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## ***Quo Vadis?* by Enrico Guazzoni and *Quo Vadis?* by Gabriellino D'Annunzio: Production – Dramaturgy – Reception<sup>1</sup>**

In November 1895, Henryk Sienkiewicz wrote in a letter to Jadwiga Janczewska:

I've constructed so many scenes that fill my head now, both magnificent and scary, so as long as I have enough strength and am in good health *Quo Vadis* will be greater than anything else I've written. I cannot stop thinking about it; asleep or awake. Thus, a longer break would be of no use, as I'm obsessed by the theme regardless of whether I'm writing or not, my mind is constantly occupied with the work (quoted in: Kurowska, Kuźmicki, 2001, p. 10).

Obviously, intuition did not fail the author of the famous trilogy. *Quo Vadis* – a story about Rome at the end of Nero's reign – effectively earned him the most important literary prize and brought him world renown. The novel, which initially was issued in parts in *Gazeta Polska* [Polish Gazette]<sup>2</sup>, was translated into several European languages shortly after the first Polish book edition (1986). As Władysław Banaszekiewicz claims (1974, p. 57), the English translation of this book, by 1897, had reached a circulation of 400,000, the Italian (by 1898) – 40,000, the German (by the same time) – 150,000, and in France

<sup>1</sup> This paper has been written within the research project 2bH 15 013683 founded by the National Programme for the Development of Humanities (NPRH).

<sup>2</sup> The novel was printed in parts in *Gazeta Polska*, and also, after a slight delay, in Cracow in *Czas* [Time] and *Dziennik Poznański* [Poznań Daily].

170,000 copies of the novel were sold within 15 months from the publication of the first translation.<sup>3</sup>

Translated into more than 40 languages, *Quo Vadis* became the source of numerous artistic (panoramas by Jan Styka, paintings by Henryk Siemiradzki, reproduced illustrations by Piotr Stachiewicz, as well as postcards popular at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) and film inspirations. Before Sienkiewicz's novel was adapted for the screen, the imagination of its readers had been supported by verbally commented slide shows that presented the development of the plot of *Quo Vadis*.

In this article, I will discuss two productions of the Italian silent cinema based on Henryk Sienkiewicz's novel, *Quo Vadis?* (1913), a film by Enrico Guazzoni and another (1925) by Gabriellino D'Annunzio and Georg Jacoby.<sup>4</sup> The latter was considered lost for decades but a copy was eventually found in the Vatican Library in 2012.

Both Italian silent cinema adaptations of Sienkiewicz's novel are kept in the peplum style, a.k.a. sword-and-sandal (in Italy called *colossal*), which almost half a century later would be re-discovered by Hollywood. As Grażyna Stachówna (2009, p. 261) pointed out: "for many reasons, antiquity has proved to be a great backdrop for Italian cinema, as was associated with the history of Italy, upheld the longing for Italy's imperial heir to ancient Rome, motivated the colonial ambitions and plans of military conquest of the Italian politicians of those times. And of course it was great trading material". Both screen adaptations of *Quo Vadis* are the symbolic caesuras of the popularity of the trend, which includes, among others *Marcus Antonius and Cleopatra* (dir. Enrico Guazzoni, 1913), *Cabiria* (dir. Giovanni Pastrone, 1914), *Julius Caesar* (dir. Enrico Guazzoni, 1914) and *Jerusalem Liberated* (dir. Enrico Guazzoni, 1918).

<sup>3</sup> Strangely enough, although the title of the novel is *Quo Vadis* (without the question mark), all Italian translations of the novel and its film adaptations have the question mark at the end of the title. Sienkiewicz's novel had already been translated into Italian by Federic Verdinois a year after its first publication. Stanisław Windakiewicz (1922, p. 22) wrote: "When the novel was published, on all Italian trains, even on the side tracks such as from Rimini to Ferrara, *Quo Vadis* was the main subject of conversation. A year later, at a fair organised during a religious holiday in Genoa, all the book stands in Piazza San Lorenzo were full of Sienkiewicz's novels in Italian, and highlanders from the Apennines dressed in goat skins were asking each other's advice about whether to buy *Potop* [The Deluge] or *Pan Wołodyjowski* [Fire in the Steppe/Sir Michael/Colonel Wołodyjowski]".

<sup>4</sup> Apart from the two Italian films discussed in this paper, two feature films have been made (*Quo Vadis* by Mervyn LeRoy in 1951 and *Quo Vadis* by Jerzy Kawalerowicz in 2001). For these films see Miller-Klejsa, 2017. In addition, two television series based upon *Quo Vadis* have been produced – directed by Franco Rossi (1985) and Jerzy Kawalerowicz (2002). Alicja Helman (2014) writes about the television series by Rossi, but she omits D'Annunzio's film (see also Słodowski, 1998). It should also be noted that at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – even before Guazzoni made *Quo Vadis* – the novel by Sienkiewicz could have been an inspiration for *Martyrs Chrétiens* (dir. Lucien Nonguet, 1905) or *Au temps des premiers Chrétiens* (dir. André Calmettes, 1909). These films can, however, hardly be recognised as adaptations of the novel; these were rather loosely connected scenes depicting the most spectacular dramaturgic situations from the work of the Polish writer (see Maśnicki, 2006, pp. 229–230).

## **Quo Vadis? by Enrico Guazzoni**

On the subject of Guazzoni's film, the director of the Cines film company wrote to Georg Klein – a European film distributor in the USA – about the scale of the enterprise: “I have 20 lions at my disposal, which will stay at the studios for four weeks. To give you an idea of what an impressive film it'll be, I'd like to inform you that the negative will cost 80,000 liras, and its length varies from 1,500 to 2,000 metres” (quoted in: Brunetta, 1995, p. 62). At the same time *Quo Vadis?* by Guazzoni constitutes – which is particularly emphasised by Italian researchers – a milestone in the development of film aesthetics, one year ahead of *Cabiria* (Brunetta, 1995; Paoletta, 1956; Russo, 2007). Guazzoni (a trained painter, later a stage designer) was the first to create a feature-length spectacle (over two hours of projection) using a crowd of extras, with huge, three-dimensional scenery built outdoors. With the scenes full of motion, such as chariot races, the fire of Rome or Ursus's fight with the bull, he definitively broke the convention of theatrical spectacle (although for today's viewer unaccustomed to silent filmmaking, an almost motionless camera and overly expressive acting is reminiscent of a stage performance<sup>5</sup>).

Roberto Paoletta (1956, p. 104) writes: “Finding solutions to give a sense of perspective has always been a problem which Italian artists encountered starting from Giotto who was the first to discover this third dimension. Guazzoni's film has the same significance for new art as the usage of perspective by Paolo Uccello and Piero della Francesca”. This opinion may be considered exaggerated – but indeed, showing action happening in various overlapping places in the frame, both in the foreground and the background, (especially the scene of the feast at Nero's house) with the characters moving inside the frame and out of it, the director used film perspective in *Quo Vadis?* creatively.

In fact, Guazzoni refers in *Quo Vadis?* to two paintings by Jean-Léon Gérôme: the end of the gladiators' fight resembles the painting *Pollice Verso* (1874; the actors actually stay motionless for a moment as if in a freeze-frame), whereas the composition of the shot showing the lions being released into the arena (with Christians kneeling in the background) reflects *The Christian Martyrs' Last Prayer* (1883). This reference to the art of painting was an implication of the connection which exists between film and “real” art. The most prestigious, however, was the fact that the film was based on a bestselling novel by a Nobel Prize Winner. It is worth remembering that back then cinema willingly reached out to literature to gain the status of art (in Italy, a few years earlier, films which were adaptations of such famous novels as *Lady of the Camelias* by Alexandre Dumas and *The Betrothed* by Alessandro Manzoni had already been made). At the same time, in Italy, people continued to debate on the new medium, which thanks to Ricciotto Canudo and the Futurists, with their main representative Tommaso Marinetti, began to be perceived as art.

<sup>5</sup> Guazzoni worked with Max Reinhardt himself as well as Ryszard Ordyński at the time connected with Deutsches Theater, who assisted Guazzoni with mise-en-scene for the scenes of the fire of Rome and amphitheatre scenes.

*Quo Vadis?* by Guazzoni turned out to be a great artistic and financial success, both in Italy and abroad. In Paris, it was screened in “the world’s biggest film theatre” the Gaumont Palace, and was accompanied by an orchestra and a choir; in London, at the Royal Albert Hall (converted to a cinema, the film’s premiere was honoured with the presence of the Royal couple, and King George V personally congratulated the actor, Bruto Castellani, who played Ursus<sup>6</sup>), whilst its American premiere took place in New York at the first-class Astor Theater on Broadway, where the film was screened for 22 weeks (Brunetta, 1995, p. 33). Although the film was undoubtedly a box-office success – so popular in Italy that within a few months of the premiere, a new edition of the novel was published in Milan, illustrated with stills from the film (the so-called *edizione cinematografica*) – some film critics in the West lacked enthusiasm for the film, pointing out the superiority of the literary work.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, some Polish film critics were quite reserved in their opinions about Guazzoni’s film. One of them, Karol Irzykowski (1982, p. 17), called the Italian production an “archaeological and tailored pot-pourri” of the novel. Regardless of critics’ opinions, film audiences in Sienkiewicz’s homeland greeted the Italian version of *Quo Vadis* with enthusiasm. According to Małgorzata Hendrykowska (1995), who quotes some local newspapers of the time, during the premiere in Cracow certain film sequences were greeted with rounds of applause. The most admired were those which showed the Olympics crowd scenes in Circus Maximus, images of Rome on fire and the martyrdom of Christians. In Cracow, the film, *Quo Vadis?* was screened for a month, in two cinemas simultaneously, four times a day, which at that time was totally unprecedented. For the first time, discounts were offered on the ticket price for audience group-bookings, and the Uciecha Cinema, which competed with Wanda Cinema, ran free matinee-screenings for not so well-off high school pupils, while Wanda provided a special artistic entourage for Guazzoni’s film. The opening title sequence was preceded by a specially-commissioned portrait of Sienkiewicz, and the music accompanying the screening included oratorium fragments (*Quo Vadis* by Feliks Nowowiejski). Soon, *Quo Vadis?* was screened

<sup>6</sup> Bruto Castellani also played Ursus in D’Annunzio’s *Quo Vadis?*, as well as in a farce referring to the success of Guazzoni’s film – *Kri Kri and Quo Vadis* (1913). It was one of the first films (copies of which have not survived) of an over hundred-episode comic series which was continued up to 1915. *Kri Kri* created and played by Raymond Frau was very successful all over Europe (see: Maśnicki, 2006, p. 233).

<sup>7</sup> For example, one of the authors who called Guazzoni’s *Quo Vadis?* “an album with illustrations for the novel”, came to the conclusion that “it is not possible to dramatise and film a piece of work which has already come into being as a prose epic, i.e. without losing its qualities”. Other critics had similar opinions: one of them wrote about the Italian film adaptation of *Quo Vadis*: “whatever the novel is, it will never be possible to substitute it with a film, so the question arises whether it makes any sense to make film adaptations of dramas or novels” (Diederichs, 2016, p. 158).

in Warsaw<sup>8</sup> and Lodz, and within the first three months of its premiere, in all major Polish cities. Thus, Polish cinema audiences could see the film at the same time as viewers in big European cities.

The news of the success of his novel's Italian film adaptation reached Sienkiewicz, who at the time of the film's Polish premiere was 67 and considered a senior Polish novelist. Sienkiewicz, in one of his letters, wrote to Bronisław Kozakiewicz, a friend and translator of *Quo Vadis* into French:

Cines has planned world-wide distribution. In Vienna, it is reported in newspapers that the premiere screening was really grand, with the Emperor and the whole Court present. In Cracow, 60 screenings were agreed upon, for which the local distributor paid 12,000 crowns. In short, everybody will be making a fortune in hundreds of thousands, maybe even millions, apart from me and you (quoted in: Banaszekiewicz, 1974, p. 59).<sup>9</sup>

The novelist's words not only point out the fact that he missed out on his share of the enormous income generated by the film's wide distribution, but on top of everything else, Cines film production company had obviously violated the copyright laws, which is even more interesting as Italian publications devoted to Guazzoni's superproduction, stress the legality of the whole enterprise suggesting that the copyrights to *Quo Vadis* must have been bought by Italians (Brunetta, 1995; Paoletta, 1956; Russo, 2007). The giant Italian historic epic finished its tour of Polish screens at the turn of April and May 1914, when it was also shown in smaller towns.<sup>10</sup> As a matter of fact, *Quo Vadis?* was the only film screened on Polish territories before 1914 which was so widely distributed in all three (Russian, German, Austro-Hungarian) partitions of the country.

<sup>8</sup> A Polish senior cinematographer Jan Skarbak-Malczewski wrote about the Warsaw premiere of the film: "The premiere was a splendid occasion, representatives of the authorities and press were invited and the audience was filled with members of Warsaw's high society. The regular screenings that followed were so popular that often crowds of people would leave the box office without getting a ticket. An especially thrilling moment was when Lygia was tied to a bull's horns, despite the fact it was more of a biggish calf than a bull. Later in the scene of the tragedy which took place in the arena, Lygia is substituted with a dummy. There was also a scene of a gladiator fight and Nero in the tribune – emotionally-packed and thrilling, enhanced by a live orchestral music, which contributed to the excitement of the audience" (quoted in: Lewicki, 1995, p. 226).

<sup>9</sup> Banaszekiewicz (1974, p. 59) recalls a fragment from the newspaper *Kurier Warszawski's* [Warsaw Courier] report at the time: "The production company Cines made a film based on Sienkiewicz's novel, not only without making any offer to the author himself but without asking his permission or even informing him about the production".

<sup>10</sup> In smaller cities, the film was screened after first being censored by the cinema owner and very often by the local priest too. The removal of scenes of orgies enabled cinema owners to advertise the movie as the work of religious art. The screening-tour of the film around the cinemas on Polish territories has been described in detail by Małgorzata Hendrykowska (1995).

### ***Quo Vadis?* by Gabriellino D'Annunzio and Georg Jacoby**

During the 1920s, the production rate of Italian films dropped sharply; in 1920, 150 films were made in Italy, whereas one year later only 60 were produced, and in 1927 there were only 6 films of domestic production. This situation was partly due to the recent end of the war (between 1915–1918<sup>11</sup> a significant number of motion picture companies were closed), but also due to the fact that US studios were “entering” Italy (for example, MGM made *Ben Hur* in Cines studio in Italy). In the 1920s Italian cinemas were already dominated by American films (from 1921 to the end of the decade they accounted for 80% of the entire repertoire [Nowell-Smith 1996, pp. 2–3]), resulting in the Unione Cinematografia Italiana<sup>12</sup> trust facing bankruptcy. Reactivation of peplum genre was supposed to be a recipe for overcoming the crisis (Guazzoni shot *Messalina* [1923] and Amleto Palermi *The Last Days of Pompeii* [1926]). *Quo Vadis?* was also expected to be a profitable super-production (1925). The reasoning was simple: if in 1912 production costs amounted to 60,000 liras and profits to several million, it was worth investing in a super-production, as one could easily expect to generate huge revenue. An international cast was assembled in view of exporting the future masterpiece. German actor, Emil Jannings, playing the role of Nero and named as first in the credit titles, became the pillar of this cast. It was directed by Gabriellino D'Annunzio (son of Gabrielle D'Annunzio) and – Georg Jacoby (who during WWI was the director of propaganda documentaries glorifying the German army).

*Quo Vadis?* by D'Annunzio was supposed to mesmerise the audience with its magnificent stage design and costumes (visible, for example, in the scene of the feast in Nero's palace and the Games sequence). Nevertheless, Karol Irzykowski pointed out that

In comparison with the film we saw ten years earlier (Guazzoni's *Quo Vadis?*), progress has been slight. It's strange! One might think that *Quo Vadis* is great material for a film because it is full of cinematic images i.e. artistic, vivid and expressive. But this cinematic aspect already present in the novel most probably hinders the film-maker's imagination and makes him follow it and merely reflect it. And, as was quite common in the past, the main emphasis in those “illustrations” is put on splendour, archaeological and historical accuracy, the number of extras, etc.

It should be noted, however, that the style of D'Annunzio's film is much more complex than Guazzoni's. Above all, what is remarkable is the use of the cross-cutting technique (e.g. the scene of Nero's feast is intertwined with scenes depicting Christians, which emphasises the contrast between the two worlds) and close-ups (e.g. on the faces of Christians dying on the cross). The film is also visually diverse – there are scenes in the open air shot in a bird's-eye view (e.g. the sequence of the

<sup>11</sup> Italy joined World War I in 1915.

<sup>12</sup> L'Unione Cinematografia Italiana was a trust of a dozen larger Italian motion picture companies. It operated between 1919 and 1923.

people rebelling against Nero); particularly interesting are the underwater pictures used in the scene of Nero throwing a woman to predatory morays.

Despite the involvement of renowned artists, *Quo Vadis?* from 1925 turned out to be a financial disaster.<sup>13</sup> In Italy, the film was talked about not because of its artistic value but because of the conflicts and accidents which happened on the set. One of them, during which a lion tore the actor who played Seneca to pieces, was also mentioned in the Polish press. *Kurier Polski* [Polish Courier] from 1924 thus wrote about the story:

According to the latest reports from Rome, the directors of the film *Quo Vadis* and the cinematographers have been arrested, as one of the actors was attacked on the film set by a lioness. The investigation showed that the tragedy was caused by bad organisation and poor pre-production. Moreover, it turned out that one of the cameramen, protected by iron bars, kept shooting the whole accident in cold blood. The footage was confiscated and will be delivered to the court as evidence (quoted in: Ludorowski, 1998, p. 106).<sup>14</sup>

In Poland, D'Annunzio's film received mixed reviews. Karol Irzykowski (1925) made a biting remark that in comparison with Guazzoni's film,

there is progress in techniques – lions climbing columns, jumping up high to get at some miserable soul desperately climbing set-decorations to escape the beast! The strength of the film, though, is the strong casting. The role of Nero is played in an interesting and original way by Jannings.

Anatol Stern (1926, p. 4), however, had a different opinion about D'Annunzio's film, which he expressed in *Wiadomości Literackie* [Literary News] in his *Cinema* column:

In comparison to *The Last Days of Pompei*, *Quo Vadis?* wins effortlessly. Although I consider Jannings as Nero to be miscasted, you can feel the taste of authenticity here expressed in architecture, crowds and their lives. There is also the director's creativity and this is crucial.

In the Polish distribution, the film had a long screening life and successfully competed with sound films (in Warsaw the last screenings were organised in 1934).

<sup>13</sup> The trust Unione Cinematografia Italiana ceased to exist; what is more, the bank (Banca Italiana di Sconto) which provided loans for the Italian film production closed down in 1921. On top of all that, UCI started to convince the film crew that it had the copyright for the adaptation, secured by paying a certain sum to Bronisław Kozakiewicz, who held the rights to the translation. However, the heirs of Sienkiewicz demanded compensation, the right to which has been confirmed by the court (Maśnicki, 2006 p. 234; Bernardini, Martinelli, 1994, p. 188).

<sup>14</sup> According to Jannings' recollections, the event looked like this: "For the circus scene, when hungry lions run around the arena, I demanded a double. Indeed, my double is acting instead of me and next to him in Caesar's box sits the philosopher, Seneca. D'Annunzio gives the command «Action!». The picture has the inscription «Nero teases the lions». In the meantime, an accident happens: a lioness with a single jump leaps into Caesar's box, grabs poor Seneca – some Italian – and runs with him into the arena. In an instant, the man is dead, torn to pieces. The man is dead, the one who just a moment before was the philosopher, Seneca (see Ludorowski, 1998, p. 106).

## Dramaturgy and the Protagonists

The following part of the paper will be devoted to comparative analysis of the dramaturgy of both films (juxtaposing both films, as well as evaluating them against their literary original). First and foremost, I would like to indicate main events present both in the novel and in the examined productions. This will make it possible to designate common plot threads that in each case were brought up-to-date in a different way.

The analysed films are based on the melodramatic thread – Marcus Vinicius' stormy love for Lygia (Kallina), a daughter of the barbarian king of the Luggii tribe who is raised in the house of Aulus Plautius and Pomponia Graecina.<sup>15</sup> In both adaptations Lygia is taken from her adoptive parents on Nero's command, takes part in a palace feast full of debauchery, from which she escapes in the arms of the faithful servant Ursus, and then she is liberated by Christians on the way to Vinicius's villa. The rejected lover finds her among Christians thanks to a shrewd Greek – Chilon Chilonides (who will be mentioned again). An attempt to kidnap the girl with the help of a gladiator, Croton, fails. Croton is killed by Ursus (in Guazzoni's film the act of murder is not shown), while Vinicius is saved (at Lygia's request, as in the novel), and though wounded, he recovers amongst the merciful Christians. Contact with Christ's followers changes the character's behaviour – he decides to marry Lygia and convert to her religion. In the meantime, Nero burns Rome to stimulate his creative vein (in the films in question, separate scenes or sequences were dedicated to this thread). Nero, frightened by the wrath of the people, accuses Christians of setting fire to the city. The plot's climax are the games in which Christ's followers are slaughtered. Lygia is trapped and destined for a special spectacle – the fight of a bull with Ursus (the girl is tied to the animal), which unexpectedly ends with the slave's victory. In both films, Nero pardons Lygia at the request of the people, and the lovers can finally reunite. In the novel, Marcus and Lygia go to Sicily, whilst in the productions by D'Annunzio and Guazzoni this thread ends in the arena.

The films under discussion include the rebellion against Nero and his death which are also present in the novel. In Sienkiewicz's novel Nero flees with his henchmen because of the Gallic legions' rebellion (and then dies some time later, after the dramatic Olympics, uttering the famous line: "What an artist is dying!") However, in the Italian films, Galba's arrival (who is hailed the new Caesar) is placed parallel to or shortly after the Christians' martyrdom as if in response to Nero's cruelty. The tyrant's fall and death (in both films as well as in the novel, Nero, in the act of committing suicide, is helped by his henchmen) are in a way immediate repercussions of the crime against Christ's followers.

<sup>15</sup> The girl comes from the territories where Slavic tribes settled and where Poland had its origins. Apparently, Sienkiewicz referred to the arguments of the historian Wojciech Kętrzyński about early Slavic tribes, amongst whom Ligians were supposed to inhabit the territories between the Vistula and Odra rivers. Alicja Helman (2014) mentions that in Guazzoni's film Lygia is called a Greek princess; the film copy I watched did not have such a title card (most probably the film was distributed in several different versions). In D'Annunzio's film, Aulus's wife's name is Domitilla, instead of Pomponia.

Both productions include motives also present in the novel: the love affair between a Greek slave Eunice and Petronius (which is, in a way, a “pagan” version of Vinicius and Lygia’s love) and their suicidal death during the farewell feast (because Petronius falls from Caesar’s grace and is accused of treason). In both Guazzoni’s and D’Annunzio’s films, there is also a plot derived from the novel about Nero and his wife, Poppaea’s, child, who dies of an illness. In the 1913 film, Caesar’s wife remains, as she does in the novel, enchanted by Vinicius.

In both adaptations in question, the emperor remains a distinctive character, also due to the actors playing him. The role of Nero was played mainly by the stars of the decade – Carlo Cattaneo in *Quo Vadis?*<sup>16</sup> from 1913, Emil Jannings in the adaption from 1925. In the latter, the emperor is the first character we see on screen, introduced by the following title card: “Nero – a symbol of power and corruption, beauty and sin”. The cruelty of this character is expressed in his first action – imperator commands that a woman begging for mercy be thrown into a pool with predatory morays (the scene has no counterpart in the novel and is not present in any other screen adaptations). What is more, one of the title cards says that “morays, fed with human flesh, were his (Nero’s) favourite meal for banquets”. Thus it turns out that this spectacle of death is not only ordinary entertainment for the emperor and his court, but also serves as “daily bread” in a very literal sense, since bloodthirsty fish is one of the dishes served during the palace feasts. In this way, cruelty is in some way attributed to all subjects who indirectly feed on human flesh (!).

The moral corruption of the empire is shown for example in the scene of Nero’s feast (where gluttony, drunkenness and promiscuity prevail), and by similar feasts of “ordinary”, poor Romans. It is even more emphasized in the film, as the palace orgy was cross-cut with the images of the Christians praying with St. Peter. This juxtaposition – a clear division into evil (symbolised by Nero and the moral corruption of Rome) and good (represented by Peter and his fellow believers) – is highlighted in the film by D’Annunzio from the very beginning: in one of the first scenes Nero signs the edict against the followers of Christ, condemning them to death.

In both Italian films, as well as in the novel, Nero is guilty of matricide (in the 1925 film production, the theme is illustrated by Nero’s nightmares) and treats his child’s death not as a personal tragedy but as an opportunity to perform yet another, this time dramatic role – that of a grieving father. In D’Annunzio’s film, Nero is presented as someone who believes in magic; the emperor consults a fortune-teller, who interprets the meaning of his nightmares. Seeing a burning cross in the crystal ball she explains to the emperor that this is the fate Christians are preparing for him. However, this episode, absent in the novel, highlights the juxtaposition of the behaviour and demeanour of Nero and the Christians in the film

<sup>16</sup> Vinicius was played by Amleto Novelli, who a few years earlier had also played Nero in a theatre production based on the novel.

(in a close-up of the fortune teller's hands, we see a snake, which in the Christian tradition symbolises Satan).

There's a significant change in D'Annunzio's film in reference to the novel and Guazzoni's film, namely the new theme of Nero wooing Lygia. In this version of *Quo Vadis*, Caesar tries to seduce the girl twice (his unequivocal advances are interrupted, at first by his wife Poppaea, and then by Ursus). Sometimes references to Mussolini, known for his love conquests, are found in this figure of a ruler sensitive to female charms (Pucci, 2002; Reich 2002). However, this interpretation seems inadequate to me. The image of Nero emerging from the film is unambiguously negative, while in 1925, at the time of *Quo Vadis* premiere, propaganda chronicles acclaiming Duce were produced by the nationalized LUCE motion picture company. Moreover, the Italian film director – Gabriellino D'Annunzio (son of Gabriele D'Annunzio), championed the fascists' ideology, just like his father did; therefore, it is hard to suspect that he intended to identify Mussolini with Nero. Possible analogies can be found in the prologue of the film, which reverberates with the echoes of imperial and colonial ambitions of the ancient Italy, as the film begins with the title card which read: "Rome was the capital of the world. The Roman eagles and pennants mounted by the victorious legions set the boundaries of unknown lands".

While Nero is the ruler of corrupt Rome and the symbol of evil, St. Peter appears to be the ruler of the Christian world and the father of the Christian community. On the pages of the novel, the "two leaders" meet only once, when during one of Nero's pompous processions his gaze meets the apostle's gaze among the mob. In the films in question, St. Peter is portrayed as an old man with a grey beard. In the film by D'Annunzio (contrary to the literary original and other productions), he appears at the beginning of the plot (in the fourth minute of the film). His words, addressed to the first followers, are cross-cut with images depicting the moral corruption of the empire (the palace scene with morays and depicting licentiousness of ordinary Romans, which were already mentioned). In this way, in the version of *Quo Vadis* from 1925, both worlds (Nero's and that of the Christians) are sharply contrasted from the beginning. Moreover, both productions contain the scene of the vision of St. Peter. The Apostle, fleeing Rome for fear of persecution, meets Christ himself (in the Italian productions – in flesh and blood). Having asked the title question ("Quo Vadis Domine?") and hearing the answer: "If thou desert my people, I shall go to Rome to be crucified again", he decides to go back.

In the novel, as well as in both films, Saint Peter administers the sacraments (in Guazzoni's film he christens Vinicius, whereas in D'Annunzio's film, he performs Lygia and Vinicius' wedding ceremony), preaches and, as already mentioned, has a vision which makes him return to Rome. The other apostle from *Quo Vadis* is Saint Paul. One of the most important episodes connected with this character is the christening of the converted Chilon. This scene is included in Guazzoni's film. In D'Annunzio's film the character of Saint Paul is completely absent from the plot.

The 1925 version of *Quo Vadis?* lacks the characters of Crispus and Glaucus – two Christians who in Sienkiewicz’s novel serve very important dramaturgical functions and at the same time enrich the picture of the Christian community. Crispus, dying on the cross, exposes Nero, whereas the demeanour of Glaucus, the doctor, who was hurt by Chilon many times before and yet forgives him one more time during his torture, gives a direct impulse to the Greek for religious conversion. These characters, although present in Guazzoni’s film, are hardly noticeable, as they participate in very few scenes.

Extensive sequences of the martyrdom of Christians, who die either being torn apart by lions or as living torches (crosses to which they are nailed are set on fire), can be found in both film versions of *Quo Vadis*. The games, with the unwilling participation of Christ’s followers, represent – just like in the novel – the climax of both film adaptations. However, each of them presents the “spectacle of death” in a slightly different manner. Two Italian silent cinema productions “add” the scenes of chariot races and gladiator fights before the sequence of execution of Christians (in the production by Guazzoni, its final sequences resembles the *Pollice Verso* painting by Jean-Léon Gérôme [1874]). Although the struggles of the athletes are also found in the literary source, the quadrigas races (in the film by D’Annunzio, the Christians are tied to the back of the cars) are the invention of filmmakers. Perhaps they were aware of the fact that the scenes with the lions were difficult to film, and Ursus’s fight with the bull (in both productions limited to a few snapshots) would not appear spectacular enough. In the film by Guazzoni there is one shot in which the lions, thanks to trick shots (overlapped), seem to run towards the praying Christians, but there are no scenes of the actual “attack”. Subsequent shot in the production of 1913 shows the lions already eating the remains of their victims. Similarly, in the film by D’Annunzio we see either lions eating their meal framed from the bird’s-eye perspective, or the images of lions leaping up cross-cut with the group of Christians, which were shot separately. The sequence was accurately commented upon by Karol Irzykowski (1982, p. 312): “If you, Mr director, show me a separate group of lions and a separate group of martyrs, I will not be fooled, no matter how quickly you move the images”. What is perhaps most surprising in the version from 1925 is the mentioned chariot race – mainly because of Pomponia, who in the film by D’Annunzio is dragged behind the quadriga and then... she unexpectedly climbs up into the chariot, eventually taking control over the horses! Her act gains the approval of the crowd – the woman is saved, just like her husband was.

The ending of Guazzoni’s film also has a Christian message (D’Annunzio’s film finishes with Nero’s death). In Guazzoni’s production, the last shot shows Christ breaking his chains, preceded by the words: “from the rain of strife and blood sprang a new life: the life of Christianity, under the banner of love and peace”. The film in question includes the suggestion of the victory of Christianity, which is to bring the evangelical “profitable fruit” (the Italian version uses the biblical metaphor of sown seeds and plants, also present in the novel).

In Sienkiewicz's novel, two supporting characters, Petronius and Chilon Chilonides contribute to the discourse focusing on relationship between knowledge, power and religion. They are each other's foils – on the one hand, they are similar to one another (they are both extremely intelligent and have the ability to make right political predictions), while on the other, they have different social status and religious attitudes (although they both have direct contact with Christians, Chilon is the only one who converts). Petronius (a historical character), a Roman poet and politician, is most of all “the judge of elegance”, who advises Nero in matters of art (and not only); in the novel and the two films he is the caring uncle of Vinicius, whereas Chilon is a cunning man who is prepared to do anything for his own benefit. In the novel, as well as the films, Chilon is initially an informant, who at Vinicius' order is supposed to find Lygia amongst the Christians. Both Petronius and, as they are portrayed in the novel, are masters of the art of rhetoric. That is the reason why in the two Italian silent films, where dialogues were provided on title cards, they seem as poorly-drawn characters; the episodes with these two are at times unclear (e.g. Petronius in D'Annunzio's film suddenly covers Nero's mouth, to which the emperor – as we read from the intertitle – replies: “You are the only one who cares about me”). Without prior knowledge of the novel, one might not realise that Petronius' gesture was interpreted by Nero as Petronius' concern for the emperor's allegedly beautiful voice). The character of Chilon, as it was imagined by Sienkiewicz, is faithfully reflected in the 1913 film. Although both films contain the theme of the traitor coming to his senses (it is the Greek, motivated by revenge, who suggests to Nero the idea of blaming the Christians for setting fire to Rome), it is only Guazzoni's film which shows the conversion of “the rogue who became a demon” (this is what Petronius calls Chilon in the novel when he sees him next to the emperor during the bloody Olympics). Not only does it present the very moment of the inner transformation (Chilon is converted under the influence of the forgiveness he receives from Glaucus, when the latter is dying on the cross), but also the scene of his christening.

In both films, Chilon, having witnessed the torture of the innocent Christians, publicly exposes Nero as the one who is responsible for the fire, for which he is punished in Guazzoni's film by being imprisoned, while in D'Annunzio's film Chilon's daring announcement about the real cause of the fire of Rome leads to his death. It is Nero who fires the deadly arrow at Chilon and his body is fed to the lions. Thus, neither of the films follows the scene of Chilon's crucifixion present in the novel, in which the protagonist, almost like a biblical villain, experiences Christ's forgiveness.

Each of the adaptations can be seen through the prism of socio-political contexts. Of particular importance are (characteristic for the early 20<sup>th</sup> century) Italian imperial longing and its colonial ambitions. In 1911 and 1912 (the time of Guazzoni's film production), Italy was in a state of war against Turkey over the

territories of present-day Libya,<sup>17</sup> and in 1925, already after the march to Rome in 1922 and Benito Mussolini coming to power, Italy's international policy was very aggressive. A few years later, after the premiere of D'Annunzio's *Quo Vadis?*, Il Duce subjected Albania to Italian rule, and in the 1930s he started what was to become a victorious military campaign to conquer the Abyssinian Empire. Italian viewers watching *Quo Vadis?* in 1925 most probably bore in mind the recent "war" about Fiume (Rijeka), provoked by Gabriele D'Annunzio (the director's father) in September 1919. The playwright and writer did not accept the decisions of the peace treaty signed in Versailles, and together with army veterans occupied Rijeka, which belonged to Yugoslavia, which caused a political crisis in the country and abroad. The riches and the power of the Roman Empire visible in D'Annunzio's *Quo Vadis?* were by all means a welcome subject and the elements of art direction (especially the eagles) and gestures – most of all the so called *saluto Romano* i.e. the greeting gesture used by fascists, and later by the Nazis – were surprisingly familiar and topical for the original spectator's of the film (fascist Italy would eagerly refer to the traditions of the Roman Empire).

The artistic qualities of Guazzoni's film were certainly not the only reason for the film's success in Poland. The film adaptation of Sienkiewicz's novel (bearing in mind that the author himself was then already highly esteemed by the nation), was interpreted like the novel itself – through the prism of national history. *Quo Vadis* was received slightly differently in Poland than by the French, German or Italian audiences. In the story of the fall of the powerful Roman Empire and the moral power of Christianity opposing it, the Polish would notice a metaphor of the history of their own nation. The condition of the first Christians and the Poles persecuted after the failure of the uprisings was perceived as similar – they both "fought for saintly causes". In the character of Lygia, whose Slavic origin is suggested by Sienkiewicz, one might notice an allegory of Poland. Following this interpretation, the scene in which the girl is rescued by Ursus in the amphitheatre arena is of a greater significance. Lygia-Poland, who is tied to the horns of a German (!) aurochs and saved by Ursus, symbolises the strength of the Polish nation and is a quite obvious forecast of Polish liberation (Zieliński, 1920). From the Polish point of view, *Quo Vadis?* released in 1913 was a significant way of popularising the culture of the nation deprived of its own state for over a hundred years.

<sup>17</sup> The territories of present-day Libya came under Italian control in 1912, when a colony called Italian North Africa was established. In 1927 Cyrenaica and Tripolitania were extracted from it, and in 1934 all the territories were united and Libya was created, which remained an Italian colony until 1943.

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The paper concentrates on two feature films based upon Henryk Sienkiewicz's novel about ancient Rome – Quo Vadis? (dir. Enrico Guazzoni [1913]) and Quo Vadis? (dir. Gabriellino D'Annunzio, Georg Jacoby [1925]). Both films belong to the peplum genre, popular during the era of silent cinema. The paper reconstructs production circumstances of both films as well as their historical reception. It is argued that both films can be seen through the prism of socio-political contexts, including the colonial ambitions of the Italian state.