

Word and Image:
Competitive Adaptation in the Feature Film *Quo Vadis?* (1913)

Maria Wyke

About six months after the Italian feature *Quo vadis?* had its French premiere at the Gaumont Palace in Paris (the largest cinema in the world, capable of accommodating over 6,000 spectators), the film was drawn on by the critic and man of letters René Doumic as evidence of how cinema was failing to recognize its limitations as an art form and was developing, instead, improper ambitions:

Before an enthusiastic crowd, for instance, they recently showed *Quo Vadis?*, a mammoth cinematic reconstruction adapted from the famous novel by Sienkiwicz. Everything trooped through it: Nero, Petronius (that master of style), the imperial box, Christians and wild beasts, vestal virgins, etc. Between every two cinematic tableaux on the luminous screen, you know, there appeared an explanatory inscription, usually copiously written. This interminable succession of tableaux and placards, in which the complete novel was cut up into wordless images—images which, moreover, seemed to me more than mediocre in their grouping of actors, their decors, and costumes—was the most stupefying film that I have ever seen. (Abel 1988: 86-7)

In the monthly magazine *Revue des deux mondes* (15 August 1913), under the ominous title ‘Drama review: The Cinema Age’, Doumic used the example of *Quo vadis?* to attack the upstart medium as cheap, facile, modern, realist, and international – in sum, a universal theatre for illiterates. Such disdain for cinema as ‘wordless images’ belongs to early critiques of the adaptation of novels and stage plays to screen, critiques that regularly judged film adaptations to be vulgar cultural usurpers (substituting mere images for words, fragments of

reality for literary fictions) and a threat to the survival of theatre, the book, and even literacy itself.¹ This chapter (drawing on recent work in adaptation studies) seeks to re-conceptualise the relationship between the Polish novel and the Italian film, viewing cinema not as an inferior but as a more varied mode of expression with extensive ideological and aesthetic, as well as mass-market, reach (Cartmell and Whelehan 2010: 24-5).

Cinema as adaptation

Adaptations, according to the theorist Linda Hutcheon, are ‘deliberate, announced, and extended revisitations of prior works’ (2013²: xvi). The Italian feature *Quo vadis?* (1913) invites consideration as an adaptation even in Hutcheon’s strong definition of that troublesome term. Firstly, the film’s director Enrico Guazzoni is on record as stating that, in the early 1910s, he aspired precisely to overthrow the initial limitations of cinema and, since Sienkiewicz’s novel was widely known throughout Italy, to translate onto the screen (‘tradurre sullo schermo’) its grand vision of Rome’s imperial age.²

The film itself obviously takes from the novel its title, characters and plotline (such as the fictional lovers Lygia and Vinicius and the fictional strongman Ursus, as well as Nero and his court, the burning of Rome, the martyrdom of the early Christians, and the climatic appearance of Christ to the apostle Peter on the Via Appia). It unfolds as a series of ‘moving illustrations’ of the novel (Scodel and Bettenworth 2009: 18-19), a visual form of homage

¹ For such criticism of cinema more generally, see Elliott 2003: 54, and Cartmell and Whelehan 2010: 2-4.

² As recorded in Redi 1991: 37-8. Cf. Bernardini 2005: 32.

that would be difficult to follow or appreciate for a spectator who had not read the book.³ However, the intertitles (those interminable placards that so irritated Doumic) are more difficult to interpret in terms of their relationship to Sienkiewicz's text.

The print of *Quo vadis?* (1913) that survives in the archive Cineteca Nazionale in Rome has intertitles in Spanish, most likely in readiness for exhibition abroad. The print in the British Film Institute National Archive possesses French intertitles, but carries a stock date of 1922 and is therefore a later reissue.⁴ And the hybrid version restored in 1996 by the Fondazione Cineteca Italiana (Milan) and the EYE-Film Institute Netherlands has English intertitles assembled from a number of surviving prints including a good quality Dutch one in colour. These intertitles in Spanish, French and English are not identical and vary in their complexity and the degree of dialogue they employ.⁵ Those of, or based on, prints from the period of the film's original release are predominantly plain explanations of ensuing actions expressed, in strong contrast to the narrative of the novel, in the present tense: for example, at the start, 'Petronius—arbiter elegantiae—welcomes his friend Vinicius back from Armenia'. Only with the death of Nero towards the close of the film, does an intertitle adopt both the

³ For a detailed account of the film's intimate relationship with the novel, particularly in terms of its greater spatial diversification and narrative complexity relative to stage adaptations, see Dagna in this volume.

⁴ I am most grateful to the BFI's curator of silent films, Bryony Dixon, for details of the stock date of its print.

⁵ The French reissue of 1922 differs from the others particularly in its frequent use of past tenses for narration and of pictures to illustrate the intertitle cards. For the growing complexity of intertitles in the course of the silent era (with a view to easing the transition between word and image), see Elliott 2003: 90-6.

past tense and a more poetic modality of destructive fire contrasted with productive rain: ‘Thus died Nero. Like fire, he brought nothing but destruction, mourning, pain and death. But from the rain of strife and blood sprang a new life: the life of Christianity, in the sign of love and peace’.⁶ Appropriately enough, at the film’s close, it puts its literary allegiance manifestly on display by quoting from the novel.

Through the character of Petronius, moreover, Guazzoni’s feature makes explicit intermedial reference to literature, for it figures ‘the arbiter of elegance’ as the accomplished writer known to literary history.⁷ Early in the film, he is found in his study writing at a desk which is heaped with papyrus and pens and surrounded by buckets of scrolls (figure 9.1). In his last scene, he reads out his farewell letter to Nero deploring the emperor’s inferior artistic skills. Thus Petronius is a textual character, who can embody the authority and the artistry of the Polish author and his Neronian narrative (not least because he had already done so in the novel itself).⁸ Finally, the production company Società Italiana Cines promoted its product in advance as an adaptation of the novel and as a film whose artistry it should communicate with reference to the novel. Within a four-page spread of the magazine *La Vita Cinematographica* published on 13 January 1913, an advertisement placed by the studio proclaimed:

⁶ As pointed out by Scodel and Bettenworth 2009: 53 n. 52. The two intertitles are from the 1996 restoration.

⁷ For the importance of Petronius as a sympathetic focaliser of the narrative in Sienkiewicz’s novel and his identification there with the author of the *Satyricon*, see Scodel and Bettenworth 2009: 22-8 and earlier in this introduction.

⁸ The hounding and suicide of Petronius in the novel has been read as a vehicle for the expression by Sienkiewicz of his fears about artistic repression, see e.g. Damiani 1946.

Alongside the many imitations and the many remakes, there have even been attempts at cinematographic adaptations of this powerful and compelling novel. But the public, constantly unsatisfied or downright disappointed, is still waiting for a representation of *Quo vadis?* such as appeared in literature, one that captures its imagination... In this great presentation from Cines, the novel of Henryk Sienkiewicz has been followed faithfully and to it naturally we should refer to describe this new film of extraordinary artistic value.⁹

The mission of cinema

Guazzoni's *Quo vadis?* deserves evaluation as part of the rich afterlife of Sienkiewicz's novel not just because its makers invited the original Italian audience of 1913 to evaluate it in that way. Silent cinema inserted itself into a growing network of receptions of the nineteenth-century novel as a radically new way of experiencing Neronian Rome, related to but distinct from its reconstruction in other high cultural forms (such as the novel, theatre, opera, painting, dance, and sculpture) or more popular forms (such as circus shows). The Roman past was brought into the present moving in real time, embodied by actors, emotionally coded by colouring and musical accompaniment, and thus rendered powerfully immersive.¹⁰ The film *Quo vadis?*, moreover, stands at the forefront of a highly successful three-pronged mission launched by the Italian film industry in the early 1910s that ultimately enabled this pioneering, feature-length adaptation of the Polish novel to reach spectators of all classes throughout Italy and across the world (Wyke 1997: 119-20 and Bertellini 2013: 3).

⁹ The translation of the Italian is my own.

¹⁰ For silent cinema as a radically new and important mode of classical reception, see Michelakis and Wyke 2013: 1-15.

One facet of the film industry's mission at this point was to nationalize the Italian public. Italian entrepreneurs saw filmmaking as a powerful instrument with which to stake a claim to the past, to deliver it in the public space of the cinema to a collective audience that transcended region, dialect, class, politics, age, and gender, and thus to unify their country. Italians had been urged to take ownership of their Roman and Christian past ever since the struggle for unification. In the logic of film producers, cinema could shape the historical consciousness of its mass domestic audience and, by providing in particular lessons on the common cultural heritage of ancient Rome, lay solid foundations for a shared national identity (Garofalo 2012: 366-70). The film company Cines, managed by powerful aristocrats and businessmen, and funded by the Vatican's bank, built much of its production strategy on these principles. Its first trademark of the twins Romulus and Remus suckling a she-wolf signalled the studio's location in the capital city but also its distinctive symbolic investment in the history of ancient Rome (Tomadjoglou 2000).

The backers of Italian film production also sought to increase the artistic status of cinema and to legitimate it as a respectable form of entertainment. They proposed to accomplish this facet of the industry's mission through increased capital investment, the development of complex, multi-reel articulations of prestigious but well-known literary or dramatic narratives, their reenactment in a grandiose yet accessible register, and the use of high-quality photography to showcase cinema's technical virtuosity and enhance the sensation of spectacular realism (Muscio 2013: 163-5). Sienkiewicz's novel *Quo vadis* provided an exceptional resource—grounded in the city of Rome, progressing toward spiritual uplift while lingering over secular pleasure, and rich with thrillingly vivid depictions of court, catacomb, and arena (Woźniak 2016: 7-9). By 1900, the Polish novel had already

appeared in a number of Italian editions (low-cost as well as luxurious)¹¹ that, according to one worried Jesuit (Pavissich 1900: 25), were being displayed in the windows of bookshops across the country and read avidly by every type of person. Its success in Italy was swift, substantial and widespread, while its artistic qualities received conspicuous endorsement with the award to the author in 1905 of the Nobel Prize for Literature (Scodel and Bettenworth 2009: 8). At almost two hours in length, Guazzoni's *Quo vadis?* was promoted in 1913 as a cultural artefact aspiring to the duration of a play or an opera and the narrative complexity of the now internationally celebrated novel (Wyke 1997: 120).

The third facet of the Italian film industry's mission (Wyke 1997: 24-5) was to penetrate foreign markets by utilizing stories of international appeal, thus increasing profits and the commercial prestige of Italian manufacturing abroad. Guazzoni's *Quo vadis?* was exported for distribution all over the world, and became a transnational cultural ambassador for Italian industrialism.¹² The rest of this chapter will explore the silent film as an adaptation of the Polish novel in each of these three respects—nation-building, artistic integrity, and global profitability.

The politics of cinema

¹¹ For the success of the novel in Italy, see Begey 1946: 77-9 and de Berti and Gagetti in this volume.

¹² Martinelli 1994: 47 argues for Cines as a forerunner of other Italian film companies in the vigorous pursuit of international distribution.

The Italian film translates the Polish novel across media, languages, and cultures, ‘indigenizing’ (or re-indigenizing) the historical fiction as one rooted in Italian soil.¹³ Already in 1901, the archaeologist Orazio Marucchi prefaced a Roman edition of the novel intended for the young with a topographic map of the ancient city and a detailed description of each of its fourteen regions (Begey 1946: 80). Twelve years later, the film lays claim to historical veracity and ownership of the *Quo vadis?* story through the use of location shooting (the Via Appia itself for the visitation of Christ to the apostle Peter, the Borghese gardens for the climactic baptism of the traitor Chilo by the apostle Paul) and the construction of large-scale sets in recognizable parts of the Roman landscape (the Centocelle airfield for the burning of the city and the Parioli racecourse for the arena sequences).¹⁴ Cinematic images of the geography of ancient Rome kindled pride in an Italian national identity among both domestic audiences and those who had emigrated abroad (Bertellini 1999a: 47-8; Tomadjoglou 2000: 264), while for non-Italian spectators they provided the aesthetic satisfactions of a virtual grand tour (Muscio 2013: 165-6). In the reconstruction of such images, Italian filmmakers understandably claimed, and were regularly credited with, a disposition for the best photographic realism. The British trade magazine *The Bioscope* (20 February 1913), for example, pondering whether *Quo vadis?* was the greatest cinematic spectacle ever made, argued that:

Its value, educationally, is thus of paramount importance; indeed, it probably presents a clearer and truer portrait of a vanished age than has ever yet been presented by other

¹³ For ‘indigenization’ as an aspect of the adaptation process when it occurs across cultures, see Hutcheon 2013²: xxvii and 148-53.

¹⁴ Some of the location shooting is noted by Martinelli 1994: 49 and referred to in the reviews assembled in Martinelli 1993.

means whatsoever. In Rome is a collection of historical remains which cannot be paralleled, except, perhaps, in Egypt, for antiquity and variety. The Cines Company are the first people to make use of them for the purposes of a picture play, and the result is something for all the world to wonder at.

The Cines company also asserted a material and emotional, as well as an environmental, primacy in the reconstruction of ancient Rome. Foreign textual resources are subordinated in the film to the solidity of the three-dimensional architectural sets and the intricate antiquarianism of furnishings, costumes, statuary, and props, whose originals had been purloined by foreign collectors and reproduced by foreign artists but now could be seen apparently back in their rightful, native space and time. Such lavish set designs supply visible, authenticating indices of Italy's classical past and simultaneously affirm the technical ingenuity of Italy's film industry as a mechanism for exhibiting and memorializing the nation's exquisite cultural patrimony.¹⁵ Both casting and acting add another temporal path straight from ancient Rome to contemporary Italy and the re-nationalisation of *Quo vadis?* as Italian history rather than Polish fiction. In February 1913, when making a case for the attractiveness of its historical film for American audiences, Cines cited its 'great historic truth' and drew attention to the Roman character of the story, a character they argued which has not lost its identity in any of the classes of the Roman people, a character which can be noticed especially in the movement of the masses and the majestic posture of each individual. A full Christian sentiment is shown throughout the work and the most famous artists of Italy have been especially engaged for the star roles. (Tomadjoglou 2000: 269)

¹⁵ For the importance of set design to Italian historical films, see Rhodes 2000: 311-15; Garofalo 2012: 374-7; Blom 2016: 188-90.

In the same month, the British *Bioscope* concurred: ‘No other artists could have acted this story as they act it, for it is a Roman tale, and they, themselves, are Romans, with all the mighty power and passion of the ancestors they have here portrayed’.

Guazzoni’s film indigenizes Sienkiewicz’s novel but also repurposes it for an Italian audience living in a different time and a different cultural context.¹⁶ The Polish narrative has been understood as a Catholic allegory composed in the face of growing nineteenth-century religious scepticism and critiques of the temporal powers of the papacy. Readers follow the gradual conversion of Vinicius as he comes to respect Lygia and her religion, and encounters the apostles Peter and Paul. And, in the novel’s concluding sentences, we have moved into present time to read the worn inscription *quo vadis, Domine?* on the Via Appia’s little chapel and to bear witness to Peter’s church standing high on the Vatican hill commanding the city and the world.¹⁷ Soon after publication, the novel also came to be interpreted as a coded and comforting patriotic manifesto for its Polish readers, in which innocent Lygia embodies Catholic Poland and her giant champion Ursus the Polish people rescuing their martyred country from the horns of its irreligious, imperial oppressors.¹⁸

¹⁶ Adaptation theorists argue for the importance of analyzing the repurposing of an adapted text for a new audience living in a different time and cultural environment, as Cartmell and Whelehan 2010: 21. Cf. Hutcheon 2013: 142-53.

¹⁷ E.g. Giergielewicz 1968: 135. The novel is described as ‘a call to prayer’ by Guzik 2008: 4.

¹⁸ For the novel as a patriotic manifesto see, most recently, Bujnicki 2016. Cf. D’Amico 1946: 124-5; Giergielewicz 1968: 135-7; Wyke 1997: 125; Scodel and Bettenworth 2009: 140-1; and Axer in this volume.

In contrast, a meticulously composed, key scene in the Italian film puts on display its contemporary concerns. The Roman patrician Vinicius is led to the humble home of a Christian quarryman by Peter, the leader of the religious community. Just at the point when the apostle initiates the solemn ritual of baptism, the workman's tools are disclosed centre frame, hanging on a black curtain in splendid isolation above the head of the kneeling convert—an axe fastened over a sickle. These tools of the urban worker and the peasant were already in use by socialist and other labour groups in Italy as symbols of class struggle. Yet such groups were vigorously anti-clerical and the Catholic Church had responded to their emergence with the creation of their own trade unions and peasant leagues (Pollard 2008: esp. 29-68). As the product of a company associated with the papacy, the film appears not to be aligning the activism of socialists and its repression by the Liberal state with the political experience of Catholics, but to be subsuming that struggle. Italian spectators are invited to see only modern Catholics reflected in these modest, ordinary Christian workers persecuted by the Roman state.¹⁹ The later scene in the arena then continues this translation of a Polish into an Italian allegory, with Lygia embodying Catholic Italy needing rescue by the faithful from the tyranny of Italy's secular government. The final shot of the film, moreover, in which Christ miraculously breaks the chains that bind the faithful kneeling before him (figure 9.2), is completely disconnected from any passage in Sienkiewicz' novel. It appears to offer the conclusion that only possession of faith in Christ will liberate Italy's workers and lift them up

¹⁹ I am grateful to the audience of a talk I gave on *Quo vadis?* (1913) at the University of St. Andrews for leading me to an interpretation of the baptism scene that differs from that in Wyke 1997: 124-7. On the significance of the scene for contemporary Italians, see also Dumont 2009: 483; Pucci 2011: 64; Scodel and Bettenworth 2009: 91-2 and 129 n. 11; and De Berti and Galletti in this volume.

into the light of salvation. A significant shift in ideological valence has occurred, therefore, from the adapted Polish text of *Quo vadis* to its Italian, trans-culturated adaptation. Despite claims made by the production company Cines to have followed Sienkiewicz's novel faithfully, fidelity is rarely a strong motivation behind any adaptation (Hutcheon 2013: xv), and in the Italian *Quo vadis?* it is ultimately overtaken by nationalism, religious polemic and spiritual uplift.

The art of cinema

A cinematic adaptation of a novel is a particular mode of 'intermediality' or translation across media. As a photographic palimpsest, it always carries a deposit of the text it has adapted, and that deposit is integral to how the film is viewed so long as spectators are familiar with the work whose traces the film bears. In such circumstances, both the film and its promoters can trade on memory of the 'original'.²⁰ Yet the dual consistency of a film adaptation still does not mean that fidelity to a text is the best criterion by which to judge it, not least because—as in this case—a film adaptation does not necessarily have a single source in the written words of a novel.²¹ Guazzoni's *Quo vadis?*, despite claims to the contrary in the adverse French review of August 1913, does not simply convert the words of Sienkiewicz into a procession of images. The Polish novel was already by this time a multi-medial phenomenon and the feature film draws on the whole gamut of its manifestations.

²⁰ On film adaptations as palimpsests of adapted texts, see Hutcheon 2013: 8-9 and 21, and Cartmell and Whelehan 2010: 26-7.

²¹ For the argument that adaptations should be decoupled from the notion of a single source or single ur-text and be read 'intertextually', see Cartmell and Whelehan 2010: 12, 51 and 73-4.

Sienkiewicz's narrative itself, especially through the focal character of its 'undisputed arbiter of all that was elegance and tasteful' (1993: 1), had set up an interart dialogue with architecture, sculpture, song, music, dance, theatre and painting.²² Readers are given access, for example, to Petronius' private aesthetic verdict on first catching sight of Lygia: 'That's what the first light of dawn would look like, he thought, if it were rendered in human form by a gifted sculptor ... The artist and worshiper of beauty woke in him at once. There was only one title for a sculpture of her: Spring! Nothing else would do!' (1993: 26). Publication in book form then added to the author's words an overt, material bond with an array of pictures. The original Polish edition of Sienkiewicz's novel and a number of the translations produced in France and Italy, such as that by Flammarion (Paris, 1900 and 1903), Fratelli Treves (Milan, 1901) and Libreria Editrice Bideri (Naples, 1905), were generously interleaved with especially commissioned illustrations or reproductions of celebrated history paintings.²³ We should not categorise the difference between novel and film as simply that between word and image because the book was already a hybrid art,²⁴ and the film clearly evokes some of its textual decorations many of which had gone on to enjoy an existence independently from the

²² Mosso 2010: 13-18 explores the two-way traffic between the Neronian paintings composed by Sienkiewicz's compatriot and acquaintance Henryk Siemiradzki and scenes in the novel (paintings such as *Nero's Torches* of 1876 and *Christian Dirce* of 1897). See also Skwara in this volume.

²³ Detail on Italian editions of the novel and their illustrations can be found throughout *Nel centenario* and in De Berti and Gagetti in this volume. On the inclusion of famous paintings, see Blom 2001: 285.

²⁴ On the hybrid artistry of film adaptation from illustrated novels, see Elliott 2003: 6 and 31-76.

editions in which they had first appeared, in exhibitions or as postcards circulated in their thousands.²⁵ The pose momentarily adopted by Ursus in the film when wrestling the aurochs, for example, clearly mimics the illustration by Jan Styka printed in a Polish edition of the novel and in some of its Italian and French versions (Mosso 2010: 11-13).

Theatrical enactments of novels are often crucial reference points for film adaptations (Elliott 2003: 6). Sienkiewicz's *Quo vadis* had been regularly adapted for the European and Anglo-American stage ever since its publication, achieving long runs particularly in Italy. That mode of intermediation is brought physically to the attention of spectators by the casting of Guazzoni's *Quo vadis?*. Prior to obtaining a contract with Cines, the actor who played Vinicius (Amleto Novelli) had had a distinguished career in theatre including the role of Nero in an abridgement of the Polish novel performed at the Teatro Mercadante in Naples in June 1900.²⁶ The novel had also been transformed into a number of musical works, the most popular of which was a five-act opera with libretto by Henri Cain and music by Jean Nougès first performed in Nice in 1909, followed by Paris, London and New York.²⁷ Four years later, Guazzoni's *Quo vadis?* opened in Italy's most famous opera houses (such as the Teatro Costanzi in Rome) accompanied by an orchestra and a choir while, at the Gaumont Palace in Paris, eighty musicians and fifty choristers relied on Nougès' score to accompany

²⁵ See Surzyńska-Błaszak 2016 and Górecka in this volume.

²⁶ On Italian theatrical productions of *Quo vadis*, see Martinelli 1993: 182 and Dagna in this volume. On Anglo-American versions, see Mayer in this volume.

²⁷ Operas based on the novel are discussed in Urbański 2016. On Nougès' opera in particular, see Manuwald 2013: 240-6 and Dagna in this volume.

the French premiere.²⁸ Thus, on exhibition, the Italian feature film extended its intermedial embrace to include the aural, as well as the pictorial, the theatrical and the novelistic.

The written words of Sienkiewicz's novel were not the only source available to Guazzoni's film and, furthermore, visual images were not the only mode of expression into which the author's historical fiction could be translated. Silent film is a synthesised performance of sequential photography, written words and music.²⁹ The Italian feature *Quo vadis?* might 'cut up' the narrative of the novel (as disparagingly observed in Doumic's review), but it had at its disposal other modes for expression that constitute the composite language of cinema—modes inherited from the visuals of photography and painting, the décor of architecture, the performance of theatre, the movement of dance, the music of opera, the democratic spectacles of the circus and the pyrodrama.³⁰

An article in *Le Courrier Cinématographique* for 5 April 1913, for example, demonstrates the vital role music played during the projection of Christian martyrdom at the film's extravagant French premiere:

The annals of the spectacle have never recorded a success as considerable as that obtained by the film *Quo Vadis* presented at the Gaumont Palace. This enthusiasm of the great Parisian public is due not only to the comfort that the luxurious hall of the Gaumont Palace offers, and to the beauties of Sienkiewicz's work, but also to the

²⁸ For details of the film's premieres in Italy and France, see Bernardini 1982: 148-9; Martinelli 1993: 183; Meusy 1995: 253.

²⁹ This list adapts that produced by Robert Stam in order to categorise sound film as multi-track: moving photographic image, phonetic sound, music, noises, and written materials. For discussion of his views in relation to film adaptations, see Hutcheon 2013²: 25.

³⁰ For film as a composite language, see Hutcheon 2013: 35 and Elliott 2003: 144 and 195-6.

musical arrangement (artistic and elaborate) that the conductor Paul Fosse knew how to draw out of the opera by Jean Nougès. ... From the first scenes, the work comes alive, the phalanx of eighty musicians distinctly emphasises the dances at the banquet. Nero sings his verses, his lyre throbs. Rome catches fire, the choirs sing the hatred of the mob.... The prayer of the Christians in the catacombs and the blessing of Peter resonate amid the ringing voices of the fifty choristers. The trumpets blare, the circus appears immense and packed with spectators, the chariots gallop past, shouts acclaim the victors. Then, plaintive and slow, comes the chant of the Christians who go to their torture. The voice of Vinicius appeals for the miracle that will save Lygia. ... The orchestra, the soloists and the choristers seem synchronised with the film and turn the spectacle into a wonder of art.³¹

Guazzoni's *Quo vadis?*, then, is both intermedial and plurimedial (in the sense that it both absorbs and deploys a range of art forms). An adaptation of this kind raises the question of what one art form can do that another cannot (Hutcheon 2013: 35) especially given that, in the period of the early 1910s and with this film in particular, Italian cinema was attempting to distinguish itself as a modern art form—as the Seventh Art that could subsume all the others.³² This aesthetic competitiveness, in which the novel *Quo vadis* operates as a point of

³¹ I translate from the French text of the article as excerpted in Martinelli 1993: 180-1. For the important connection in Italy between silent historical film and opera, see Kuhn 2012 and Dagna in this volume.

³² For silent cinema's claims to be the Seventh Art in the context of its literary adaptations, see Elliott 2003: 114-5. Cf. on the competitive intermediality of the Italian Roman history feature *Cabiria* (1914), Kuhn 2000: 27.

reference rather more than a textual source,³³ is strongly in evidence throughout the course of the film.

The opening sequence introduces each of the main characters in a series of individual portrait shots and identifies the actor who plays them. Almost all of the nine dramatis personae so introduced turn to look directly out of the camera at their audience. The initial reference point for the film is thus theatre rather than literature although, in this sequence and the scenes that follow, the camera often shortens the distance that theatre would have placed between actors and spectators. Correspondingly, despite offering a number of domestic settings to begin with (the private rooms of Petronius, Aulus Plautius and Nero), the film violates the conventional space of the proscenium theatre by means of deep staging to which the attention of spectators is especially drawn.³⁴ When, for example, Petronius and Vinicius visit the house of Plautius, his wife draws back a curtain to reveal a garden into whose depths all the foreground characters walk in order to encounter her son and her foster daughter Lygia who are playing ball in the far distance. Subsequently, the space of performance expands further still in order to flaunt the larger scale of cinema's lavishly antiquarian sets and mobile, multitudinous cast,³⁵ with grander scenes in the triclinium of the imperial palace (a scene broken up into different planes of action and points of view), in the imperial gardens

³³ A distinction of this kind is also made for the relationship of Edward Bulwer-Lytton's novel *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834) to the Italian film adaption of 1908 in Garofalo 2012: 373.

³⁴ Cf. Scodel and Bettenworth 2009: 30. Blom 2016: 90-3 attributes this use of deep staging to the influence of Alma-Tadema's history paintings.

³⁵ This is a common strategy of Italian historical films of the period, as noted by Tomadjoglou 2000: 269.

(shot on location in Rome), or before or within solid three-dimensional structures designed to represent various streets of the ancient city.

When the film first introduces the Christian community processing toward Ostrianum on the outskirts of the city in order to pray, it vies not just with the enactment of theatre but also with the archaeological knowledge displayed by the novel and the material documentation of archaeology. Excavation of the catacombs had continued on beyond the period of publication of Sienkiewicz's novel in the late nineteenth century, and Christian archaeologists like Orazio Marucchi had published endorsements of the Catholic doctrine that the apostles Peter and Paul came to Rome and were martyred there, while correcting Sienkiewicz's understanding of the specific location of Peter's activities.³⁶ The scene at Ostrianum seems to provide an especially vivid authentication of Peter's presence in Rome because it is imprinted on the realistic photographic medium through which the excavations continued to be revealed to readers of twentieth-century newspapers and works of scholarship, and because on screen the catacombs are fully restored, brightly lit and in use, whereas in archaeological reports they were in ruins, dim and empty. The Cines production company could turn Church legend into thrilling history by gathering spectators up from their cinema seats and taking them along with Rome's early Christians through a real extra-urban landscape to an underground basilica. There, in the flesh, the fisherman preaches to his responsive flock unaware that the spies Chilo and Vinicius are putting them all in danger. In the crypt, the camera also pans slightly past the unsettled patrician to demonstrate the film's grasp of current archaeological knowledge about early Christian iconography (however anachronistic for Neronian Rome)—drawn on the wall is not just the fish, but also the anchor, the alpha and the omega, and the chi-rho.

³⁶ Wyke 1997: 116-7. See also Ziółkowski in this volume.

The technical virtuosity of cinema comes into its own when the city of Rome catches fire. In conspicuous divergence from the orange, yellow, green, and blue tints deployed throughout the rest of the restored FCI/EYE print, the fulfilment of Nero's ambition to sing as Rome burns is chemically tinted a hellish red, reminiscent of nineteenth-century paintings of the infamous event.³⁷ In a green and pastoral long shot, Vinicius gallops straight at the camera along the tree-lined Via Appia toward Rome and Lygia's rescue. Abruptly, in the next shot, the camera has turned to capture his frantic ride up closer, from the side, in scorching red. Immediately, real flames completely fill the screen. Then, through smoke-filled streets, carefully choreographed swarms of extras race forward as buildings collapse around them. Their physicality is emphasised as Vinicius plunges in the opposite direction, pushing them out of his way. Historical reconstruction is experienced individually when reading a novel, collectively when watching a film. So colour, the movement of crowds and, undoubtedly, music encourage spectators of *Quo vadis?* to identify en masse with the suffering of ancient Romans and gain a stake in the historical action (Wyke 1997: 20). Additionally, the superimposed flames that burn upward from the base of the film frame and leave the ancient city in ruins evoke the susceptibility to combustion of silent cinema's nitrate film stock. Fire can operate metaphorically as a vehicle for self-reflection on cinema's technical ability to ignite emotion in and about the past, as it does when it appears as a motif throughout the subsequent Italian historical epic *Cabiria* (1914).³⁸

³⁷ For the process of restoring the film's original colours, see Read 2009: 9-46 and colour plates P1-5.

³⁸ On the motif of fire in *Cabiria* (1914), see Campassi 2003: 58.

The capacity of cinema to exceed the representational possibilities of painting is densely exploited in the arena sequences of *Quo vadis*?³⁹ In a vast open-air auditorium constructed by the filmmakers for height, width and depth, three discrete spectacles build up suspense until the moment when Lygia will be brought out to die, and all are presented before a huge gathering of on-screen spectators whose gesticulated appreciation of these visual thrills acts as a prompt to similar responses from spectators off-screen in cinemas. The first sequence of chariot racing is relatively short and evokes similar scenes depicted by artists such as Jean-Léon Gérôme, Alexander von Wagner, and Ulpiano Checa in the late nineteenth century.⁴⁰ However, the film's sequential photography replaces the stasis of the picture frame with the rapid motion associated with modernity. It also adds a forward story since, after the four-horsed chariots have completed three swift laps, the winner rides over to the imperial box waving his victory palm.

Next two particularly celebrated paintings by Gérôme are placed in sequence and endowed with an expanded temporal dimension and considerable movement—*Ave Caesar, Morituri Te Salutant* (1859) and *Pollice Verso* (1872).⁴¹ The camera pans along with the gladiators as they march toward the imperial box to salute the emperor. A brief static citation of *Pollice Verso* is preceded by the combat between a retiarius and a mirmillo, although not

³⁹ See further Wyke 1997: 120-3 and Blom 2001: 287. Mosso 2010 explores the relationship to painting of this and several other sequences in the film.

⁴⁰ Scodel and Bettenworth 2009: 4 note that no such race occurs in Sienkiewicz's novel. The sequence was most likely inspired by the chariot race described in Lew Wallace's novel *Ben-Hur* (1880) and then frequently performed in its stage adaptation.

⁴¹ For the prior circulation of Gérôme's paintings in exhibitions and as engravings etc., see Blom 2001.

followed by the kill. Throughout the fight between the gladiators, the camera frequently cuts away to look up at the visual pleasure it causes in the crowd, the vestal virgins and, especially, the emperor.

Finally, the temporal, spatial and aural difference of cinema is emphasized by the amount of film time given over to a single long shot of Roman soldiers relentlessly driving the Christians to the back of the vast arena—a shot accompanied at the film's premiere in Rome by a fifty-strong choir assembled from the city's churches singing liturgical motifs (Bernardini 1982: 148-9). The martyrs turn to take up a position in the distance that for a moment matches the composition of Gérôme's *The Christian Martyrs' Last Prayer* (1883), but then the camera proceeds on elsewhere to capture in close-up the lions underground with their trainers, beginning to emerge screen-left into the sunlight, heading towards their prey, and devouring them. Unlike Gérôme's painting, Guazzoni's film can isolate and multiple internal points of view (including up from the arena at the disturbing ecstasy of Nero) and alter the distance of external spectators from the terrible events unfolding on screen (cutting in closer than the painting to capture in more detail the supplication and the facial expression of terrified men, women and children).

The concluding, climactic moments in the arena, however, draw on the graphic literary description to be found in Sienkiewicz's novel and on a performative tradition for ancient Rome's reconstruction quite different from the historical fiction or the history painting of the cultural elite.⁴² In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the circus companies which travelled around Europe and the United States included on their bill wild animal acts, athletic displays, acts of strength, Graeco-Roman wrestling, equestrian

⁴² Mosso 2010: 15-18 argues that, in the presentation of Lygia's torment, this sequence also evokes the iconography of martyrdom in Siemiradzki's *Christian Dirce* (1897).

acrobatics, and mythological or historical re-enactments such as Barnum and Bailey's *Nero, or The Destruction of Rome*. When Ursus wrestles the 'aurochs' to the ground he mimics those popular cultural practices. This 'king of force' achieves public celebrity as a hero because he defeats a beast and rescues a girl in an exploit that, in narrative terms, bears profound allegorical significance. Audiences of the film who were unfamiliar with the novel or even illiterate could still find an exciting point of entry into Roman history through this humble servant and mill worker. Thus, the competitive aesthetics of the film *Quo vadis?* claim for cinema the status of being a more democratic art form than painting, theatre, opera or the novel. For, unlike those other forms, it draws the working classes into history even if it is at the service not of class struggle but of Christianity.⁴³

The production company that made *Quo vadis?* extended this assertion of superiority as an art form explicitly to include other films. The four-page advertisement Cines published in *La Vita Cinematographica* two months before the film's release described the public as 'unsatisfied or downright disappointed' with earlier cinematic adaptations of the Polish novel. The first known adaptation of 1901, produced by the French company Pathé Frères, adopted the approach to a literary source customary for early cinema where key moments with strong recognition-value for audiences are radically compressed into a single kinetic scene lasting only a few minutes⁴⁴ (at a banquet on the Palatine, the imperial court watch a gladiatorial combat and a lascivious dance, Ursus rescues Lygia, and Nero sings as Rome

⁴³ On the democratising connection between Ursus and circus strongmen, see Reich 2015: 23-50; Bertellini 1999a: 47; Wyke 1997: 44 and 123; Brunetta 2008: 203-4; dall'Asta and Faccioli in this volume.

⁴⁴ Early cinema's strategies for literary adaptation are discussed by Buchanan 2012.

burns in the background).⁴⁵ Little can be understood without adequate knowledge of the adapted text. But twelve years later, brief homage has been replaced by a far more ambitious, interventionist cinematic strategy. In 1913, Guazzoni's feature film draws on the *Quo vadis* story in all its multi-medial manifestations to define the modern medium as an art form in competition with all others, as nonetheless socially inclusive, and as now fully matured.

The commerce of cinema

As a means to attract middle-class audiences to the cinema and increase profits, Cines promoted the film *Quo vadis?* as a product of high artistic status, attained by virtue of its adaptation of an illustrious novel. In December 1912, the Italian production house dedicated to this enterprise the entirety of its monthly magazine *Cines Revue*. Lavishly illustrated with scenes from the film, and containing text in Italian, French, German and English, the publication appears to have been designed for anticipated audiences at premieres both at home and abroad.⁴⁶ The opening claim that in its production Cines has faithfully followed Sienkiewicz's novel is shored up by the substantial details subsequently given of the film's plotline—to the extent that the film is said to conclude (more in the manner of a literary work than any cinematic adaptation) with the contents of a *letter* from Vinicius to Petronius

⁴⁵ A restored version of the 1901 film was shown at the Cinema Ritrovato festival in Bologna in 2016. I have no information currently on another French film adaptation entitled *Au temps des premiers chrétiens* (1910), presumed missing.

⁴⁶ I am very grateful to Raffaele De Berti and Elisabetta Gagetti for their kindness in providing me with access to this publication. My description of its contents is greatly indebted to their analysis, for which see De Berti and Gagetti 2016 and their chapter in this volume.

describing the happiness he and Lygia have found through Christ in Sicily. Given that the released film did not end in this way but with a *vision* of Christ before an unindividuated group, it may be thought that Cines was here presenting its film reassuringly as subservient even to the medium of the adapted work. Despite this act of transcriptive fidelity, however, most of the prefatory remarks in the magazine constitute a clear boast of artistic equivalence.⁴⁷

Cines acknowledges the difficulties of producing an adaptation because, it says, the novel is a masterly work of re-enactment in which the life of imperial Rome is forcefully relived and sensuously breathed. But, it claims, the difficulties were not insurmountable and the company has now produced for the public of the whole world a perfect adaptation ('una riduzione perfetta'). Furthermore, a hint of cultural superiority lies within the additional, poetic claim that Cines was able to complete its great work not just because it was in possession of the most perfect technical means to do so, and the most exceptional academic and artistic expertise, but also because it had around it for inspiration the city of Rome 'constantly singing, through its arches, through its columns, through its ruins decorated by beautiful sunsets, its eternal glorifying song of ancient power and of ancient beauty'.⁴⁸

The commercial systems for distribution and exhibition of *Quo vadis?* reveal equally bold approaches toward attracting the higher classes (as yet unaccustomed to cinema) to see it. Exclusive concessions to exhibit the film were put into place for each region of Italy. From Milan to Naples, it opened in prestigious opera houses where the price of tickets was raised

⁴⁷ For the operation of a reassuring rhetoric of transcriptive fidelity in the promotion of silent film adaptations, see Buchanan 2012: 26-7.

⁴⁸ The translation is my own, taken from the Italian text of *Cines Revue* 1.3 (December 1912) p. 83, as the English version contained there is somewhat awkward and a little inaccurate.

substantially higher than was usual for film going. A special screening was arranged in the palace on the Quirinale for the Italian royal family and their court.⁴⁹ These tactics were evidently successful as newspapers reported on the unusual and appreciative constituency seated in the Teatro Costanzi at Rome on the opening night of 12 March 1913 (not only regular frequenters of film, but also the flower of the aristocracy and notable intellectuals, artists, journalists, industrialists, and financiers),⁵⁰ while the film remained in circulation until the end of world war one. In New York, the commercial life of *Quo vadis?* was significantly prolonged by the American distributor George Kleine, who arranged for it to be screened initially on Broadway at the high admission price of \$1.50 for highbrow audiences and then, some ten months later, downtown at a cost of between 50 and 15 cents for working-class Italian immigrants (Bertellini 1999: 244-5). *Quo vadis?* was the first film every to play in a Broadway theatre in this manner, running at the Astor in Manhattan from April to December 1913. This radically new pattern of distribution and exhibition was continued in Britain, where the exclusive rights to *Quo vadis?* was sold at auction and a four-week opening held at the immense Royal Albert Hall, before a wider release across the country in small provincial venues (Christie 2013: 115-6). At such venues, the distributor put a programme on sale that

⁴⁹ The Italian distribution and exhibition of the film are discussed by Bernardini 1982: 148-9 and Martinelli 1994: 49. Hendrykowska 1996 comments on the exceptional distribution of the film across all the divided parts of Poland (Russian, Prussian and Austrian) and its unsurprisingly enthusiastic reception.

⁵⁰ A sample report from the *Giornale d'Italia*, from which I take this description, is quoted in De Berti and Galletti 2016: 57.

provided British spectators with a synopsis of the story and an assurance that ‘every incident of the novel appears to have been preserved with remarkable fidelity’.⁵¹

Many of the reviewers who saw *Quo vadis?*, in sharp contrast to the critic René Doumic, were outspoken about the respects in which they judged the film’s re-enactment of Neronian Rome to equal, or even to trump that of the novel it was adapting. On 4 March 1913, a few days in advance of the premiere, the journalist Matilde Serao enthused in the Neapolitan newspaper *Il Giorno* that

to bring to life, in its setting and its episodes, *Quo vadis?*, all of *Quo vadis?*, was like proposing to create a world, in elements that are the most difficult to reproduce, of the exact colouring of the environment of imperial Rome...The vast and impressive Neronian tragedy passed from the vision of the book to the real and throbbing evidence of its action.... It is a spectacle never before seen. The cinematograph has never created anything like this. Yes, Cines has reconstructed a world. A world of beauty that enchants and thrills.⁵²

The modern medium’s capacity for realism and movement permits Serao to suggest that Sienkiewicz’s book offers a literary vision of Roman history, whereas Guazzoni’s camera offers both the photographic evidence and the action.

Given such contexts of distribution, exhibition and consumption, it is no surprise that the cover of the British programme for sale at cinemas where the Italian feature was shown

⁵¹ A number of the brochures are available for viewing in the special collections of the British Film Institute Library that are dedicated to the British distributor William F. Jury.

⁵² Quoted in Martinelli 1993: 175-6, the translation is my own. On Serao’s response, see also Dagna in this volume.

makes no reference at all to the Polish novel or any of its characters, but carries instead an image of Christ standing over a scroll and gesturing out at the programme's readers, with the Latin tag *Quo vadis?* inscribed on a crossbar above his head. Inside, the programme even argues that

there are times when mere words appear totally inadequate to fittingly describe anything great and magnificent, and in attempting a pen picture of the colossal production of '*Quo Vadis?*' we find language almost fails us to convey anything like the beauty, fascination, magnificence, and power to enthral of the production process.

In the excited rhetoric of promotional materials like this, the competitive intermediality of the film achieves victory over the book—as René Doumic foretold it would. Momentarily, writing 'a pen picture' fails and the cinematic medium overpowers 'mere words'.

The victory of the image

In face of the disdain shown toward cinema's rising ambitions expressed by men of letters such as René Doumic, I would argue that Guazzoni's *Quo vadis?* not only engages in close and sustained competition with the other arts but even plays out the victory of cinema over them at its close. At the end of the Italian film, in contrast with the end of the Polish novel it adapts, the romance of Vinicius and Lygia receives no closure (despite the promise made that it would in the *Cines revue*). Writing in Turin's *Il Muggese Cinematografico* (n. 3, 25 May 1913), a disappointed critic complains how much better it would have been to have included, after all Nero's atrocities, a sweetly sentimental scene of the loving and peaceful life of Lygia and Vinicius far from Rome.⁵³ Likewise neither Peter nor Paul experience martyrdom in the film. Among the closures that are provided—for Petronius and his beloved Eunice, for the

⁵³ Cited in Martinelli 1993: 176-7.

repentant Chilo, and for Nero—it is productive to pause over that for Petronius. Here, as in the opening of the film, explicit intermedial reference is made to literature and the written word when Petronius ceremoniously reads out his farewell letter to Nero deploring the emperor's inferior artistic skills. While in novels, letters float in a sea of words, on film they are denaturalized as a mode of representation.⁵⁴ This thematising of another medium or 'metamediality' is made even more explicit in the 1922 French re-release where a handwritten letter commands our attention, filling the screen in order for it to be read. Petronius is here a master of the word and the hand that holds up the paper on which his words are written draws our attention to his favoured medium.

However, the film does not end with the suicide of Petronius or even that of Nero. After the Christians are set alight as human torches, after Peter sees the sacred apparition on the Via Appia, after the emperor throws himself on a slave's dagger, the last shot (coloured green by a dye tone process) gradually illuminates Christ again, standing before a bright white cross. He looks down at the suppliants before him whose chains he breaks, and then out of the camera directly at the audience of the film (Figure 11.2). This constitutes a vision rather than a scene because it is without location (and without precedent in the novel).⁵⁵ And, as a vision, it can be interpreted as another moment of 'metamediality' after that set in motion by Petronius—that is as a comment on the process of adaptation from book to film.⁵⁶ The

⁵⁴ On the ways in which cinema can create textual scenes, see Elliott 2003: 99-112, esp. 101.

⁵⁵ As noted in the Turinese magazine *Il Maggese Cinematografico* (25 May 1913).

⁵⁶ Scodel and Bettenworth 2009: 7 describe the shot as an authorial or authoritative comment but only with reference to Italian politics and religion.

slow revelation of Christ is like a stylized performance of the triumph of the visual.⁵⁷ The picturesque (the horrific human torches, the reverential apparition on the via Appia, and now this liberating epiphany) supersedes the textual.⁵⁸ The kneeling faithful are invited to adore a master of the image rather than mourn the loss of a master of the word. *Quo vadis?* concludes by suggesting that seeing (not reading) is believing, and cinema (not literature) should be our church.

⁵⁷ I am indebted for this meta-cinematic interpretation to the analysis of a scene in Cecil B. DeMille's *The King of Kings* (1927) by Judith Buchanan. There she argues that when Christ finally appears in the film, seen subjectively by a girl he has just cured of blindness and who is now learning to see, the scene is 'like a stylised rehearsal of the coming of cinema itself' (Buchanan 2007: 58).

⁵⁸ See Elliott 2003: 99-112 for occasions where film adaptations react against their founding texts.

