

# 'Big' and 'little' Quo Vadis? in the United States, 1913–1916: Using GIS to map rival modes of feature cinema during the transitional era

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This article emanates from a geospatial database of over 600 premieres of the Cines company's *Quo Vadis?* (1913), an eight-reel film distributed by George Kleine, and nearly 250 premieres of the Quo Vadis Film Company's *Quo Vadis?* (1913), a three-reel film of ambiguous origins distributed by Paul De Outo. By mapping local premieres of both films across the United States from 1913 through 1916, the data show with spatiotemporal precision the spread of *Quo Vadis?* as one of cinema's early blockbuster titles. Yet within this national phenomenon, the two films' footprints reveal differing cultural geographies served by competing efforts to feature *Quo Vadis?* using alternative practices of distribution and exhibition. The study finds that *Quo Vadis?* played a more complex role mediating the rise of features than is yet known, serving rival modes of cinema where longer, more expensive films were celebrated but also contested.

**KEYWORDS:** features, variety, roadshows, state rights, transitional era, George Kleine, GIS

The Italian Cines Company's historical and religious epic *Quo Vadis?* (1913) is one of cinema's earliest blockbusters.[1] Its transnational success elevated the profile of Italian films and boosted cinema's reputation for social, moral, and cultural uplift. A lavish production renowned for its spectacular big budget realism and running time of two and a half hours, Cines's film was adapted from Polish author Henryk Sienkiewicz's 1896 novel *Quo Vadis: A Narrative of the Time of Nero*, a global best seller that spawned widespread "quovadisomania." [2]

This article examines the spread of *Quo Vadis?* in the United States, where George Kleine held sole distribution rights to Cines's film. Kleine cultivated a national audience using advance publicity that heralded the eight-reel film's massive scale, authentic settings, and artistic innovations, while touting its unprecedented record of popular and critical success.[3] As the film traveled, it produced a global space that interfaced with countless local experiences of cinema emplaced in diverse assemblages of venues, distributors, exhibitors, programs, and

[1] S. Hall, S. Neale, *Epics, Spectacles, and Blockbusters*, Detroit 2010, pp. 28–34.

[2] M. Woźniak and M. Wyke, *Introduction*, [in:] *The Novel of Neronian Rome and Its Multimedial Trans-*

*formations*, eds. M. Woźniak, M. Wyke, Oxford 2020, p. 5.

[3] J. Frykholm, *George Kleine and American Cinema*, London 2015.

audiences.[4] Intense anticipation for the film propelled it forward, but exclusive distribution practices and costly tickets made its circulation prone to blockages, diversions, and piracy. Some without rights to Cines's film served audiences at lower-priced theaters with other films entitled *Quo Vadis?*, as Ivo Blom found in his work on the Dutch film trade[5] and as I will recount here for a three-reel version released by Paul De Outo (Fig. 1). *Quo Vadis?* offers a prime opportunity to explore what Laura Isabel Serna calls "cinema's multiple interfaces" so as to "uncover more complex stories about cinema's travels, rethink the shape and scope of concepts such as national cinema, and question received notions about the direction of film traffic at any given moment." [6]

Cines's *Quo Vadis?* played a prominent role in the transformation from variety film programs to feature films during American cinema's transitional era from 1908 to 1917.[7] The film benchmarked the public's willingness to pay a premium for long features and helped these become a dominant mode of cinema. But despite its prominence, we know little about the reach of *Quo Vadis?* beyond its presentation at first-class theaters in big cities in 1913.[8] Where, when, and how did it travel across the rest of the country? To answer this question, a geospatial study of *Quo Vadis?* premieres was undertaken, yielding new insights about the film's traffic across the nation. The research also unexpectedly revealed the widespread distribution of a three-reel *Quo Vadis?*, shining light on this film's brazen effort to sell a mini-blockbuster version of the title that bridged features and variety. Unlike Cines's film, which Kleine released through direct booking and branch offices, the short feature was distributed by state rights buyers who bought territorial franchises from Paul De Outo of the Quo Vadis Film Company.[9] De Outo's film was not directly based on Sienkiewicz's novel but instead seems to have been a composite of three older one-reel films, anchored by Milano Film's *The Life of St. Paul* (*San Paolo*, 1910).

To contribute knowledge about the circulation of both films, this article presents initial findings from over 600 hundred premieres of the eight-reel *Quo Vadis?* and nearly 250 premieres of the three-reel *Quo Vadis?* in the United States from 1913 to 1916. Geospatial maps show the national spread of *Quo Vadis?* as a blockbuster title but also reveal dif-

[4] For more on space and place in cinema history, see J. Klenotic, *Mapping flat, deep, and slow*, "TMG Journal for Media History" 2020, vol. 23, no. 1–2, pp. 1–34.

[5] I. Blom, *Jean Desmet and the Early Dutch Film Trade*, Amsterdam 2001, pp. 228–230.

[6] L.I. Serna, *Mapping film traffic*, "Post45" 2021, n.p., <<https://post45.org/2021/04/mapping-film-traffic/>>, accessed: 7.01.2022.

[7] This dating of the transitional era follows C. Keil and S. Stamp (eds.), *American Cinema's Transitional Era*, Berkeley – Los Angeles – London 2004.

[8] J. Frykholm, op.cit., pp. 58–59, 64–65; R. Abel, *Americanizing the Movies and 'Movie Mad' Audiences*, Berkeley – Los Angeles – London 2006, pp. 35–36.

[9] This article examines the U.S., but De Outo's film was franchised internationally. South American rights were sold to Walter McCallum, Colon, Panama, European rights to H. Winnick, London, England, and Australasian rights to George R. Harper, Sydney, Australia. Anonymous, "Quo Vadis?" *State Rights Selling*, "Moving Picture World" [MPW], June 13, 1913, p. 1261.

fering cultural geographies served by competing efforts to feature *Quo Vadis?* using alternative practices of distribution and exhibition. The study concludes that *Quo Vadis?* played a more complex role mediating the rise of features than is yet known, serving rival modes of cinema where longer, more expensive films were celebrated but also contested.

Across the United States, the multiple interfaces for *Quo Vadis?* were often clouded by ambiguity and obfuscation emanating from news items, publicity releases, and advertisements that heightened curiosity about the film and tested one's cultural capital. There was ambiguity about the title, which ended with a question mark as often as not, and which led newspapers to sometimes insert "Whither Goest Thou?" as an English translation.<sup>[10]</sup> This was particularly true for the short film, which also embedded the translation inside the tail of the title's Q in marketing materials. To further complicate matters, the short *Quo Vadis?* was called the "veritas" version, though this claim was rarely explained.<sup>[11]</sup> There was additional confusion about the attributes of *Quo Vadis?*. Did the film begin its run in New York City or Buffalo, New

Why study both films?

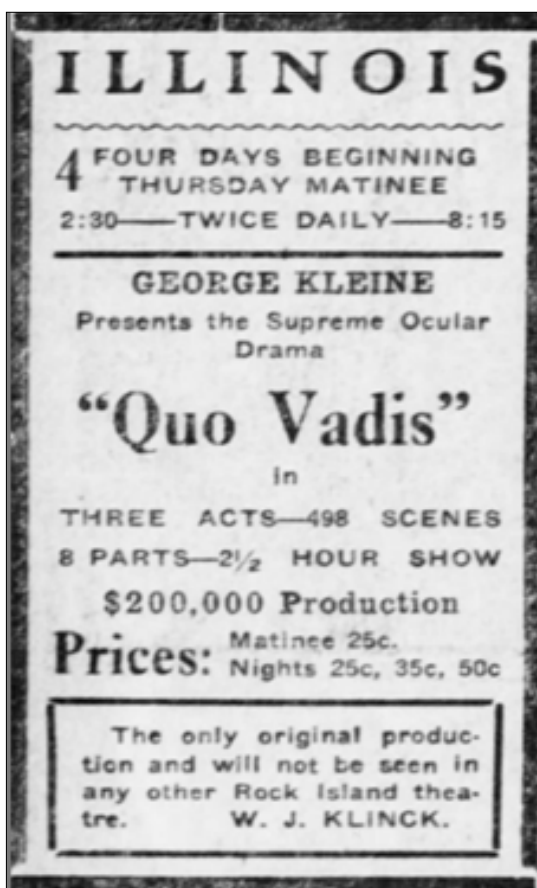


Fig. 1. "Big" and "little" *Quo Vadis?* competed head-to-head in Rock Island, IL. Three weeks later, Kleine sued De Outo for infringement of copyright. "Rock Island Argus", November 7, 1913, p. 10

[10] For examples, see "Muskogee [OK] Times-Democrat", June 2, 1913, p. 8; "Sheboygan [WI] Press", October 16, 1913, p. 9; "Hiawatha [KS] Daily World", October 22, 1913, p. 2.

[11] Anonymous, *The Veritas "Quo Vadis?"*, "MPW", June 7, 1913, p. 1012.

York? Was it 3,000 or 8,000 feet, three or eight reels? Was it in three parts and three acts or three acts and eight parts? Was it 150 or 498 scenes? Was the cast 1,000 or 3,500? Was it made by Cines or Milano? Were tickets more or less than 25 cents? These questions fed dichotomies such as the “big” versus the “little” *Quo Vadis?* and the “real” versus the “fake” or “other” *Quo Vadis?*. Distinguishing the films became a class marker: “As the Kleine production includes eight wonderful reels and is only produced in the high-class theaters of the country [...] the general public have been quick to discriminate between the big and the little ‘Quo Vadis.’ In the big cities of the East, Mr. Kleine’s production was taken up by fashionable society and theatre parties.”[12]

If one approaches *Quo Vadis?* from the top down, such dualities and ambiguities may be irrelevant given that received history has established Cines’s film as the canonical text, partly because of its lineage from Sienkiewicz’s novel. The “fake” film’s connection to the novel is mostly in its title, with any overlaps in events, plotting, and characterization owing more to its intertextuality with Roman history and the Christian Bible than to Sienkiewicz’s story. While the fog around the films can be penetrated to focus only on the “real” *Quo Vadis?*, it also shows that distributors, exhibitors, and audiences construed *Quo Vadis?* in multiple ways, begging a more complex object of study. Indeed, many who attended the three-reel film likely thought they had seen the “real” *Quo Vadis?*, a perception that may not have been “corrected.” In Hopkinsville, Kentucky, the three-reeler was billed as a “great special” that “will appeal to Bible students and to everybody who has read that wonderful book ‘Quo Vadis;’” those who had not done so were advised to “read the book before Monday” when the film screened.[13] Cines’s film never played in Hopkinsville, with its nearly 10,000 residents. Hopkinsville was not alone. The three-reeler premiered in 246 municipalities across 47 U.S. states and the District of Columbia, and in 131 (53.2%) it was the only version to play. In 26 states where the short feature played it was the only option in half or more of that state’s premiere localities. This list was topped by Kansas, where the three-reeler played in 42 municipalities and was the sole offering in 31 (73.8%), and Oklahoma, where it ran alone in 18 of 23 municipalities (78.2%). Inhabitants could travel to see Cines’s film elsewhere, but many may have lacked the knowledge, means, or desire to do so. The “little” *Quo Vadis?* affords valuable evidence of the large audience for small features that existed at a pivotal moment in film history (Fig. 2).

The complexity of *Quo Vadis?* as an object reflects the broader dynamics of cinema’s transitional era. In the early 1910s, as Eileen Bowser has shown, there was pervasive ambiguity about the meaning, value, and length of a “feature” film.[14] Michael Quinn observes that

[12] Anonymous, *Opera House*, “Sheboygan [WI] Press”, September 18, 1913, p. 3.

[13] Anonymous, “*Quo Vadis*” Coming, “Hopkinsville [KY] Kentuckian”, September 6, 1913, p. 8.

[14] E. Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema*, Berkeley – Los Angeles – London 2006, p. 191.

“a two- or even a single-reel film might be described as a feature” if its uniqueness was established by distribution and exhibition practices.<sup>[15]</sup> Three-reelers were particularly prone to straddle the line between features and films released as part of a standard variety program.<sup>[16]</sup> For example, the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC) and its distributor General Film Company (GFC) had enormous stakes in servicing exhibitors with regular single-reel film programs, but by 1912 they “recognized that the market was demanding feature films” and increased production of three-reel films such as Selig’s *The Coming of Columbus* (1912) and Edison’s *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1912).<sup>[17]</sup> Both were “special features” made by MPPC studios, but *Columbus* was released to exhibitors at added expense alongside their regular service, while *Chuzzlewit* was integrated with a standard program of single-reelers as a regular release.<sup>[18]</sup> In October 1913, the MPPC and GFC attempted to bridge the divide between features and regulars with an “exclusive service” offering exhibitors a higher priced program of a two- or three-reel feature and two one-reelers changed three times a week. Though short-lived, the service was a serious attempt “to reconcile program and feature cinema.”<sup>[19]</sup> In 1914, the industry would define a feature as four reels or more<sup>[20]</sup> and three-reelers were grouped with shorts. Nonetheless, as Ben Singer shows, differences in distribution, sales, and moviegoing practices left space where variety and feature programs “both flourished,” with many believing these were “separate and parallel modes of exhibition, each with its own distinct niche.”<sup>[21]</sup> Quinn argues there was a sense that “exhibition would eventually divide into feature theaters and program theaters; one would attract the middle class and the rich, while the other would interest the working class and the poor.”<sup>[22]</sup>

It was in this context that George Kleine and Paul De Outo charted different paths for getting their version of *Quo Vadis?* to exhibitors and audiences who might most appreciate it. Neither could know how the competition would turn out. Studying both films affords a fresh perspective on *Quo Vadis?* that does not “back-project a context onto an object,” as Robert Allen puts it, such that an object is significant only to the extent that it validates what is known about the outcomes of an era.<sup>[23]</sup> Allen invites historians to “suspend judgment” and resist

[15] M. Quinn, *Distribution, the transient audience, and the transition to the feature film*, “Cinema Journal” 2001, vol. 40, no. 2, p. 38.

[16] B. Singer, *Feature films, variety programs, and the crisis of the small exhibitor*, [in:] C. Keil and S. Stamp, op.cit., p. 84.

[17] M. Quinn, op.cit., p. 45.

[18] Ibidem, pp. 45–46; see also E. Bowser, op.cit., p. 203.

[19] M. Quinn, op.cit., p. 47.

[20] M. Rogers, ‘Territory going fast!’ *State right distribution and the early multi-reel feature film*, “Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television” 2017, vol. 37, no. 4, p. 600.

[21] B. Singer, op.cit., p. 84.

[22] M. Quinn, op.cit., p. 45.

[23] R. Maltby, P. Meers, *Connections, Intermediality, and the Anti-Archive: A Conversation with Robert C. Allen*, [in:] *The Routledge Companion to New Cinema History*, eds. D. Biltereyst, R. Maltby, and P. Meers, London – New York 2004, p. 18.

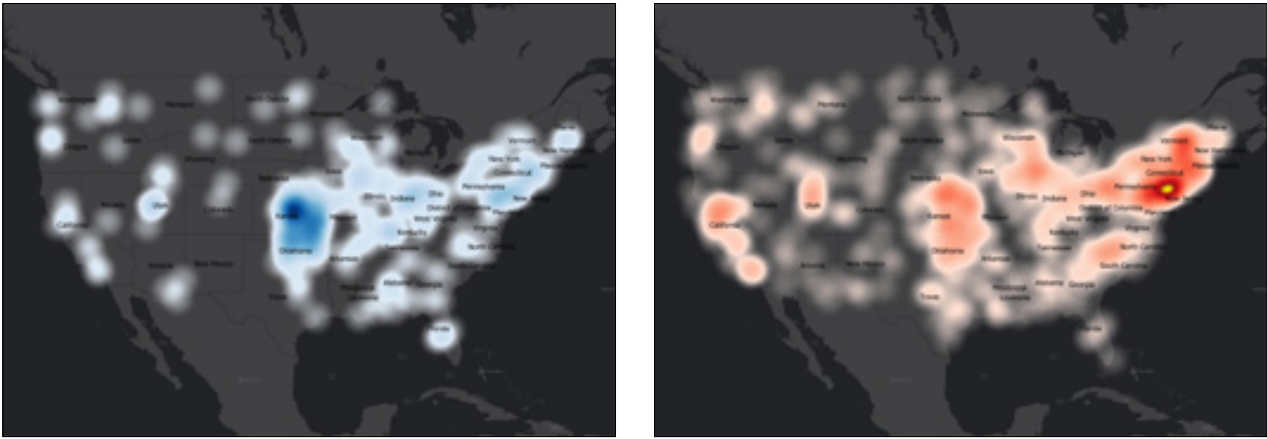


Fig. 2. Heatmaps for “little” (left) and “big” (right) *Quo Vadis?* premieres. The short feature was especially popular in the Midwest and it indexes the large audience for small features in the transitional era. Maps created by author

**“If you owned *Quo Vadis*, what would you do with it?”**

imposing a “teleology of cinema” upon persons, objects, and practices that renders them only as “archaic” phenomenon that “will soon be made obsolete.”[24] Suspending judgment rebalances the dialogue of past and present but also invites a “flat” approach to mapping and spatial history that avoids assumptions about where and when events took place.[25] This approach puts new people, places, and objects on the map of film history, as it seeks *Quo Vadis?* beyond the fashionable audiences and first-class theatres so identified with its success, which in turn moves inquiry beyond 1913.

George Kleine paid \$10,000 for a negative of Cines’s film and exclusive North American distribution rights.[26] *Quo Vadis?* was his first attempt to import a film of this length and expense. Its poor fit for program cinema presented Kleine with challenges, not least navigating a release outside the GFC, which declined to handle it.[27] *Motography* columnist “The Goat Man” lauded the film but questioned its path forward: “Honest now, if you owned *Quo Vadis*, what would you do with it?”[28] Kleine chose to open *Quo Vadis?* in large, high-class, legitimate theaters in major cities beginning in April 1913. There the film won critical acclaim and had major success despite tickets ranging from 25 cents to \$1.50. At New York City’s Astor Theatre, the film ran 154 days; at McVicker’s in Chicago, 54 days; at Philadelphia’s Garrick, 98 days; at Baltimore’s Academy of Music, 63 days; at the Tremont in Boston, 90 days.

Throughout its slow rollout, the film’s publicity tended to “Americanize” *Quo Vadis?* by figuring Kleine as its owner, crediting him for its success, and sometimes erasing any references to Cines[29] and Henryk Sienkiewicz.[30] However, an emergent exigence also precipitated repeated recitation of the film’s European provenance. The exigence

[24] Ibidem.

[25] J. Klenotic, *Mapping flat...*, pp. 16–19.

[26] J. Frykholm, op.cit., p. 47.

[27] Ibidem, p. 49. Frykholm documents that the film was licensed by the MPPC.

[28] The Goat Man, *On the Outside Looking In*, “Motography” vol. 9, no. 7, April 5, 1913, p. 239.

[29] R. Abel, op.cit.; See also, G. Bertellini, *Italian Imageries, Historical Feature Films, and the Fabrication of Italy’s Spectators*, [in:] *American Movie Audiences*, eds. M. Stokes, R. Maltby, London 1999, p. 40.

[30] Sienkiewicz’s work may also have been appropriated by Cines without proper copyright. See A. Miller-Klejsa, *Quo Vadis? by Enrico Guazzoni and*

stemmed from Kleine's decision to release the film without state rights distribution and his need to protect copyrighted marketing materials from being illicitly usurped by distributors and exhibitors. From the start, trade and local newspapers notified distributors, exhibitors, and the public that "George Kleine, proprietor and manager of the sensational photodrama success, 'Quo Vadis?' made by the famous Cines company of Italy, positively refuses to sell state rights. [...] The Cines production comprehends the entire Sienkiewicz story." [31] In this context, European provenance authenticated Kleine's show against imposters and dissociated it from state rights, which had gained some disrepute for distributing sensationalistic films. [32] Kleine's marketing was itself so effective he feared it would be co-opted. To stifle this, he leaned on provenance, noting that since "his immense success with the Cines production of 'Quo Vadis?' there have been several minor attractions started that have taken advantage of his advertising and press notices [...] misleading the public into the belief that they are presenting the original Astor theater production." [33]

Avoiding state rights removed regional intermediaries and gave Kleine central control over the terms of film rental and national release. Kleine would roadshow *Quo Vadis?* and book it only through agents Cohan and Harris for a percentage of the box office rather than flat fees. Fusing exhibition with distribution, this strategy ensured the film played in high-class venues. It also put conditions on the film, such as reserved seating and minimum 25-cent tickets, and on its presentation and promotion, with roadshow companies "carrying 326 pieces" [34] supplying screen, booth, two projectors, [35] films, and special music, all supported by Kleine's marketing collateral. By August 1913, there were "two companies operating in the South, two in New England, two in the Middle West, three in New York city [sic], one in Brooklyn, one in Philadelphia, one in Boston, three in Chicago, two in New Jersey, making in all 19 companies." [36] However, as Joel Frykholm has shown, roadshows presented challenges, particularly outside urban areas. There the ideal of booking the film in first-class theaters for a percentage of receipts might succumb to dependence on lesser venues, many wanting flat fees. [37] In January 1914, Kleine ended his roadshows, "having lost much money in some instances and made a lot in others." [38] Instead, "thirteen branch offices for the handling of 'Quo Vadis?'" were opened in February. [39]

*Quo Vadis?* by Gabriellino D'Annunzio, "Panoptikum" 2017, no. 18(25), p. 250.

[31] Anonymous, *News of Photoplays*, "Lancaster [PA] Intelligencer Journal", July 12, 1913, p. 8.

[32] S. Hall, S. Neale, op.cit., p. 29.

[33] Anonymous, *Kleine After Pirates*, "Buffalo [NY] Sunday Morning News", October 19, 1913, p. 27.

[34] Anonymous, *Film Play at Detroit Opera House*, "Detroit [MI] Free Press", August 7, 1913, p. 5.

[35] "Moving Picture News", May 10, 1913, p. 40.

[36] Anonymous, "Quo Vadis", "Anaconda [MT] Standard", July 13, 1913, p. 33.

[37] J. Frykholm, op.cit., p. 62.

[38] Anonymous, *Controlling Kleine's Special*, "Variety", January 23, 1914, p. 15.

[39] Anonymous, *Kleine Positives*, "New York Clipper", January 24, 1914, p. 14.

Kleine perceived state rights as a threat to the profits and reputation of his first-class enterprise, but the reality was more complex. As detailed by Maureen Rogers, state rights gave franchisees rights to roadshow a film or book it at venues within a designated territory, a system of regional release that played a vital role in the circulation of feature films of varying levels of prestige including boxing pictures, expedition documentaries, historical reenactment films, and European imports.[40] What such films shared was that their unusual length, subject matter, and/or production history did not fit the standard distribution and exhibition model for variety programs. Instead, they required custom releases with special promotion and potentially extended runs and advanced prices. Kleine well knew the advantages of state rights for features. In 1909, he used the system to distribute the four-reel *Johnson-Ketchel Fight* (1909) for the MPPC (franchisees were limited to MPPC-licensed exchanges).[41] He also witnessed Monopol's success distributing European features like Milano's *Dante's Inferno* (1911) and *Homer's Odyssey* (1912) via state rights.[42] According to Rogers, "Monopol effectively launched the trend of releasing European feature-length epics on a regional basis to small towns and large cities and at opera houses and other prime venues" at premium prices and set the model for using grand "details of the film's production and cost as promotional ballyhoo." [43]

Kleine's demonization of state rights and exclusion of regional buyers was self-serving given that his plan for *Quo Vadis?* owed a debt to the system's innovations for promoting and releasing features. Abel argues that the state rights success of Ambrosio's *Satan* (*Satana* 1912), in particular, "set a precedent" for Kleine's handling of Cines's film.[44] Frykholm suggests that *Paul J. Rainey's African Hunt* (Jungle Film Co., 1912), a state rights release with a sixteen-week run at the Lyceum Theatre in New York City, was another influence.[45] If Kleine worried profits would be siphoned by state rights operators imitating his success in places beyond his purview, those operators likely felt the reverse was true. Some may have found his release of *Quo Vadis?* outside the GFC a bitter pill, seeing his roadshows and branch offices as territory encroachments that disenfranchised them from a share of feature cinema's greatest opportunity to date. When Paul De Outo announced the sale of state rights for *Quo Vadis?*, he spoke to the heart of this sentiment, asking, "State right operators, can't you see the possibilities of this film?" and urging buyers not to "let the biggest money-maker in the history of motion pictures slip through your fingers." [46] He declared *Quo Vadis?*

[40] M. Rogers, op.cit., p. 599.

[41] D. Streible, *Fight Pictures*, Berkeley – Los Angeles – London 2008, pp. 210–211.

[42] R. De Berti, *Milano Films*, "Film History" 2000, vol. 12, no. 1, pp. 279–281; see also, K. Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment: America in the World Film Market, 1907–1934*, London 1985, p. 26.

[43] M. Rogers, op.cit., pp. 604, 605.

[44] R. Abel, op.cit., p. 35.

[45] J. Frykholm, op.cit., p. 48.

[46] Anonymous, Advertisement, "MPW", June 21, 1913, pp. 1212–1213.



“the people’s greatest possession”[47] and the “chance of a life time for state right operators” (Fig. 3), who would “have no competition” in their territory.[48]



De Outo’s epiphany must have been that Kleine’s adoption of state rights promotional practices on a national basis, combined with his avoidance of state rights release practices on a regional basis, would produce vacuums of anticipation and unmet demand. These could be filled by state rights buyers, who might serve moving picture theaters excluded by Kleine with a well-advertised three-reel special that could be combined with another short feature or a program of regular films or live acts. But state rights buyers needed their own *Quo Vadis?*, a problem solved June 12, 1913 when De Outo’s Quo Vadis Film Company of New York[49] received copyright on title, description, and “43 prints received” for one “small reel” identified as “Quo vadis” in the copyright catalog.[50] This enabled sale of the film as “copyrighted and fully protected” to state rights franchisees.[51] De Outo’s film had no producer attached to it, which differed from the entry that recorded Kleine’s copyright on title, description, and “498 prints received” for “Quo vadis: by Societa Italiana Cines.”[52] The number of prints indexed the

Fig. 3. De Outo’s *Quo Vadis?* had elaborate pictorial and publicity equipment that created new novelty from old films. “Moving Picture World”, June 7, 1913, pp. 990-991

[47] *Veritas* “*Quo Vadis?*”, op.cit.

[48] Anonymous, Advertisement, “MPW”, June 28, 1913, pp. 1320-1321.

[49] Like Kleine, De Outo was based in Chicago, Illinois. He had state rights for *Quo Vadis?* in Illinois and Wisconsin.

[50] Library of Congress, *Catalog of Copyright Entries, Part 4*, vol. 8, no. 4, Washington 1913, p. 280.

[51] Anonymous, Advertisement, “MPW”, June 28, 1913, pp. 1320-1321.

[52] Library of Congress, op.cit., p. 147.

requirement that “one print taken from each scene or act of the picture” be deposited with the Copyright Office.[53] For Kleine, the number matched claims that Cines’s film had 498 scenes. De Outo’s film was said to have “three reels and three parts and over 150 stupendous scenes,”[54] suggesting copyrights for all three reels were not sought or not granted.

De Outo’s *Quo Vadis?* is unstudied and may not survive,[55] but evidence suggests it was partly comprised by Milano’s three-part one-reeler *The Life of St. Paul* (1910). Press matter for De Outo’s film stated that “the famous story of St. Paul, who was converted from a persecutor of the Christians into an apostle, is part of the picture-drama,”[56] and a playbill shows the focus is on “Saul (Hebrew for Paul) an enemy of the Christians but later a disciple of Christ” from his role in the stoning of St. Stephen in 33 A.D. to the burning of Rome in 64 A.D.[57] The film’s advertising highlighted key scenes with captioned photos,[58] some taken from *The Life of St. Paul* (1910). For example, Harriet Harrison and Nicola Mazzanti have matched De Outo’s photo “The Beheading of St. Paul” to a scene in *St. Paul* where Paul is met by a centurion and executioner and pushed to the ground.[59] Similarly, the photo for “The Burning of Rome” (Fig. 3) is a double exposure image of Paul and some Christians hiding near a column as Rome burns that looks repurposed from *St. Paul*.<sup>[60]</sup> There is also very close correspondence between De Outo’s photos and detailed scene descriptions of *St. Paul* provided by Joseph North, who argues more broadly that Milano’s film “sets the template for the treatment of Paul in subsequent films like *Quo Vadis*.”<sup>[61]</sup> De Outo obliquely made this same point in his press matter, claiming the three-reel *Quo Vadis?* was “the genuine, original, imported film as produced by the Milano Film Co.,” but he never revealed his active role in “converting” *The Life of St. Paul* into *Quo Vadis?*.<sup>[62]</sup>

While there is evidence that one reel of “little” *Quo Vadis?* was in part or whole *The Life of St. Paul*, the other reels are unknown. Did De Outo cut *St. Paul* with footage from other films to reach three reels, extending creative practices to the distributor? Or did he ship *St. Paul*

[53] M.H. Aronson, *Motion Picture Copyright*, “Washington University Law Quarterly” 1940, vol. 25, no. 4, p. 559, <available at: [https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/law\\_lawreview/vol25/iss4/8](https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/law_lawreview/vol25/iss4/8)>, accessed: 29.01.2022.

[54] B. Calvert, *The Silent Film Still Archive*, Film playbill from Grand Theatre, September 16–17, 1913, <[https://www.silentfilmstillarchive.com/quo\\_vadis.htm](https://www.silentfilmstillarchive.com/quo_vadis.htm)>, accessed: 31.01.2022.

[55] A rival version is briefly mentioned in J.A. North, *Martyrs on the Silver Screen*, Durham 2016, p. 114, which cites H. Harrison and N. Mazzanti, *La Collezione George Kleine alla Library of Congress*, [in:] *Sperduti Nel Buio: Il Cinema Muto Italiano e il suo Tempo (1905–1930)*, ed. R. Renzi, Bologna 1991, p. 165.

[56] Anonymous, “*Quo Vadis*” in *Films*, “La Crosse [WI] Tribune”, September 9, 1913, p. 5.

[57] B. Calvert, op.cit.

[58] For examples: Ibidem; “Dayton [OH] Herald”, August 2, 1913, p. 8; “The Reporter Times” [Martinsville, IN], September 23, 1913, p. 3; “MPW”, June 28, 1913, pp. 1320–1321.

[59] H. Harrison, N. Mazzanti, op.cit., as cited in J.A. North, op.cit., p. 114.

[60] The “Burning of Rome” is at B. Calvert, op.cit. The Milano image is at: <<https://betweenmovies.com/movie/the-life-of-st-paul-1910/>>, accessed: 3.04.2021.

[61] J.A. North, op.cit., pp. 113–116, 105.

[62] Anonymous, *Pastime Theatre*, “Sheboygan [WI] Press”, October 8, 1913, p. 3.

with two more one-reelers, enabling exhibitors to arrange the reels? Whatever the case, the film would have been a hybrid text reflecting what Blom describes as a broader tendency of “three-reelers of the early teens [...] to reproduce on a textual level the old variety format that dominated the screen practice before the introduction of the feature.”[63] But De Outo’s three-reeler was different in that its text was a composite anchored by at least one quite old film. Also, despite this, it was heavily promoted as a newly minted feature with “eighteen different styles of photos for lobby displays, assorted cuts of all sizes, eight-page illustrated herald, and complete publicity equipment.”[64] Paul Moore’s work on the secondhand film market gives a useful context for understanding De Outo’s practices. Moore defines secondhand films as “durable cultural goods whose value outlived their novelty,” calling them the “opposite of first run” and arguing that by 1908 the value of first run had shifted from “quality assurance of having a newly manufactured film print” to the “novelty of a newly released picture, never before seen, by *any* audience.”[65] How De Outo’s acquired the materials used to fabricate and franchise *Quo Vadis?* remains unknown (did he have a *St. Paul* negative, a cache of prints?), but it is clear that by early June he had manufactured new novelty from old films and was tapping the big-city, first-run energy of *Quo Vadis?* to sell state rights in places where the film could be premiered as “new to you” if not “never before seen” or “never before played.” Some exhibitors may well have booked the film under false pretenses, but others surely knew what they were doing and believed the film would nonetheless meet their audiences’ expectations, especially if *St. Paul* and its adjoining reels had not been shown locally. Moreover, for those new to the book or passionate about it, perhaps even old images could be revived by a fresh reading of a literary classic.

Occasionally, exhibitors who felt literally or figuratively duped alerted audiences that the “real” *Quo Vadis?* was not coming and canceled shows, as in Coshocton, Ohio where the Mystic Theatre’s manager explained “this is done because of it being an imitation of other pictures that have been shown recently.”[66] There were also rare cases where moviegoers themselves raised red flags. In Trenton, New Jersey, C.F. Edwards wrote a letter to the newspaper complaining about a “curtailed” version of what he thought was George Kleine’s *Quo Vadis?* presented at the Trent Theatre. Edwards reported that the missing time was partly filled by *The Girl and the Gangster* (1913), a two-reel Kalem picture.[67] Kleine’s representative Arthur Ward responded that Kleine’s

[63] I. Blom, *Take a closer look! Italian early cinema reconsidered*, “Fotogenia” 1999, no. 4, p. 292.

[64] Anonymous, Advertisement, “MPW”, June 28, 1913, pp. 1320–1321.

[65] P.S. Moore, “Bought, sold, exchanged and rented”: *The early film exchange and the market in secondhand films in New York Clipper classified ads*, “Film History” 2019, vol. 31, no. 2, pp. 5, 22.

[66] Anonymous, *Mystic Cancels “Quo Vadis”*, “The Tribune” [Coshocton, OH], July 18, 1913, p. 7.

[67] C.F. Edwards, *Says “Quo Vadis” is Much Curtailed*, “Trenton [NJ] Evening Times”, September 13, 1913, p. 9.

film had not yet played in Trenton and “under no circumstances will he permit ‘Quo Vadis’ to be abridged or curtailed for the sake of extra performances.” He added that the matter was “in the hands of our attorneys” but “the promoters of the three-reel ‘Quo Vadis’ never make any direct statements for which they can be held, but rather confine themselves to receiving the public, and misleading them by inference more than fact.”[68]

Most often, exhibitors who felt they had booked the wrong film simply reframed its value proposition. After advertising a film said to be made at the “Cines photoplay plant in Rome,”[69] the Modjeska in Augusta, Georgia pivoted to acknowledge that “the three-reel adaptation of ‘Quo Vadis’ which is being shown at the Modjeska is not the eight-reel film [...] but it is truly a grand production of the masterpiece of Sienkiewicz. ... From the mass of detail from the book, the motion picture presenters have selected the story condensing it into the three reels without losing the gist of the story” (Fig. 4).[70] The Lyric in Elwood, Indiana was even more unabashed: “Patrons that don’t care to strain their eyes for 2½ hours, and strain pocketbook for a big price, can see “Quo Vadis” here for 5c and 10c. Your money refunded any time we show you a fake picture. You will see the same picture here, only difference is the price and length of time”.[71]

To sweeten the deal, exhibitors typically programmed “little” *Quo Vadis?* with live acts and/or other films. The film was seen as “admirably adapted to a programme of vaudeville.”[72] The National Theatre in Dayton, Ohio ran it four days in August 1913 with the vaudevillians Three Kings and Zelma.[73] When the film ran with other films, programs were four to eight reels with added reels coming from all points on the compass – GFC, independent, state rights, and old films. In April 1914, the White Way Theatre in Fredonia, Kansas showed “‘Quo Vadis’ and John Bunny,” the latter in Vitagraph’s *Those Troublesome Tresses* (1913) released by GFC almost a year earlier.[74] In June 1914, the New Theatre in Junction City, Kansas played *Quo Vadis?* with films released in March and April, advertising that “in addition to this feature picture there will be three other reels from the General Film Co.,” Pathé’s *Abide With Me* (1914), Edison’s *His Comrade’s Wife* (1914), and Vitagraph’s *Woman in Black* (1914).[75] In Greenfield, Indiana *Quo Vadis?* paired with Victor’s two-reel film *The Law’s Decree* (1914), independently released by Universal in February 1914; both films played at the Why Not

[68] A. Warde, “*Quo Vadis*” *Folk Reply to Edwards*, “Trenton [NJ] Evening Times”, September 19, 1913, p. 10.

[69] Anonymous, “*Quo Vadis?*” *to be Seen at the Modjeska*, “Augusta [GA] Herald”, June 29, 1913, p. 2.

[70] Anonymous, “*Quo Vadis?*” *at Modjeska*, “Augusta [GA] Herald”, June 30, 1913, p. 3.

[71] Anonymous, “*Quo Vadis*” *at the Lyric*, “The Call-Leader” [Elwood, IN], September 22, 1913, p. 4.

[72] Anonymous, *Academy* – “*Quo Vadis*”, “Buffalo [NY] Courier”, July 29, 1913, p. 8.

[73] Anonymous, *National Theatre*, “Dayton [OH] Herald” August 2, 1913, p. 9.

[74] Anonymous, “*Quo Vadis*” *and John Bunny*, “Fredonia [KS] Daily Herald”, April 3, 1914, p. 2.

[75] Anonymous, *At the New Theatre*, “Junction City [KS] Daily Union”, June 2, 1914, p. 3.



Theatre two months later.[76] Universal also distributed Frontier's *The Girl and The Bandit* (1913) and Éclair's *Oh! What a Dream* (1913), two one-reelers released in November 1913 that joined *Quo Vadis?* to start the new year at the Peoples Theater in Calumet, Michigan.[77] *Quo Vadis?* was also programmed with independent releases from Mutual, as when the Davis Theater in Norwich, Connecticut ran it in August 1913 with newly minted pictures from Broncho, *A Wartime Mother's Sacrifice* (1913), Thanouser, *Proposal by Proxy* (1913), and Keystone, *Cohen's Outing* (1913).[78] During summer 1913, *Quo Vadis?* had great success on the west coast paired with another state rights feature, W.J. Stroud's *Wildest America* (1913), a three-reel scenic natural history film. This double feature had multi-week runs in San Francisco, Sacramento, Long Beach, and Los Angeles (where it was said 20,000 people saw it[79]) before moving on to Oregon, Washington, and Arizona. Both films were often accompanied by music as well as by a film lecturer.[80]

My research on "little" *Quo Vadis?* is ongoing, but to whatever degree the film had any original production practices, its uniqueness and "newness" as a feature seem wholly a product of its distribution and exhibition practices. One measure of the success of those practic-

Fig. 4. Some exhibitors expecting Cines's film pivoted to extol the "little" film's condensed treatment of the novel. "Augusta Herald"; June 29, 1913, p. 3

Mapping rival modes of feature cinema

[76] Anonymous, *Why Not Theatre Tonight*, "Daily Reporter" [Greenfield, IN], April 6, 1914, p. 4.

[77] Anonymous, *The Peoples Theatre*, "Calumet [MI] News", December 30, 1913, p. 7.

[78] Anonymous, *Davis Theater*, "Norwich [CT] Bulletin", August 16, 1913, p. 16.

[79] Anonymous, *Bentley Grand Theatre*, "Long Beach [CA] Press", September 1, 1913, p. 6.

[80] For example: Anonymous, *Auditorium*, "Los Angeles [CA] Evening Express", August 11, 1913, p. 15; Anonymous, "*Quo Vadis*" at *Eugene Theatre*, "Morning Register" [Eugene, OR], August 27, 1913, p. 8.

es would be their ability to generate interest in the film sufficient to launch new premieres over time. The same was true for the “big” *Quo Vadis?*, though its feature status was established not only by its mode of distribution and exhibition but also by unprecedented production practices. The relative success of both models of feature cinema can be shown through a geospatial mapping of the two films’ local openings across the United States.

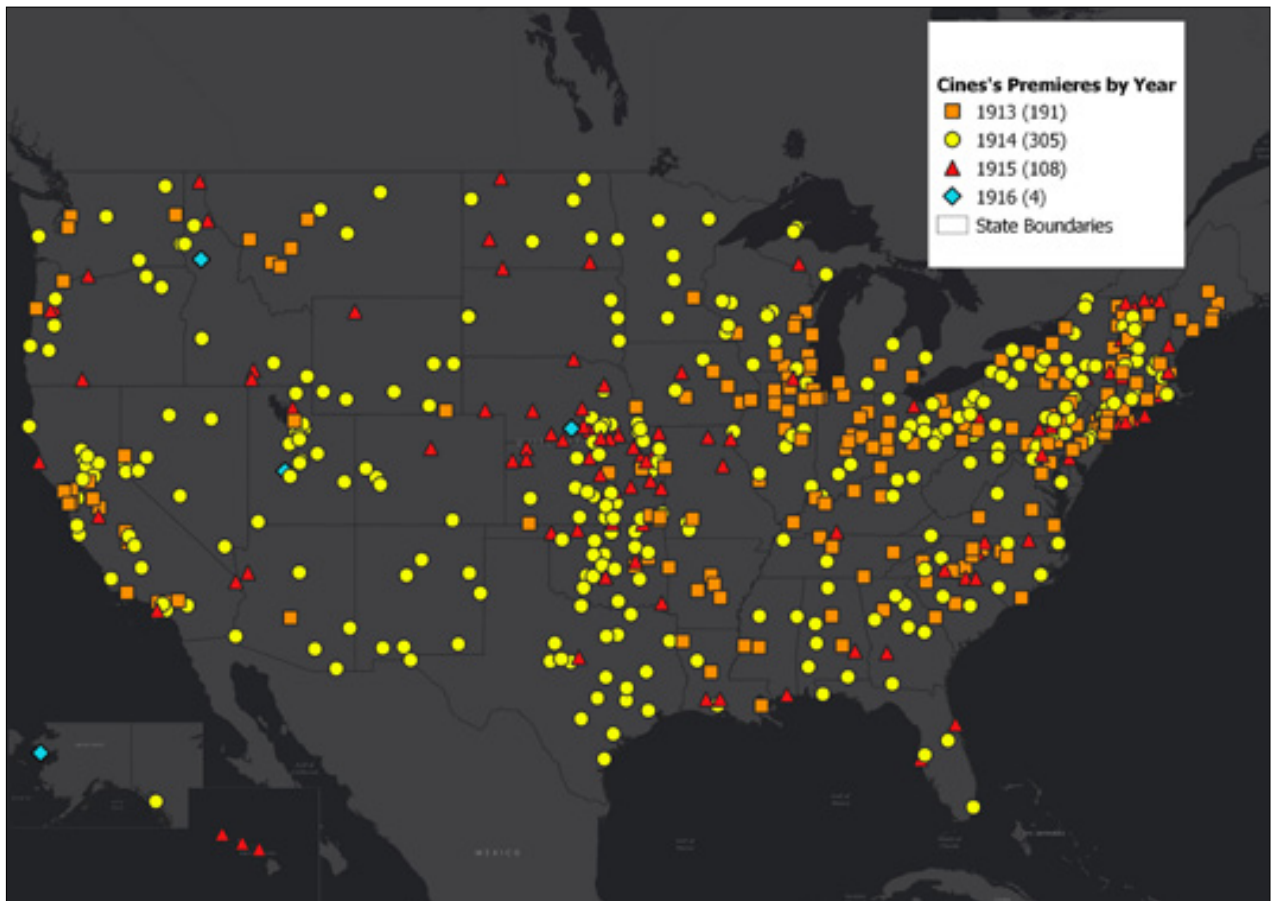
Figure five displays 608 municipalities where Cines’s *Quo Vadis?* premiered, ranging from its 154-day run at the Astor in New York City beginning April 21, 1913, to its two-day showing starting November 30, 1916, at the Gem Theatre in Minden, Nebraska. Information on premieres was culled primarily from Newspapers.com, a database of historical newspapers from across the United States. Data collection began in January 2021 with a search of “Quo Vadis” in U.S. newspapers from 1913 to 1916 that returned 9,926 results. I vetted these results manually to remove those irrelevant to the film. To capture the film as a spreadable phenomenon, I recorded only its first appearance in a municipality, a privileged moment for publicity and news. The municipality’s name and location were captured along with the premiere date and length of run. To offset geographic gaps in Newspapers.com’s collection, additional sources were incorporated, including the Library of Congress’s “Chronicling America” website, the NewspaperArchive.com website, and state- and locality-specific websites spanning eleven states.<sup>[81]</sup>

In June 1913, newspapers showed that there were two main versions of the film. The marketing concept used for each film enabled tracking of their respective premieres. De Outo’s *Quo Vadis?* was routinely placed in small moving picture theatres and priced between 5 and 20 cents as compared to the larger venues, where a 25-cent minimum was usually required to see Cines’s film (after 1913, prices fell below 25 cents in some places). In its product and promotion, De Outo’s film was three reels and three parts or three acts (not eight reels, three acts, and eight parts) and it was uniquely tagged as “the story of the Christian martyrs from the crucifixion of Christ to the death of Nero”. Its publicity matter and photos, when used, were highly consistent across municipalities. Figure six shows 246 premieres of the three-reel film from its seven-day run at the Globe Theatre in Buffalo, New York starting June 16, 1913, to its one-day show at Gibson Opera House in Glasgow, Montana on August 27, 1916.

To measure the reach of *Quo Vadis?*, municipalities where the films played would ideally be compared to an exhaustive list of U.S. municipalities where moving pictures were shown. The closest such list

[81] Data on premieres is provisional, as information from newspapers continues to be added from ever-expanding online archives in an effort to broaden and continually clean the database. The author’s website records up-to-date

data at: <<http://mappingmovies.unh.edu/maps/erma.html#x=-106.61133&y=35.38905&z=4&layers=14256+14257>>.



may be one “The Billboard” magazine published over multiple issues starting in December 1910.[82] The precise number and locations of venues would have changed by 1913 and onward, but the list affords a loose context against which to measure the footprint of *Quo Vadis?*. When georeferenced, the list produces a map of 2,543 municipalities that showed movies.[83] The two *Quo Vadis?* films played in 854 municipalities total but overlapped in 115 places (13.4%), leaving a footprint of 739 municipalities (29% of “Billboard’s” list) where at least one played. Of all the municipalities showing movies, Cines’s 608 premieres reached 23.9% and the three-reeler’s 246 premieres reached 9.7%.

The 14.2% difference in the two films’ reach reflects differing capacities to generate new premieres over time. In 1913, the films premiered in nearly the same number of places, the long version in 191 municipalities and the shorter film in 180. National roadshows ensured first-class venues and expensive tickets for Cines’s film but left voids filled by regional franchisees of De Outo’s film. In February 1914, Kleine’s branch offices opened and spatial advantages from state rights began to expire. Three-reel premieres fell nearly 70% to 56 that year,

Fig. 5. Cines’s premieres grew sixty percent in 1914 after Kleine’s branch offices opened. Map created by author

[82] Anonymous, *Motion Picture Theatres*, “The Billboard”, December 10, pp. 92–108; Anonymous, *Moving Picture Theatre List*, “The Billboard”, December 17, 1910, pp. 46–47; December 31, 1910, pp. 46–47, 51; January 7, 1911, pp. 46–47; February 11, 1911, pp. 44–45.

[83] J. Klenotic, *US Picture Theatres in 1910*, “ERMA Mapping Movies” 2013, <<http://mapping-movies.unh.edu/maps/erma.html#x=-100.07996&y=35.80890&z=5&layers=13837+13840>>, accessed: 7.10.2022.

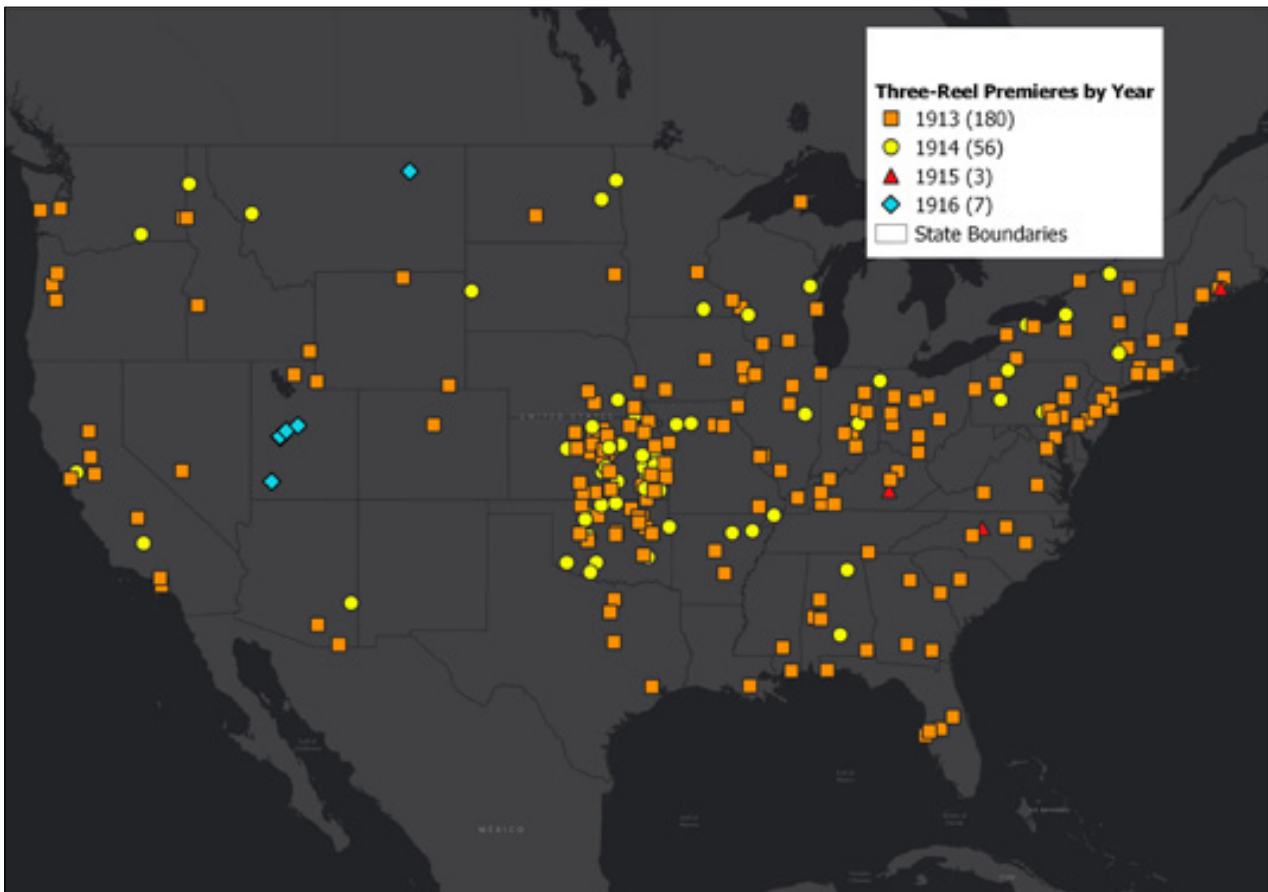


Fig. 6. De Outo's film filled voids created by roadshows in 1913, but Kleine's branch exchanges and lawsuit slowed new premieres by nearly 70% in 1914. Map created by author

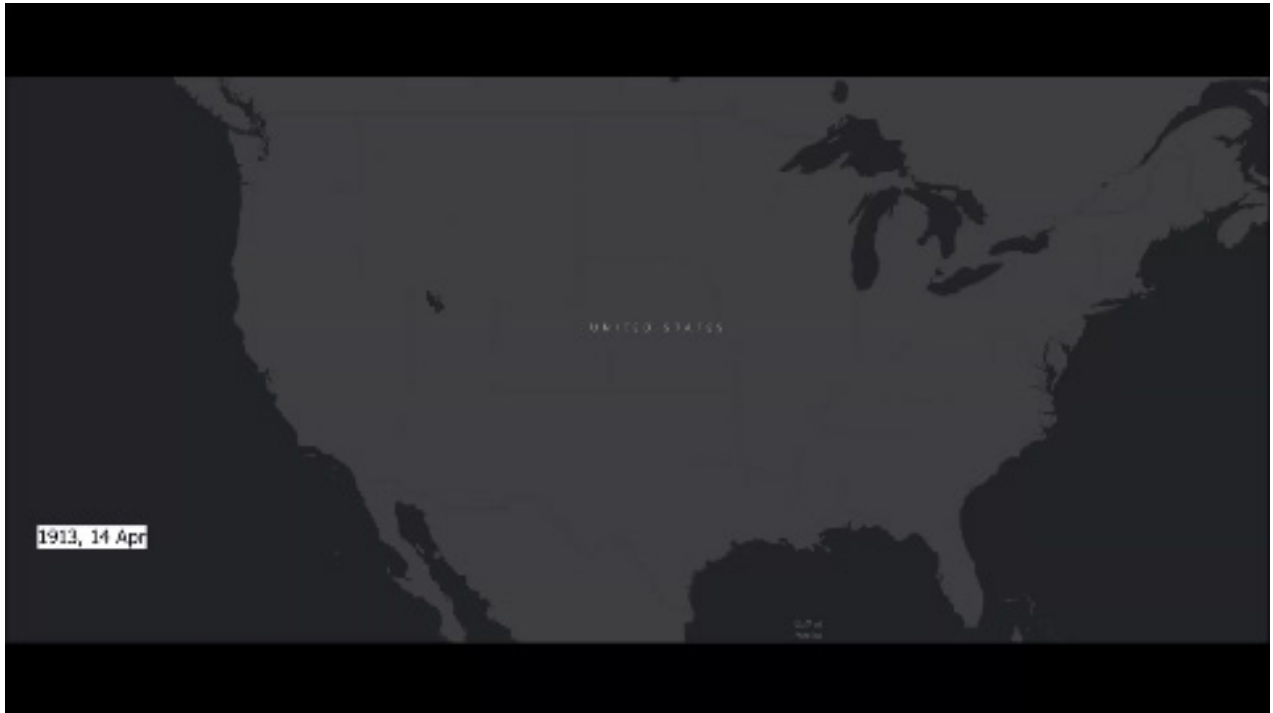
while Cines's film exploded to 305 new municipalities. Another reason for the drop may have been a lawsuit Kleine filed against De Outo in late November 1913 that was eventually served in mid-December.<sup>[84]</sup> The suit alleged infringement of Kleine's copyrights. This challenged De Outo's claims that his film was "copyrighted and fully protected" and chilled the efforts of franchisees to use his publicity matter to freshen the product. By 1915, the long version still generated sufficient interest to reach 108 new municipalities, but the short version added just three. In 1916, Cines's film also tapped out, reaching only four new municipalities. The films' different expiration rates are also seen in their run lengths. Among "little" *Quo Vadis?* premieres, 68.2% were one-day, 20.3% two-day, 7.7% three-day, 2.8% four-to-seven days, and <1% twelve-to-fourteen days. For "big" *Quo Vadis?* premieres, 49% were one-day, 22.5% two-day, 13.8% three-day, 10% four-to-seven days, 2.1% eight-to-fourteen days, and 2.5% were for 21 to 154 days.

The ways in which the two films competed spatially using rival modes of distribution and exhibition are more evident when data are animated (Fig. 7). Through 1913, the "little" feature countered the "big" one, filling vacuums created by national roadshows and fueled by advance publicity. The three-reeler played every state except Alaska, Hawaii, and West Virginia. It had abundant bookings in small cities

[84] Anonymous, *Kleine Prosecuting*, "MPW", January 3, 1914, p. 32.



and towns, especially in the Midwest and Bible Belt south, with intense traffic in Kansas and Oklahoma. Facing Kleine's lawsuit and branch offices in 1914, its travels slowed steadily as premieres fell from seventeen in January, to ten in February, five in March, and two in August, after which it opened only sporadically.



Cines's *Quo Vadis?* earned profuse praise and its popularity created “a new moving picture public [of] people who are not in the habit of attending the movies”, as an exhibitor in Hammond, Indiana observed.[85] But there was praise and popularity for the “other” *Quo Vadis?* as well. In Omaha, Nebraska, where the two films competed directly, it was called “the greatest three-reel motion picture ever produced” and played continuously from 10 AM to 11 PM for three days with all seats ten cents.[86] Omaha's newspaper stated, “Quo Vadis' [...] in its entirety is given at the Boyd and in abbreviated form it is given at the Hipp. Nero, ancient Rome and the martyred Christians are shown in both of them. It all depends on how much time you want to give, and how much money you want to spend.”[87] In Lima, Ohio, the “little” film was billed as not “a long and tiresome production. Three reels of this production will tell you more than three reels of the 8 production [sic]. Two thousand people pleased the first day.”[88]

Fig. 7. “Little” + and “big” ● *Quo Vadis?* competed fiercely until Kleine's branch offices and lawsuit slowed the former down in 1914 (the short film did not play in Alaska or Hawaii, which are not shown). Map created by author. Click map to play animation or view it online at <<http://mappingmovies.com/quo-vadis-premieres>>.

[85] Anonymous, “*Third Degree*’ Good”, “Lake County Times” [Hammond, IN], October 6, 1913, p. 5.

[86] Anonymous, *HIPP*, “Omaha [NE] Daily News”, August 11, 1913, p. 24.

[87] Anonymous, “*Quo Vadis*” is at Two Theatres”, “Omaha [NE] Daily News”, August 11, 1913, p. 3.

[88] Anonymous, “*Quo Vadis*”, “Lima [OH] Morning Star and Republican-Gazette”, September 2, 1913, p. 3.

## Conclusion

This study confirms much that is known about Cines's *Quo Vadis?* but adds new spatial data on the film's traffic, which directs attention to the importance of its travels *after* 1913, when branch offices replaced roadshows and premieres more than doubled. In 1921, notices about the release of a re-edited, six-reel version of the film claimed the original grossed \$1,500,000 from roadshows and \$750,000 from branch exchanges.<sup>[89]</sup> These were likely hyperbolic estimates, but their implication that roadshows were key to the film's success parallels received notions of its historical significance. Geospatial maps of the film's premieres, however, suggest that its import for distribution and the shift to long features was equally earned, or more so, in 1914–1915, when it had enduring drawing power in diverse geographical markets without need of pre-assembled roadshow packages or regional state rights intermediaries.

But those intermediaries did not go down easily, as shown by this study's discovery of the expansive distribution of a competing film through mid-1914. "Little" *Quo Vadis?* was a compendium of scenes anchored by an old film that gained new novelty via a cunning marketing campaign which enabled exhibitors to feature the film in diverse programs as a condensed epic. It offered an inexpensive, flexible bridge between features and variety that gave state rights buyers and program-minded exhibitors a chance to share in "quovadisomania." Geospatial analysis puts Kansas and Oklahoma on the map of cinema history as areas of magnitude for the "other" *Quo Vadis?*, but the film's reach was widespread. Its success invites further research not only on the dynamics of copyright, piracy, and shadow economies<sup>[90]</sup> but on the social and cultural appeal of three-reel features and the audience formations, beyond class, for rival modes of cinema during the transitional era.<sup>[91]</sup> The film's success also invites more work on what Martin Johnson calls "dynamic and variegated [...] specific instances of film distribution"<sup>[92]</sup> such as De Outo's "Quo Vadis Film Company," which formed temporary, regionally- and film-specific networks via the decentralized intersections of exhibitors and state rights agents. What values and norms defined such cultures and how did their sometimes "fly by night" business practices get negotiated?

Frykholm has shown that George Kleine initially devised alternative plans to the first-class roadshow strategy that ultimately became "what he would do" with *Quo Vadis?*. The plans imagined four-to-five- and two-to-three-reel versions of the film released after a clearance period for the full film had elapsed.<sup>[93]</sup> The plans went to the MPPC and GFC, which served lesser-class theaters with weekly programs,

[89] Anonymous, *So the Exhibitors May Know*, "Exhibitors Herald", vol. 13, no. 10, September 3, 1921, p. 7.

[90] R. Lobato, *Shadow Economies of Cinema*, London 2012.

[91] I am currently contextualizing the two films in relation to religious geography, for example.

[92] M.L. Johnson, "The Romance Promoter" with a 'Deadline at Eleven': Rural exhibitors, urban exchanges, and the emerging culture of film distribution in the United States, 1918–1925, "Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television" 2021, vol. 41, no. 4, p. 668.

[93] J. Frykholm, op.cit., p. 48.

but they met with no interest. Nonetheless, the logic of featuring this blockbuster title in multiple ways at a time of uneven development in the film industry is clear. A three-reel version that became a nationwide hit might prove the concept, and that is what Paul De Outo “would do” with *Quo Vadis?*.

Author’s note:

This article is dedicated to Mary Ann Klenotic (née Fruit/Owoc)

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