

QUO VADIS ON FILM
(1912, 1925, 1951, 1985, 2001),
THE MANY FACES OF ANTIQUITY

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ABSTRACT: The Polish novel *Quo vadis* by Henryk Sienkiewicz was adapted into film five times. Every adaptation was filmed in special circumstances, accompanied by different political situations and each time for a different, specific audience. The comparison and detailed analysis of all versions will bring to light, how and for what purpose has antiquity been translated onto the silver screen. The paper will focus especially on the three adaptations – the American (1951), the Italian (1985) and the Polish one (2001).

KEY-WORDS: Henryk Sienkiewicz, *Quo Vadis*, Cinema, adaptation.

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RESUMO: O romance polonês *Quo vadis*, de Henryk Sienkiewicz, foi adaptado para o cinema cinco vezes. Cada adaptação foi filmada em circunstâncias especiais, acompanhadas por situações políticas diferentes, e cada vez para um público específico diferente. A comparação e análise detalhada de todas as versões trará à luz como e com qual propósito a antiguidade foi traduzida para a tela de cinema. Este artigo tratará especialmente de três adaptações – a americana (1951), a italiana (1985) e a polonesa (2001).

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Henryk Sienkiewicz, *Quo Vadis*, Cinema, adaptação.

Cinematography willingly reached for antique themes and settings from the very beginning of its existence. It often used them as a metaphor to express a completely contemporary content or idea. Thus, the study of usage of ancient themes in cinema provides extraordinary opportunities to understand not only what views did the contemporary hold on antiquity, but also how they translated the world that surrounded them into an ancient setting.

An excellent research opportunity presents itself in the adaptations of *Quo vadis*, a novel by Henryk Sienkiewicz, from 1895, and translated into more than 50 languages. It has been adapted in radically different ways by many European and American directors. Watching so many versions one sees the different meanings that have been ascribed to the Roman and early-Christian motifs of the book, and also how the social and political situation influenced the interpretation of this work of fiction.

Issues related to the film adaptations of the novel have been widely and thoroughly discussed in a monograph written by Ruth Scodel and Anja Bettenworth: *Whither Quo vadis? Sienkiewicz's novel in film and television* (2009). We will not, therefore, list all the differences between the existing adaptations, but focus on a few examples, just to show that each and every movie has been prepared for a specific audience. The filmmakers took into account special preferences, expectations, experiences of a socio-political nature, and artistic tastes of their contemporary viewers.

Henryk Sienkiewicz, a Polish writer and Nobel Prize laureate¹, accomplished something that is rarely possible for authors of historical romances. His novel *Quo vadis?*, set in the time of Nero's persecution of Christians, tells the story of a Roman military commander, Marcus Vinicius, who falls in love with a devout Christian, Lygia, and slowly becomes intrigued by her religion. Their love story, told against the broader historical background, received international fame due to the universality of its values and vividness of characters. Partly thanks to this popularity and partly because of the ancient setting, so attractive for cinematographers, it was transferred onto the silver screen 5 times².

1. Sienkiewicz received the Nobel Prize for his works of epic, and not, as is often stated, for *Quo Vadis*.

2. Other adaptations: *QV* dir. Enrico Guazzoni, 1912, Italy (silent); *QV* dir. Gabriellino D'Annunzio and Georg Jacoby, 1924, Italy (silent); *QV* dir. Mervyn LeRoy, 1951, USA; *QV* dir. Franco Rossi, 1985; Italy (TV-series); *QV* dir. Jerzy Kawalerowicz, 2001, Poland.

QUO VADIS 1912 & 1925

The first 2 adaptations (1912 and 1925) were silent films, but also in those productions there is a kind of *signum temporis*. Especially the second film from 1925 seems interesting in terms of this paper.

The film started out as an Italian production directed by a poet and fascist-supporter Gabriellino D'Annunzio, who also wrote the script. When the Italian company ran out of money, German producers stepped in and Georg Jacoby was appointed co-director. This Italian-German version of *Quo vadis* reflects the atmosphere present in the time of the birth of the fascist movement. For example, Nero's promises, "to purify our city and cleanse it of sin and of the evil that threatens and corrupts it" and "to destroy all the enemies of Rome", contains elements that can be found in fascist rhetoric. Scodel & Bettenworth underline that in the fall of 1922 Mussolini gave a speech in the northern city of Udine declaring that "now we aspire to make Rome the city of our spirit, a city purged, cleansed of all elements that have corrupted and violated her". Germany in the time of fascism also used euphemistic terms (the cleansing of the country) to define an ethnical purge, which is known today as the Holocaust³.

A characteristic element that appears throughout every *Quo vadis* film is the Roman salute. One could even say that this one element becomes the distinguishing feature of each filming. The raised hand gesture so often seen in Roman statues has nothing to do with the fascist *heil!* Martin Winkler in his book *The Roman salute: cinema, history, ideology* (2009) very convincingly proves that there is neither an ancient literary nor iconographic source which would allow to identify the hand, raised mostly in a beneficiary gesture, with the Nazi salute. Winkler believes that paintings by Jacques-Louis David *The Oath of Horatii* (1784), *Tennis Court Oath* (1789) and especially *The Distribution of the Eagle Standards* (1810), Jean-Léon Gérôme's *The Death of Caesar* (1759) and *Ave Caesar, Morituri te salutant* (1759-1967) influenced and established the connection between these two gestures. Early films about antiquity alluded to this kind of art, and when Hitler and Mussolini copied Gérôme's image and organized their own distribution of eagles, the gesture from the painting was for-

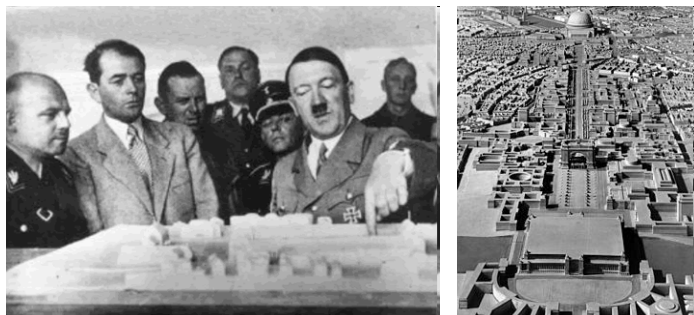
3. SCODEL & BETTENWORTH, pp. 110-111.

ever linked to the fascist greeting. Numerous movies, including adaptations of *Quo vadis*, were eager to display a kind of greeting that remained in the consciousness – hopefully not permanently – as a Roman salute.

Both silent versions of *Quo vadis*, especially the Italian-German one, significantly contributed to the consolidation of this association. There are no scenes in which characters would not greet themselves with just such a gesture. And it does not matter whether it is an official welcome or a greeting between passing friends. Perhaps it was the idea of the directors to conform to the expectations of the public in times, when fascism was just being born.

QUO VADIS 1951

The most famous American adaptation from 1951 also bears the marks of its time. The film was produced in the early 50s – shortly after World War II and in the face of the Cold War. In this version it is Nero, who plays one of the most important parts in the plot and personifies the threat posed by any madman in power over an empire. Associations seem almost to impose themselves on the viewer – the persecution of Christians resembles the recent persecution of the Jews, and Nero's behaviour, that of Hitler. The emperor is repeatedly presented on film against a large model of the new, rebuilt Rome, which supposedly was to be associated with many published photographs of Hitler inspecting the projects of his architect, Albert Speer.



Pictures nr 1. Adolph Hitler and his architect Albert Speer over a model of the new rebuilt Berlin (Welthauptstadt Germania). This is a file from the Wikimedia Commons.

An interesting feature in presenting Nero is his gesture of greeting, which mimics the führer's *heil!* He does not straighten the arm at the elbow, but only waves the open hand near his ear. In this way, the similarities are even more exposed. Formal greetings still resemble a fascist gesture, but they no longer appear in the scenes of private meetings. For example, Petronius and Vinicius greet one another by connecting the inner sides of their forearms.



Pictures nr 2. Adolph Hitler speaks in Reichstag, Charlie Chaplin in parody of Hitler in the film *Dictator* (1940). This is a file from the Wikimedia Commons.

The American version was prepared for viewers in the 50s. How much the interpretation of the film changes, if it is shown to a different target group, can be seen on the example of the Polish reception of this adaptation. This acclaimed American film was shown to the Polish audience somewhat late. It was not until the early 80s that one could see this version appear, mostly in parish halls and churches. The film never reached theatres and on television appeared only with the introduction of cable and satellite channels like TCM (in the early 90s). While recognized for its grandeur and intense dramaturgy, it was incomprehensible for the audience why the character of Nero was so prominently shown. Thirty years after the war the metaphor of Nero as a madman in power has become outdated for the Polish audience. Poles did not struggle with an inhuman tyrant, but with an inhuman system. More so were they interested in the attitude of Rome toward the early Christians, in whose persecution they saw their own fate.

The greeting gesture of friends also looked comically. For the Polish viewer it looked like a greeting of the Indians from adaptations of Karl May's books, which, although filmed in the 60's, have been known in Poland earlier than the American version from 1951. So for the Polish audience, when Marcus Vinicius greets Petronius, it is as if Old Shatterhand greeted Vinnnetou the Apache chief. It is hard to be surprised that the American version of *Quo vadis* left many of its Polish audience unsatisfied.

QUO VADIS 1985

Another adaptation of the novel by Henryk Sienkiewicz was an Italian miniseries, directed by Franco Rossi, from 1985, which focuses largely on the Pisonian conspiracy, which was completely omitted in the book. In this way religious persecution is presented in the film as a way to eliminate political enemies. Also this version, as the previous ones, is not without allusions to contemporary problems, and this time to the socio-political situation of Italy, which faced huge numbers of immigrants, especially from Catholic countries⁴. The image shown on film, of Christians without a roof over their heads, living in unhygienic conditions and performing the worst kind of work dramatically corresponded with the Italian reality of the 80s. This adaptation avoids filming any scenes with greeting gestures. And if it so happens that the Roman salute has to be shown, then it always appears in very official situations and is cropped in such a subtle way that it does not catch the attention of the audience.

Polish viewers, not knowing about the metaphorical message of the film, which described partially the contemporary reality of Italy, filled with immigrants, could not fully appreciate the advantages of this production. The poetics of this adaptation, which often referred to the esthetics of Fellini's *Satyricon*, were also incomprehensible for Polish audience⁵. But neither this nor the Iron Curtain separating Poland from the West, which prevented Poles from learning about international politics, was the only reason for the low popularity of the series. To understand the needs and expectations of the Polish viewer, one has to read a few words about the novel itself and its author.

4. See SCODEL & BETTENWORTH, p. 117.

5. See SCODEL & BETTENWORTH, p. 104.

THE NOVEL

The problem with the Polish audience lies in the fact that it has specific expectations regarding adaptations of works by Sienkiewicz, because those occupy a special place in national literature. His historical novels written in the days, when for more than a 100 years, Poland did not exist on the map of Europe, were almost entirely set in the periods during which Poland was a cultural and military power. They presented Poland in times of danger, but only such danger which ended in conquering the enemy and saving the country. The author emphasized that he wrote "to lift the hearts". There was an interesting social component to the way his novels were published. Before they were brought to the reader as a book, they would appear in Polish newspapers broken into chapters. *Quo vadis* was printed in the Warsaw "Gazeta Polska" (1895–96) and in Krakow in "Czas" and "Dziennik Poznański". The premier of the whole book took place in Krakow in 1896.

The most famous work by Sienkiewicz, called *The Trilogy*, is a series of three novels which follow dramatized versions of famous events in Polish history, weaving together fact and fiction. The first one, titled *With Fire and Sword*, chronicles the 17th century Cossack revolt known as the Chmielnicki Uprising. The second book, *The Deluge*, describes the Swedish invasion of Poland. The final novel, *Colonel Wołodyjowski* (*Pan Wołodyjowski*, 1888) depicts Poland's struggle against the Ottoman Empire, invading Poland in 1668-72. The plot of each part follows the same schema of love between two protagonists, who face many obstacles before they come together. In every case the couple overcame all difficulties and their love affair reached a happy ending.

The fate of the characters has been woven into the dramatic events in the history of the Polish Republic of the seventeenth century, which allowed the author to concentrate not only on the issues characteristic for a romantic novella, but also on patriotism and war. Sienkiewicz consciously chose historical events with the most dramatic character to get the desired effect. In an almost hopeless situation, when the fate of the nation seems to be already decided, the meager but patriotically oriented Polish army defeats a mighty enemy. The main protagonist covering himself in glory wins the affections

and the hand of his beloved. The traitors are humiliated and defeated. In this way Sienkiewicz, idealizing historical truth, spreads the cult of heroic sacrifice for the motherland.

The unusual effect of Sienkiewicz's historical novels was due primarily to their message. The plot was usually fairly similar – Poland threatened by an external enemy: *With Fire and Sword* – Ukrainian Cossacks; in *The Deluge* – the Swedes, and in *Colonel Wolodyjowski* – the Turks. However, thanks to the extraordinary valour of the Polish nation, which one of the characters describes as the nation that “especially pleased God, and God himself adorned it”, the enemy was defeated and the country saved. The meaning of this message was quite clear – it was to bring hope, that, as in the past centuries the country managed to get out of trouble, so now also its political non-being is only a temporary misery.

Catholicism as a determinant of national identity is also heavily exposed in these novels. Enemies are always of a different confession: in *With Fire and Sword* – Ukrainian Cossacks are Orthodox; in *The Deluge* – the Swedes are Calvinists, and in *Colonel Wolodyjowski* – the Turks are Muslims. And even if there appears a traitor among Poles, he always turns out to be of a different confession. In *Quo vadis* there are no “true” Catholics, but only because there were no Catholics then, as we understand the term today. The plot on the other hand stays almost the same – Christians threatened by a stronger enemy of a different faith (Gentiles) are victorious through the valour of their spirit. The main representative of this Christian collective, Ligia, bears also the Slavic name Callina, and together with her guardian Ursus comes from a tribe named Lygians, which inhabits areas between two Polish rivers – the Oder and Vistula. Sienkiewicz did not miss this opportunity to emphasize how great the land was, overflowing with milk and honey.

For Poles, *Quo vadis* is largely a metaphor of their own fate – first during the partition, and then in the years of socialism, when the Catholic Church was always the mainstay of the opposition and was instrumental in changing the system to democracy. That is probably also the reason why it took so long to adapt *Quo Vadis* onto the silver screen. Other historical novels (by Sienkiewicz) also struggled with political problems of some sort, but as many of them have already been out-dated, they did

not have to wait so long for an adaptation. The first of those to be filmed were *Krzyżacy* (*Knights of the Teutonic Order*, 1960), directed by Aleksander Ford, in which the Poles defeated an already non-existent Order of Brothers of the German House of Saint Mary in Jerusalem; then *Pan Wołodyjowski* (*Colonel Wołodyjowski*, 1968), directed by Jerzy Hoffmann, in which the negative portrayal of the Tatar horde could not stir any negative emotions. The trouble with *Potop* (*The Deluge*, 1974), directed also by Jerzy Hoffmann, was not brought by the description of the conflict with Sweden in the XVII century, but that the central plot of the book revolves around the protection of the monastery at Jasna Góra, which was always Poland's holiest sanctuary. The adaptation, again by Jerzy Hoffman, of *Ogniem i mieczem* (*With Fire and Sword*, 1999) was still the latest and the most problematic one. Even now the film and the story of conflict between Poland and Ukraine strains the friendship of these eastern European countries.

QUO VADIS 2001

It is no surprise that the Polish film unlike the previous ones exposes all allusions to Poland— the movie mentions several times the Slavic origin of the name “Ligia”, and she herself describes her country. The TV-version of the film starts by showing a map, that marks the boundaries of the Roman Empire, from the river Danube to Rhine, behind which border the warlike tribe of Lygians threatened Rome. Do not forget that the 2001 version of *Quo vadis* was filmed in the last years of pope John Paul II pontificate, who in Poland enjoyed great esteem. So the film also refers to the Pope – in the last scene, when St. Peter turns back on Via Appia and a boy questions him “Quo vadis, Domine?” he responds “to Rome” and the camera shows the modern city of Rome with its characteristic dome of the basilica of St. Peter⁶.

As we can see, some things in the movie have been altered or even added because of the expectations of Polish viewers⁷. A few motifs have also been removed. The film skips entirely chapter 50, in which two rabbis introduce Chilon to Nero and in that way become co-actors in the crimes on

6. Scodel & Bettenworth see this conclusion as an implicit identification of Nero's reign with the communist regime in Poland, so that St. Peter is a symbolic representation of John Paul II. Worth mentioning is the fact that the premiere took place in the Aula of Paul VI, in the presence of John Paul II; see: SCODEL & BETTENWORTH, p. 97; E. KABIESZ, 2001 nr 36, p. 27; 2001, nr 151 p. A1; 2001, nr 178, p. A9.

7. Foreign interpretations suggest the film was made specifically for a catholic Polish viewer. Polish media stressed the same information in the promotional campaign; see: SCODEL & BETTENWORTH, p. 95 e 212; KAŁŻYŃSKI, nr 42, pp. 52-53.

8. Scodel & Bettenworth (p. 19) state that none of the films used that scene. The ideological implications would have been too dangerous.

9. See SCODEL & BETTENWORTH, p. 81.

10. Winkler (p. 105) is right, when he writes that this gesture could never again be perceived as harmless or innocent.

11. Winkler gives many examples of such gladiatorial greetings with weapons in hand, but he underlines that the most important is the way in which the fighters are shown. Kawalerowicz would not use long shots to present a crowd of gladiators outstretching their hands in salute. When after the close-up a camera shows the arena again, all gladiators stand with weapons aligned along their bodies. See: WINKLER, p. 41.

12. Winkler calls it “a variation of the Fascist salute with a standard cinematic one”, so Kawalerowicz follows film tradition but avoids strict analogies between Romans and Nazis. See: WINKLER, p. 172.

Christians⁸. We can also notice that there are no negative comments on the barbarian origin of Lygia and Ursus. In the chapter nr 2 of the novel Petronius is surprised that a barbarian girl answers him “using Homeric verse”. In the film adaptation he only admires such an excellent education in a girl. Scodel & Bettenworth think that “The opposition between pure, simple Lygia and an over-refined Roman had become obsolete in 2001, with post-communist Poland struggling to reconnect to Western Europe. With Polish spectators identifying themselves with Lygia and Ursus, a strong emphasis on their barbaric origin would have been offensive”⁹.

In that period, when Poland was trying to join the European Union stressing cultural differences in such a strong way was undesirable. The film also tries to eliminate any signs of official greetings to – if possible – avoid displaying the infamous fascist hand gesture. If this is not possible, it tries not to show a raised hand, because no matter what way the actor will present it on screen, Poles will always associate this gesture with the fascist *heil!*¹⁰

If the plot of *Quo vadis* requires there to be an official welcome, the director Kawalerowicz in various ways tries to “disguise” the gesture, and replace it – for example the Romans greet their ruler always with applause, and Nero always raises his hand with open fingers, as if he wanted to keep the cheering crowd quiet – like an artist asking them for silence, and not as if he were greeting them. The gladiators appear on the screen for a second and this in such a close-up that one can only guess from the words: *Ave Caesar, morituri te salutant*; that they are saluting. The outstretched hands hold swords or tridents. That further eliminates the negative connotations¹¹.

Throughout the whole film the salute of an imperial envoy is shown only three times, in two of which the saluting emissary is obscured by objects in the foreground. The Roman soldier, who comes to general Plautius, greets him with a raised-arm salute, elbow bent and lower arm and palm held vertically¹². Then he strikes his breast with his fist. In the third case a messenger comes bringing news that Rome is burning, and there one sees the salute. Here the association is clear, but it also may have not been made on purpose. It is interesting, therefore, how the characters behave in the *Quo Vadis* in greeting-scenes. Usually they copy the gesture often used in

other adaptations of Sienkiewicz's historical novels – they put their right hand on their chest near the heart and bow their head. Because the metaphorical message of the book had such a tremendous meaning for Poles, it is quite obvious, that the viewers expected an adaptation, which would follow the plot of the novel to the word. Kawalerowicz repeatedly stressed that his major attempt is to faithfully reproduce the novel. In interviews Kawalerowicz says he was impressed by Sienkiewicz and by the book, but if he had to make a film co-produced with the Americans, they probably would not allow him to faithfully stick to the work. Similarly, press releases state that the director wants to faithfully reflect the moral and philosophical message of the novel¹³. One has therefore expected a film thoroughly saturated with antiquity, because not only Sienkiewicz is regarded as the author who is very familiar with classical literature and culture, but also the director has a reputation as being “the painter of worlds irretrievably lost.”¹⁴

It is important to remember that Sienkiewicz had not only a thorough classical education (translating Horace and Tacitus), but for the purpose of *Quo Vadis* very carefully (though not critically) studied the Roman historians, especially Tacitus. Through knowledge of Roman literature (Martial, Juvenal) he could integrate the fate of his characters in a meticulously recreated daily life of Rome with its usual activities, entertainments, family relationships, social obligations, rituals, beliefs and fashion, etc¹⁵. The entire film centres rather on the nineteenth century idea of the antiquity than the modern state of research. Many scenes carry reminiscence of the images painted by Lawrence Alma Tadema (1836-1912) and Henry Siemiradzki (1842-1902)¹⁶. As a result the movie feels like if it was filmed in an era in which the book was written. It pleased the audience extremely, because they - as Sienkiewicz fans - went to see a cinematographic version of the book. The only disappointed moviegoers were those who, having seen Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (2000), expected a more interesting, modern treatment of the subject.

As one can see, antiquity can be shown in a thousand different ways. It can be used as a clever metaphor – probably not only on film. But films tend to show something more – namely the way, how each era looks at, sees and understands antiquity.

13. See: ZAWIŚLIŃSKI, pp. 104-105; PIETRASIK, nr 35 (2313), pp. 50-51; nr 36 (2314), p. 16; nr 37 (2315), pp. 48-50.

14. Kawalerowicz got this reputation presenting on screen the last moments of moribund civilizations or such lost forever: e.g. ancient Egypt in *Pharaoh*, the end of Napoleonic era in *The Hostage of Europe*, the extinction of Chasid culture in *Austeria*. See: PIETRASIK, nr 35 (2313), pp. 50-51; nr 37 (2315), pp. 48-50.

15. See ŚWIĘTOSŁAWSKA, pp. 297-311.

16. *Quo vadis* also inspired postcards, which were very popular at the turn of XIX and XX century. On them one could see reproduced paintings by famous Polish artists depicting the most important elements of the plot, e.g. Nero singing over burning Rome or Ursus fighting with a bull. Some of the postcards show scenes of high esthetic value, e.g. Eunice kissing Petronius' statue. See: SURZYŃSKA-BŁASZCZAK & B. SOKOŁOWSKA-HURNOWICZ, 2001.

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