

Martin Eden. Pietro Marcello. Avventurosa et al., 2019. 129 min.

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Pietro Marcello's *Martin Eden* (2019) is a convention-breaking, historical drama film of visual beauty and technical ambition. As the newest adaptation of Jack London's 1909 novel *Martin Eden*, it understands the source material with discernment, making it a welcome release to audiences of Italian cinema and readers of London alike.

London's story is a classic Bildungsroman of the Oakland-born and raised sailor Martin Eden, whose encounter with an educated, well-born love interest, Elena, motivates him to become a writer and create himself anew. When success becomes futile, the absence of true redemption leads Eden to commit suicide. Plot-wise, the film is a remarkably dutiful reproduction of the novel, especially considering that the actions have been relocated from California to Naples, Italy. Localizing the story thus demands some careful maneuvering, and Marcello's script changes reveal sensitivity to his source material and its cultural context. For instance: the English poet Swinburne, whose work plays a substantive role in the novel—occasioning the meeting between Eden and Elena and foretelling his suicide—is replaced by Baudelaire. This alteration is sensible not only for the purpose of historical congruousness, but also for the literary affinity between the poets, as Baudelaire is an acknowledged source of inspiration for Swinburne.

Like Swinburne for London, Baudelaire for Marcello serves as a point of thematic self-reference. In an early scene, he portrays Eden reading Baudelaire's *Bénédiction*, with the page centrally framed. This is a poem about the predicaments of a poet who suffers from his own genius as well as romantic and moral disillusionment. It foreshadows the film's primary drama: the destruction of an individual in his pursuit to conjoin love and personal success with the

actualization of political ideals, when their demands inherently diverge. Marcello showcases this process with care, for the most part, though some unevenness can be observed.

Primary emphasis is placed on the story of Eden as a lover and writer. In particular, Marcello has reproduced many of London's original dialogues between Eden and Elena with little to no edits. His thoroughness, combined with lead actor Luca Marinelli's subtle yet layered performance and the use of a handheld camera in capturing these private exchanges, provides the audience with a sense of immersion. It convinces them of the reality of the film's central problem: Eden's literary aspiration and the obligations and desires from his love life stand in irreconcilable tension. This culminates and resolves in the penultimate scene—an intense and heart-wrenching reunion between the lovers—when the redemptive power of both love and education is revealed to be a mere illusion. The end result is a poignant retelling of the familiar Gatsbyesque tale.

In contrast, the film's treatment of its political theme is insufficient, suffering from a lack of dedicated screen time and, more importantly, a lack of specificity. It relies heavily on buzzwords and slogans in dialogue to signal political tropes, without letting the ideas they represent develop through action. Its ambiguous time frame also detaches allusions to movements, strikes, and prospects of warfare from concrete historical events. There is no doubt that this film is politically interested. In the final scene before Eden's suicide, the camera cuts to a man erasing the slogan "NO AL MACELLO DEI POPOLI" (2:00:56). The implication is clear: Eden's personal tragedy is a symbol of greater political calamities. But the visual connection is hardly supported by the drama, rendering the critique formalistic and empty of genuine politics.

It is possible that Marcello is aware of this weakness and has counted it as a necessary cost for what he sets out to do, having stated in interviews that his goal is to tell a story of universal application. One way in which he conveys this sense of universality is through the use of soundtrack and archival footage, the latter a trademark of Marcello's cinema since his debut documentary *Il passaggio della linea* (2007). The soundtrack consists of a diverse range of local and international music from different times, ranging from 1600s chorales and 1800s piano suites to nostalgic late 70s and early 80s Neapolitan and French pop. The archival footage spans from the 1920s up until the 1980s and is shot not only in Naples, but also in La Spezia in Northern Italy and other European countries such as Germany. Therefore, on the one hand, the temporal frame of the archival footage and soundtrack disassociates the film from any specific historical time, thus obscuring the time of the narrative and giving it a sense of universality. On the other hand, the insertion of other locales erases Naples's identity, letting it assume the generality of any city, thus evoking a sense of spatial ambiguity. Together they allow the story of Martin Eden, a parable about education and aspiration, to acquire a universal meaning applicable to any place and time.

Furthermore, Marcello does not simply juxtapose archival and original footage as is. Rather, it is first digitally processed to acquire blue and ochre tints. By doing so, Marcello achieves a consistent visual palette that not only brings visual unity to the film, but also facilitates the interpretative identification between the cityscape and the protagonist. In one instance, the film interweaves color-graded footage of Naples's landmark Piazza del Pleiscibito, the marginalized lumpenproletariat, celebration fireworks for the Madonna del Carmine, with a medium close-up of Eden, composing a story about the drowning of Naples in an imaginary flood reminiscent of the Biblical myth, read out in voice-over by Marinelli. The scene

accomplishes two things: it allows us to see the historic landscape of Naples as externalizations of Eden's creative musing, and to perceive Eden as an agent for Naples—writing on its behalf and prophesying its fate.

To audiences acquainted with Italian cinema, *Martin Eden*'s formal merits may remind them of the works of Gianfranco Rosi, who has enjoyed international fame for breaking the boundary between documentary and fiction. Compared to Rosi, Marcello achieves something more modest: he has no intention to deconstruct the documentary or narrative genre. Rather, Marcello brings the technique and vocabulary of documentary to the shooting of narrative films. As a result, in *Martin Eden* he achieves a striking balance between formal innovation and captivating storytelling. For whatever imperfection this film has, it is nevertheless indicative of skill and style, and has surely put director Marcello on the map as a rising talent in Italian cinema.

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