Film version of Jack London's *Martin Eden*: An artist who loses touch with everyday life

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Martin Eden, directed by Italian filmmaker Pietro Marcello, is a valuable adaptation of Jack London's well-known 1909 novel, transposed to mid-20th century Italy. As of today, it will be available online.

Marcello (born 1976, *Lost and Beautiful*, 2015) stays true to the essential content and critique of the novel, in some ways improving upon London's narrative, or at least avoiding some of its detours and occasionally grandiloquent tone.

The work concerns a phenomenon that was to have extraordinary relevance to the development of literature and art generally in the 20th century: the rise and fall of a working-class artist, who experiences great popular and financial success but succumbs to toxic individualism, turning his back on the suffering and oppressed.

Martin (Luca Marinelli), accustomed to a rough-and-tumble existence in an unnamed Italian port city (apparently Naples), earns his living as a sailor, although he already has certain aesthetic or intellectual proclivities. When he encounters Elena Orsini (Jessica Cressy), from a wealthy, liberal, cultured family, a new world opens up before his eyes.

London writes: "And then he turned and saw the girl [Ruth in the novel]. The phantasmagoria of his brain vanished at sight of her. She was a pale, ethereal creature, with wide, spiritual blue eyes and a wealth of golden hair. He did not know how she was dressed, except that the dress was as wonderful as she. He likened her to a pale gold flower upon a slender stem. No, she was a spirit, a divinity, a goddess; such sublimated beauty was not of the earth. Or perhaps the books were right, and there were many such as she in the upper walks of life."

Martin sets out to "better himself," to eradicate what is rude and uncouth from his behavior, studies indefatigably and, ultimately, determines to be a writer. Elena would prefer if he had a steady job and emulated her father and his friends. But Martin struggles, sacrificing health and nearly starving, in his quest to become a published author.

In the course of his efforts, although he has encountered socialism and left-wing ideas, and toyed with them, Martin comes across the works of Herbert Spencer, the reactionary Social Darwinist, and consciously adopts the latter's conceptions. Spencer (1820-1903) and others mechanically and self-servingly transposed Darwin's theories of natural selection and "survival of the fittest" to the study of social life, justifying inequality and the unbridled exploitation of the lesser beings on the bottom rungs of the social ladder.

Elena breaks with Martin, under pressure from her respectable family. Martin has denounced her father and his friends at a dinner party. Eventually, he achieves great success and becomes the toast of the town. War threatens. Martin publicly rails against the poor, in fact, he calls for their destruction. There are clearly echoes of Benito Mussolini, a one-time socialist, and that trend in the Italian art world that rallied to war and nationalism before 1914.

However, for all his good fortune, Martin feels sick at heart. The bitterness of his travails and his resentment against official society poisons his being. "Life disgusts me."

When Elena attempts to renew their relationship, he angrily turns on her and drives her out. In the novel, Martin demands to know why his former love had not come to him before, when he had no job and was hungry. "You see I have not changed, though my sudden apparent appreciation in value compels me constantly to reassure myself on that point." What

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puzzles him, he explains, is why she and everybody else want him now. “Surely they don’t want me for myself, for myself is the same old self they did not want. Then they must want me for something else, for something that is outside of me, for something that is not I! Shall I tell you what that something is? It is for the recognition I have received. That recognition is not I. It resides in the minds of others. Then again for the money I have earned and am earning.…And is it for that, for the recognition and the money, that you now want me?”

There is no happy ending possible for him.

London explained to fellow writer (and fellow socialist) Upton Sinclair that one “of my motifs, in this book, was an attack on [Nietzschean] individualism (in the person of the hero). I must have bungled, for not a single reviewer has discovered it,” although the work is a little more ambiguous on this score than London suggests. The writer’s pleasure in his own success and talent at times crowds out or overshadows other concerns.

In any event, it is not possible to miss this “motif” in Marcello’s well-scripted and well-performed film version. (Sidney Salkow directed a version of the novel, *The Adventures of Martin Eden*, released in 1942, with Glenn Ford and Claire Trevor.)

Marcello told an interviewer for Cineuropa: “We read *Martin Eden* as a portrait that could anticipate the perversions and troubles of the 20th century. The relations between the individual and society, the role of mass culture, class struggle.” And further: “Martin is a victim of his own success, from the moment he begins to get published, his symbolic ship sinks. It’s the story of Jack London like it is that of Michael Jackson or [R. W.] Fassbinder. Artists who lost touch with everyday life. His betrayal of the class to which he belongs makes him the victim of that system.”

Marcello’s *Martin Eden* is one of the better Italian films in recent years.

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