protests that he is simply following the Captain's orders, the guard responds, 'What a fine world it'd be if there were no captains.'¹⁷ Although the line itself is a throwaway, its egalitarian sentiment and its apparent reference to a classless society make it

similar to the examples of Communist propaganda that HUAC's 'friendly witnesses' attested to in 1947.

Likewise, although the film includes Tiberius's charge to find the names of Christians as well as Abidor's role as informant, it cuts several scenes that further develop the 'naming names' motif. For example, in scene 204 of Maltz's screenplay, Marcellus pays Abidor a coin for every name the latter gives him to add to his list.¹⁸ Scenes 221–2 show Marcellus writing the names of early Christians on a parchment scroll. Maltz's description even includes an insert in which the audience sees four names listed at the bottom of the scroll.¹⁹ Finally, scene 244 of Maltz's screenplay shows Marcellus burning his scroll in a campfire outside his tent: CAMERA MOVES IN STILL CLOSER. As the flames eat at the paper, it writhes with the heat, and, for a moment, turns toward the camera. We catch a glimpse of part of the list of names

Reuben. . . Weaver

James. . . Fisherman

And then the names turn black under the flames.²⁰

In examining the differences between Maltz's early drafts and Dunne's finished screenplay, there are at least two ways in which we might account for these particular changes. One possibility is that some lines and scenes were undoubtedly cut due to considerations of length. Maltz's screenplay ran 277 pages, and much of Dunne's work on the project involved drastically cutting and reshaping Maltz's material. In comparison, Dunne's final draft of *The Robe* ran only 141 pages in length.²¹ That, however, does not adequately explain why these specific elements were cut nor does it eliminate the possibility that these changes were made on political grounds. Indeed, if one ascribes agency to *The Robe*'s production team in shaping the meanings of the text, then one must grant the possibility that either Dunne or the producers cut these elements to obscure the script's political subtext rather than to clarify and illuminate it. According to this scenario, elements that may

have seemed harmless when the script was completed in 1946 might be viewed as politically problematic as the film entered its production phase in 1952.

This explanation, however, depends on the premise that Dunne or the producers construed Maltz's work as a possible blacklist allegory. Indeed, one could hardly seek to hide the film's political subtext unless one understood that political subtext in the first place. Yet, while this initially appears to be a plausible hypothesis, the historical record seems to indicate that neither of the film's producers actually understood the film in this way. Correspondence between Maltz and producer Frank Ross shows that RKO criticized the screenplay for overemphasizing the mysticism of early Christianity and for downplaying Christianity as a way of life.²² If RKO understood the film as a metaphor for anti-Communist repression, then we would surmise from their advice that they desired a more materialist and less metaphysical depiction of Christianity. If this were true, then the studio would be complicit with Maltz's political critique even if they disavowed such awareness for political or public relations reasons. Since this seems unlikely, it seems more reasonable to conclude that RKO simply failed to notice any anti-Communist subtext.

Moreover, even after the blacklist was established, 20th Century-Fox seemed no more cognizant of *The Robe*'s political subtext than RKO was. A conference memo from Darryl Zanuck to Dunne and Frank Ross compares *The Robe* to *David and Bathsheba* and asks, 'Are we again permitting "talk" – an overabundance of talk – to motivate our climax?'²³ As a means of engendering some suspense in *The Robe*'s 'talky' third act, Zanuck proposes that Caligula should appoint Gallio, Marcellus's father, as the 'head of a committee of the Senators to investigate the case of a traitor. Thus Gallio is forced into position of "trying" his own son.'²⁴ Zanuck's suggestion to provide a filial pressure on Marcellus would not only complement the legal and political pressures depicted in the narrative, but it would also have the effect of enhancing the parallel between ancient Rome and

contemporary America. By placing Marcellus's fate in the hands of his father, Zanuck sought to blame the persecution of Christians on a bureaucratic government committee rather than a power-mad, dictatorial Emperor. Although this conference memo raises the unlikely possibility that Zanuck himself sought to use *The Robe* as a vehicle for criticizing American political repression, he did not follow through and use his power as producer to push his agenda further.²⁵ Nothing resembling this subplot survives in Dunne's subsequent drafts of the script nor in the finished film.

If neither Ross nor Zanuck's notes imply any political intent on their part, is it possible that screenwriter Philip Dunne was responsible for these specific cuts? Although my conclusions on this question are tentative, it does not appear that Dunne deliberately sought to becloud *The Robe*'s political subtext. Several of the elements cited above were taken over by Dunne in his drafts of the screenplay and were only cut during the very late stages of the revision process. For example, in his working script dated 26 June 1952 that runs more than a hundred pages shorter than Maltz's draft, Dunne cuts the aforementioned line about 'captains,' but reworks the insert of Marcellus's scroll so that the camera shows him adding Miriam's name to the list in a 'shaky sprawling hand.'²⁶ Similarly, Dunne reworked some of the scenes Maltz had written between Marcellus and Abidor, but in a manner that preserves the characterization of the latter as a greedy informant. Scene 98, for example, shows Abidor dictating names for Marcellus's scroll:

Abidor

Benjamin and his wife, farmer
Marcellus dips his pen in the ink and writes.

Abidor

Justus, the weaver. It is said he is the leader.
CLOSE SHOT – Insert

The list, as Marcellus writes the names.

Abidor's voice

Hariph, the potter. His daughter, Rachel –

Although these sequences appear in Dunne's late drafts of *The Robe*, they were eliminated by the

time the shooting script was completed, thereby making the reasons for their exclusion much more difficult to discern.

A more pertinent question, perhaps, is whether or not Dunne actually understood *The Robe* as a blacklist allegory, and unfortunately the historical record here raises more questions than it answers. While Dunne does not specifically address *The Robe*'s political subtext in his autobiography, there is some evidence that he might have seen the film as a Cold War allegory. George Custen notes that in 1949 Dunne tried to interest Darryl Zanuck in adapting a *New Yorker* article about William W. Remington, a Department of Commerce official charged with being a Communist. Later, Dunne pitched the idea of making George Orwell's *1984* to Zanuck by saying, 'we could make another *The Robe*, set in the future instead of the past.'²⁷ The problem, as Custen points out, is that Dunne saw these projects as being anti-totalitarian, as much against Communism as they were against HUAC. This seems particularly pertinent to the idea of adapting *1984* since it is just as easy to see the novel as an indictment of Stalinism as of American anti-Communism. In fact, when one considers the anti-Stalinist allegory of Orwell's *Animal Farm*, one might be inclined to prefer the former reading rather than the latter. If this is the case, then Dunne's intentions would accord more with Maria Wyke's reading of *The Robe* as a film which defends Christianity as a weapon in the war against Communism. According to this view, *The Robe* is an allegory about the persecution of Christians by present day Communist governments rather than a film that defends the Communists interrogated by HUAC. Since the issue of Dunne's intentions gives rise to two seemingly opposed interpretations, one is tempted to ignore the issue altogether as hopelessly clouded and confused.

***The Robe* as Historical Allegory: Comparing Paradigms of Analysis**

If this complicated chronology and the role of the source novel have problematized an allegorical

interpretation based on Maltz's intentions, is there another way we might understand *The Robe* as allegory? The obvious candidate for an alternative explanation lies in reception theory. According to this line of argument, the process of encoding allegorical utterances has little or no bearing on the meanings created in the process of decoding these structures. Historical, social and cultural contexts create the conditions for such reading strategies, which in the case of historical films and fictions, involve the understanding of analogies between past and present. As I indicated near the start of this chapter, one can readily adduce this kind of allegorical interpretation in the long-term reception of *The Robe* among film scholars. But are traces of this allegorical framework evident in the contemporaneous reception of the film? While it is always difficult to assert and prove a negative proposition (i.e. reviews of *The Robe* do not show the traces of allegorical interpretation), my answer to this question is a qualified no. Rather, as Maria Wyke points out, the technological novelty of CinemaScope overwhelmed the contemporaneous reception of *The Robe*, such that reviews offer virtually no consideration of the film's subtexts.²⁸ This appears to be true even in publications that one might expect to read the film as a form of political commentary. The review in *Commonweal*, a journal edited by John Cogley, one of the most important early historians of the blacklist, is typical. In the review's first three paragraphs, Philip T. Hartung discusses the decision to make *The Robe* in CinemaScope. This is followed by a brief plot synopsis and an assessment of the film's performances. The review concludes by praising the tastefulness and dignity of its depiction of Christ, but also complains that the film is not as stirring as it might be and that this is likely due to director Henry Koster's unfamiliarity with the new technology.²⁹ This avoidance of political subtext is evident despite the fact that the same issue of *Commonweal* begins with a discussion of European reactions to McCarthyism and concludes with a book review that addresses the relationship between Communism and religious institutions.

Besides the inattention to subtext, the contemporaneous reception of *The Robe* also effaced Maltz's contribution to the film in press accounts of its production. Early reports on the film (circa 1945) note the participation of Maltz, who replaced the first screenwriter on the project, Ernest Vajda.³⁰ After Maltz completed his work on the script, *The Robe* remained in preproduction limbo until 1948 when producer Frank Ross announced that RKO was finally ready to make the picture with Victor Fleming and Gregory Peck as the film's director and star respectively. Ross also announced that he had hired Maxwell Anderson and Andrew Solt to do the screenplay adaptation despite the fact that he already had Maltz's completed script.³¹ The project met another roadblock, though, when RKO canceled the production less than a month later citing the project's \$4.5 million budget as too large an expenditure for the studio. After some legal wrangling between Ross and RKO, *The Robe* landed at 20th Century-Fox when Darryl Zanuck bought out RKO's interest in the project. In a 1952 article detailing the producer's ten year struggle to bring *The Robe* to the screen, Ross claims that he was not able to hire a top-notch screenwriter during the early 1940s because 'most of the good ones were in the service.'³² Ross goes on to say that several lesser-known screenwriters worked on the project until he wrote a scenario himself and hired Philip Dunne to 'do a polishing job.'³³ This press report corroborates the account of the production offered in Dunne's autobiography and it further points to Ross' role in preventing Maltz from gaining screen credit. In Ross's statements to the press, Maltz had gone from an artistic collaborator in 1945 to one of a group of lesser-knowns in 1952, this despite the fact that Maltz had written *This Gun for Hire* (1942), *Destination, Tokyo* (1943), *Pride of the Marines* (1945), and Ross's own Oscar-winning short, *The House I Live In* (1945).

While the paucity of contemporaneous evidence regarding blacklist interpretations poses one problem for a reception studies model, another more significant problem emerges when one considers the long-term reception of *The*

Robe and the theoretical issue of 'misreading.' In her influential study of historical reception, *Interpreting Films*, Janet Staiger briefly considers the problem of misreading as one of the possible interpretive stances taken by spectators. For Staiger, the issue of misreading is a potential liability for her model of reception studies insofar as it opens up the theoretical possibility of an unconstrained pluralism of interpretations. Staiger, however, dismisses the potential problem of infinite semiosis by drawing a distinction between the '*philosophical possibility* of reading anything any way' and the '*historical fact* that the range of interpretations is constrained by numerous factors such as language, ideologies, personal goals for the experience, conditions of reception, self-identities related to class, race, gender, age, and ethnicity, and so forth – including the contemporary critical methods readers have been taught.'³⁴ For Staiger, then, every reading, even a misreading, is potentially valuable to reception studies as 'an important datum in evidence gathering and hypothesis making.'³⁵

Yet the possibility of 'misreading' seems to run slightly counter to another doctrinal commitment for Staiger, namely that such misreadings still function as part of the horizon of expectations created for any individual spectator. Noting that every text has its own history of reception, Staiger argues that this history of successive interpretations functions as a background that 'sets up assumptions about a text's meaning and thus influences its current interpretation.'³⁶ Citing Tony Bennett, who in turn cites Pierre Macherey, Staiger argues that each of these interpretations becomes a kind of textual encrustation, not unlike the layers of secretion that form a seashell or the layers of sedimentary rock that indicate a fossil's geological history.

Taken at face value, Staiger's account goes a long way toward explaining my own interpretive position vis a vis *The Robe*. In tracing the history of *The Robe*'s reception, it is undoubtedly true that these previous interpretations, particularly those of Belton and Babington and Evans, have influenced my approach to the film. Yet Staiger's

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model of textual encrustation suggests that my own interpretation simply 'sluices over' these previous accounts as just another layer of interpretation resting atop the others. And if we accept this model of the accretion of interpretations, my own reading of *The Robe* is no more right nor wrong than the others.

But this conclusion defies common sense. How can one interpretation supported by the available historical evidence be as equally valid as another interpretation that is unsupported by the available historical evidence? These two interpretations are not merely different; they are, in fact, incompatible. Given Staiger's context-activated model of reception, it might be fair to say that my interpretation of *The Robe* has changed because the context for its reception has changed as well. But this simply begs a larger sort of 'chicken and egg' question: what accounts for the change in context that produces the change in interpretation? In this instance, one can clearly specify the reasons for the change in context, namely more detailed and specific information about both *The Robe*'s history of production and the attendant impossibility of clear-cut authorial intention posited in earlier interpretations.

Perhaps more important than the reasons themselves is their origin outside of both the text itself and any specific act of interpretation. This poses a theoretical dilemma for Staiger, who asserts that 'meaning is "in" the contextual event of each reading, not "in" one reading event rather than another.'³⁷ While I generally agree with Staiger's emphasis on context, her model suggests that a text's meaning inheres solely in particular interpretive acts. Yet doesn't it logically follow that if factors outside the act of reading cause changes in its context that they also cause changes in the text's meaning as well? And if this is true, doesn't it also follow that a text's meaning is affected by elements that exist outside of both the text and specific act of its reception? Or to put it another way, surely the fact that Albert Maltz completed his work in 1946 changes the context for the reception of *The Robe*, but does it not also exist as a historical fact apart from that reception context?

Does all of this mean we must reject an allegorical interpretation of *The Robe*? Actually, I think not. Indeed, the strongest evidence to support this model of allegorical interpretation comes not from the possible or deliberate references to anti-Communist repression in the screenplay, but to Maltz's implicit conception of Rome as an empire founded on political repression that disregarded constitutional checks and balances to hold power. In his notes for *The Robe*, Maltz cited several passages from a book entitled *The Ancient World*. A passage describing the empire's treatment of conquered territories reads:

Rome strictly isolated the subject communities from one another. She dissolved all tribal confederacies; she took skillful advantage of the grades of inferiority that she had created among her dependents to foment jealousies and to play off one class of communities against another. Likewise, within each city, she set class against class, on the whole favoring an aristocratic organization. In politics as in war, the policy of her statesmen was 'Divided and Conquer.'³⁸ (Emphasis in original text)

With such a conception of Rome as an underlying element of *The Robe*, one can readily understand how it might take on specific political resonance as something that paralleled the anti-Communists' policies regulating the American left between 1947 and 1953.

It is worth noting, though, that the very vagueness of Maltz's notes and research enable a number of possible interpretations of *The Robe*'s subtext. By equating Rome's persecution of Christians with a more generalized notion of political repression, Maltz's dramatic concept was flexible and capacious enough to support myriad readings depending on who one identifies as oppressor and oppressed. Thus, while it is logical to see Maltz's script as an indictment of Italian Fascism when it was written in 1945, the changes in the political landscape after World War II make it equally logical to see the 1953 film as either a defense of the Hollywood Ten or as a critique of religious repression in Communist countries.

In sum, although *The Robe* certainly makes sense as a Cold War parable, that interpretation is supported more by the adaptability of Maltz's scenario than it is by anything in the film's production. More importantly, perhaps the most useful model for understanding *The Robe*'s allegorical dimensions is that of a text situated in relation to its historical context. While this assertion may seem terribly old-fashioned in an era awash in reception studies of film, a 'text-context' model seems to have two distinct advantages over its competitors: 1) it is the only model that explains *The Robe*'s allegorical meanings within its shifting historical relations; and 2) it is the only model broad enough to encompass issues both of authorial intention and of historical reception. While these elements prove to be quite muddled in examining the allegorical dimensions of *The Robe*, this is not to say that these elements are irrelevant in all types of allegorical interpretation. On the contrary, it would be a major mistake to rule out authorial intention and historical reception *tout court*. Both of these aspects of a film's historical context may be relevant when and where they can be concretely demonstrated and verified. The problem here is not that authorial intention and historical reception are always unknowable, but rather that they sometimes remain unknown, even after considerable historical investigation. As such, it is important to consider both authorial intent and audience reception as part of a text's historical context, but neither should be viewed as wholly determinate factors in a film's allegorical meaning. Instead, as my case study of *The Robe* has demonstrated, an examination of primary documents may complicate a text's possible meanings as much as it may illuminate them. A 'text-context' model of allegorical interpretation weighs all of these possible factors, but relies on the historian and critic's judgment about when and where they might be relevant.

Conclusion

While film critics may have been reticent to discuss an allegorical subtext in *The Robe* at the

time of the film's release, the equation of early Christians and Communists began to enter public discourse only a few years later. In the anti-Communist classic, *The Naked Communist* (1958), W. Cleon Skousen poses the question quite succinctly in asking in a chapter title, 'Did the Early Christians Practice Communism?' In the analysis that follows, Skousen suggests that some students in the United States believe that early Christians practiced a form of 'brotherhood' Communism that involved the sharing of property and resources within the community. Skousen adds that this belief is given additional weight by the fact that the 'Pilgrim Fathers. . . undertook to practice Communism immediately after their arrival in the New World.'³⁹ After initially considering this argument, Skousen quickly dismisses this characterization of early Christians on two grounds. First, Skousen argues that all such social experiments are doomed to fail as unnatural and immoral, and points to Governor William Bradford's rejection of 'brotherhood Communism' as proof that the Plymouth Colony evolved to a more sustainable system of socioeconomic principles. Secondly, Skousen quotes scriptures, especially the parable of the Talents, to show that early Christians may have shared wealth and resources, but that they did not legally hold common property. Instead, the communitarian philosophy of early Christians served as a means of solving common problems, but stopped short of a more radical redistribution of wealth. Skousen concludes, 'When carefully analyzed, this was simply free enterprise capitalism *with a heart!*'⁴⁰

To be sure, Skousen's defense of free-market capitalism as a Christian tenet is more likely a response to the emergence of experimental Christian communities, especially among the followers of the Niebuhrs and of Henry F. Ward, than it is a response to the 1950s Biblical epic.⁴¹ Still, Skousen's comments on early Christianity indicate a possible reading formation for *The Robe* that might well have contributed to the long-term reception of the film, especially the linkage of Communism and Christianity that appears in the work of Belton and Babington and Evans. Indeed, viewed in this context, the

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reading of *The Robe* as a blacklist allegory is only a modest extrapolation and extension of the very question posed by Skousen.

Yet, most of the elements cited in support of an allegorical reading of *The Robe* turn out to be far more complicated than first thought. For example, it is true that the film was coauthored by a blacklisted writer, but that writer's participation in the project occurred before the blacklist was even instituted. It is also true that *The Robe* contains certain textual elements that appear to be references to the blacklist, but the early drafts of the screenplay contain several more concrete references that were gradually eliminated in the revision process. Finally, while Philip Dunne's liberalism and his early defense of the Hollywood Ten may well have encouraged him to see *The Robe* as a scenario of Cold War repression, it appears that he saw the film as being as much a critique of Stalinist totalitarianism as it was a critique of anti-Communism.

Given the conflicting, contradictory and perhaps willfully ignorant readings of the screenplay that circulated among the film's production team, it seems likely that the blacklist interpretation of *The Robe* emerged as a consequence of the text's shifting relationship to its historical context. Indeed, the very flexibility of *The Robe*'s scenario may well have encouraged Maltz himself to reconsider his script's implications in the period immediately following his being blacklisted. In a 1948 speech on censorship, Maltz described HUAC's activities as the most recent in a long history of efforts to restrict and suppress personal freedom. Maltz then followed this assertion with a long series of examples that began, 'Are you or are you not a Christian, you who commit treason against the Roman State by your belief in Jesus Christ?'¹⁴² As this quote suggests, Maltz probably never intended *The Robe* to be an allegory of the blacklist, but he may well have been the first person to interpret it that way.

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Notes

- 1 S. King, *Danse Macabre* (New York, Berkeley Books, 1983), p. 130.
- 2 I. Xavier, 'Historical Allegory', in T. Miller and R. Stam (eds), *A Companion to Film Theory* (Malden, Blackwell Publishers), p. 354.
- 3 For representative examples of this type of scholarship, see L. Grindon, *Shadows on the Past: Studies in the Historical Fiction Film* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press), pp. 88–90; J. Belton, *American Cinema/American Culture* (New York, McGraw-Hill, 1994), p. 247; M. Wyke, *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema, and History* (New York, Routledge), pp. 142–6; A. Miller, 'Julius Caesar in the Cold War: The Houseman-Mankiewicz Film,' *Literature/Film Quarterly* 28: 2 (2000), 95–100; M. Jancovich, *Cinema Journal*; B. Babington and P. William Evans, *Biblical Epics: Sacred Narrative in the Hollywood Cinema* (Manchester University Press, 1993), pp. 210–3.
- 4 See P. L. Gianos, *Politics and Politicians in American Film* (Westport, Praeger, 1998), pp. 23–4.
- 5 D. Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1989). See especially pp. 105–128 and 195–201.
- 6 Belton, *American Cinema/American Culture*, p. 247.
- 7 Tiberius's speech is quoted in Babington and Evans, p. 211.
- 8 Xavier, 'Historical Allegory', p. 337.
- 9 See P. Dunne, *Take Two: A Life in Movies and Politics* (New York, McGraw Hill, 1980), pp. 253–6.
- 10 For more on the political shifts in Hollywood after World War II, see L. Ceplair and S. Englund, *The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community, 1930–1960* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1979), pp. 200–253.
- 11 Quoted in E. Bentley, ed., *Thirty Years of Treason* (New York, Viking Press, 1971), p. 333. Interestingly, Parks' testimony was released to the public in 1953, the same year as *The Robe*'s debut.
- 12 Quoted in G. Kahn, *Hollywood on Trial: The Story of the Ten who were Indicted* (New York, Boni and Gaer, 1948), p. 84.
- 13 B. F. Dick, *Radical Innocence: A Critical Study of the Hollywood Ten* (Lexington, University Press of Kentucky, 1989), p. 92.
- 14 L. C. Douglas, *The Robe* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1942), p. 351.
- 15 I should note that Lela Rogers' reference to *Tender*

- Comrades* was made during her initial testimony before HUAC in the spring of 1947, but was not included in the more famous hearings that were conducted in October. For more, see V. Navasky, *Naming Names* (New York, Penguin Books, 1980) p. 79.
- 16 A. Maltz, First Draft Screenplay of *The Robe*, dated 21 August 1945, Box 7, Folder 6, US Mss 17AN, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research, State Historical Society Library, Madison, Wisconsin.
 - 17 *Ibid.*
 - 18 *Ibid.*
 - 19 *Ibid.*
 - 20 *Ibid.*
 - 21 P. Dunne, *The Robe*, Final Screenplay, 13 August 1952. 20th Century Fox Collection, Special Arts Library, University of California at Los Angeles.
 - 22 Memo from Albert Maltz to Frank Ross, 27 December 1945, Box 7, Folder 6, Albert Maltz Collection.
 - 23 Conference Memo from Darryl Zanuck to Philip Dunne and Frank Ross, 25 July 1952, 20th Century Fox Collection.
 - 24 *Ibid.*
 - 25 It is worth noting, however, that Zanuck's biographer, George Custen, argues that Zanuck was personally opposed to the blacklist even if he never publicly spoke out against it. Perhaps the best example of Zanuck's opposition was his work behind the scenes to adapt Albert Maltz's *The Journey of Simon McKeever* after the screenwriter was blacklisted. Zanuck made an agreement with Jules Dassin to film *McKeever* with John Huston doing the screenplay and Walter Huston starring. For his part, Dassin said that he would take care of Maltz and would tell no one about the project until Zanuck had secured it with Fox. Shortly thereafter, Maltz went public with the news of the project and declared to *The Hollywood Reporter* that the film of *McKeever* was in a prime position to break the blacklist. After Maltz's gaffe, Zanuck cancelled the production and denied to Fox management that he knew anything about it. See Custen's *Twentieth Century's Fox: Darryl F. Zanuck and the Culture of Hollywood*, (New York Basic Books, 1997), p. 312–3.
 - 26 Philip Dunne, *The Robe*, Writer's working script, 26 June 1952. 20th Century Fox Collection.
 - 27 Quoted in Custen, p. 315.
 - 28 Wyke, pp. 28–9.
 - 29 P. T. Hartung, 'The Screen,' *Commonweal*, 9 October 1953, pp. 12–3.
 - 30 'Robe' an Undertaking of Many Problems,' *Motion Picture Herald*, 7 July 1945. *The Robe*, Clippings File, Margaret Herrick Center for Motion Picture Research, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, California.
 - 31 'Ross and Anderson Confer On 'Robe' Prod.', *Hollywood Reporter*, 8 June 1948; and 'Ross to Produce 'Robe' in 1949,' *Motion Picture Herald*, 12 June 1948. *The Robe*, Clippings File, Margaret Herrick Center for Motion Picture Research.
 - 32 'Howard McClay,' *Los Angeles Daily News*, 26 August 1952. *The Robe*, Clippings File. Margaret Herrick Center for Motion Picture Research.
 - 33 *Ibid.*
 - 34 J. Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 34.
 - 35 *Ibid.*, p.33.
 - 36 *Ibid.*, p. 46.
 - 37 *Ibid.*, p. 47.
 - 38 *Ibid.*
 - 39 W. Cleon Skousen, *The Naked Communist* (Salt Lake City: The Ensign Publishing Company, 1958), p. 343.
 - 40 *Ibid.*, p. 346.
 - 41 See, for example, D. Nelson Duke's *In the Trenches With Jesus and Marx: Henry F. Ward and the Struggle for Social Justice* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003); and M. L. Kleinman, *A World of Hope, A World of Fear: Henry A. Wallace, Reinhold Neibuhr, and American Liberalism* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2000).
 - 42 A. Maltz, "The American Artist and the American Tradition," Speech at the Hotel Astor, 16 March 1948, Box 15, Folder 2, Albert Maltz Collection.