

Toronto International Film Festival 2019: Part 5

Steven Soderbergh's *The Laundromat*—on the Panama Papers—and *The Goldfinch*—the aftermath of a terror attack

Along with a valuable film adaptation of Jack London's *Martin Eden* and *The Traitor*, a Mafia drama

By David Walsh
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This is the fifth in a series of articles devoted to the recent 2019 Toronto International Film Festival (September 5-15). The first part was posted September 11, the second on September 18, the third on September 20 and the fourth on September 24.

Steven Soderbergh discards his generally non-committal stance in *The Laundromat*, offering a fairly withering critique of global corporate tax evasion and the financial elite generally. The film is loosely based on Jake Bernstein's *Secrecy World: Inside the Panama Papers Investigation of Illicit Money Networks and the Global Elite* (2017).

Needless to say, the critics have greeted *The Laundromat*, which opened in the US on September 27 and will be available on Netflix October 18, with some of the least enthusiastic reviews of Soderbergh's recent career.

The various well-heeled mediocrities who pollute the cultural atmosphere daily with their banalities—in many cases, in the service of this or that media plutocrat—find the film “too blunt” and “an indignant lecture.”

The “Panama Papers,” some 11.5 million documents detailing financial information on more than 214,000 offshore companies, were generated by and taken from Mossack Fonseca, a Panamanian law firm. The anonymous whistleblower later explained that he or she had leaked the documents because “Income inequality is one of the defining issues of our time.” The Panama Papers were made public by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) in April 2016.

Mossack Fonseca made many millions of dollars helping politicians and the super-rich hide their money to evade paying taxes. The scandal revealed that a multitude of tax dodges, money-laundering operations, corporate slush funds and political kickbacks were an integral part, as the WSWs noted at the time, of the day-to-day economic and political life of the world's leading “democracies.”

The ICIJ report, the WSWs pointed out, “implicated 140 public officials around the world, including 12 current and former heads of government, as well as 29 billionaires listed in *Forbes* magazine's ranking of the planet's 500 richest people.” The scandal, in short, lifted the lid on the wholesale criminality of contemporary capitalism.

Soderbergh's *The Laundromat* centers on Mossack Fonseca and

presents various vignettes involving a number of its clients. The film adopts a satirical tone, with Jürgen Mossack (Gary Oldman) and Ramón Fonseca (Antonio Banderas) breezily—until their operation unravels!—and effectively addressing the viewer and guiding us through the corrupt goings-on, in chapters entitled, for example, “The meek are screwed,” “Bribery 101” and “Making a killing.”

Ellen Martin (Meryl Streep), a fictional Midwesterner, becomes a victim of the global economic system after her husband (James Cromwell) drowns in a boating accident. She is cheated out of her insurance money because of chicanery by a series of shell companies hosted by Mossack Fonseca. The tour boat operator, in fact, unbeknownst to him, was sold a fictitious insurance policy.

Ellen travels to the West Indies to seek out one of the shell companies registered there, which introduces us to Malchus Irvin Boncamper (Jeffrey Wright), an accountant who served as the “director” of dozens of firms set up by Mossack Fonseca. Boncamper is also maintaining two wives and families, one in Nevis and the other in Miami. (In October 2011, the real Boncamper pleaded guilty to conspiring to launder the proceeds of a scheme that sold fake liability insurance policies over the course of more than 10 years.)

And so it goes. A wealthy African businessman (Nonso Anozie) living in the US, another Mossack Fonseca client, bribes his daughter to keep secret from her mother the fact he is having an affair with her college classmate. Later, a politically connected Chinese couple poison a British businessman (Matthias Schoenaerts) when he pushes them too far. This is a fictionalized version of the 2011 murder of Neil Heywood by Gu Kailai, the wife of Bo Xilai, the former Communist Party of China Committee Secretary for Chongqing and a member of the ruling party's Politburo. She was alarmed by Heywood's threats to expose the millions of dollars in real estate she held in an offshore account in the British Virgin Islands.

As the *Irish Times* reported in 2016, the Panama Papers revealed “a wealth of new information about the offshore holdings of the families of other powerful Chinese.” The documents exposed the fact “that Xi Jinping, China's ‘Chairman of Everything,’ ... has a brother-in-law who has had companies in tax havens. Relatives of at least seven other men

who have served on the tiny [Politburo] Standing Committee—including two members currently serving with Xi—also have offshore holdings, the records show.

“One of these relatives is a grandson-in-law of the late Chairman Mao Zedong, the founding father of the People’s Republic of China.”

The Laundromat cheerfully skewers the filthy lumpen elements at the top of global bourgeois society. Along the way, we learn the sociologically interesting fact that Ramón Fonseca (born 1952) had once been an adherent of radical “liberation theology” and considered joining the priesthood. Fonseca-Banderas tells us, however, he found out the “meek did *not* inherit the earth.” Rather than trying to save the world, he decided that the important thing was to “save yourself.” So he became a legal mouthpiece “for the not-so-meek.”

(The ICIJ notes that Jürgen Mossack, for his part, is the son of Erhard Mossack, a member of the Waffen-SS, the military wing of the SS, during World War II. The Waffen-SS was judged to be a criminal organization at the Nuremberg Trials due to its responsibility for horrifying war crimes and crimes against humanity. After the war, while still in Germany, Erhard Mossack offered his services to the US government as an informant. Later, according to the ICIJ, he “ended up in Panama, where he offered to spy, this time for the CIA, on Communist activity in nearby Cuba.”)

The film is not exactly the final word on the present global situation, and its explanations of the various economic processes are almost inevitably lacking, but its vicious, biting tone is bracing and welcome. This is what makes the critics nervous. The *Laundromat* will only encourage disaffection.

Streep’s characterization is generally convincing. For a Hollywood performer to inhabit the skin of an “ordinary American,” from Trenton, Michigan in this case, almost always involves a trace of condescension, simply because the social and psychological gap is so great at this point. But Streep does a fine job of portraying a decent person made to pay, through absolutely no fault of her own, for the criminal policies of the corporate elite—and who has a few tricks of her own up her sleeve.

The Laundromat’s final plea for campaign finance reform is not to be taken seriously, in the face of the damning material Soderbergh and company present about the stranglehold that wealthy swindlers hold on American and global society, but that is another story.

The Goldfinch

The Goldfinch, directed by John Crowley, is based on the popular 2013 novel of the same title by Donna Tartt. It opened in the US on September 13.

The film is narrated by Theo Decker (Ansel Elgort), whose mother died in a terrorist attack at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York some 15 years or so earlier. In the immediate aftermath of the bombing, Theo, then 13, stole *The Goldfinch*, a priceless work painted in 1654 by Carel Fabritius, a pupil of Rembrandt. Theo clings to the small painting, or so he thinks, through many vicissitudes.

After his mother’s death, we learn in flashbacks, Theo went to live with the wealthy, chilly family of a school-friend. The mother of this friend, Samantha Barbour (Nicole Kidman), is kind to him. Meanwhile, he visits the antiques shop of a man who died near him in the museum attack, whose daughter Pippa (Ashleigh Cummings) he becomes taken with. The dead man’s partner, Hobie (Jeffrey Wright), becomes his mentor.

Theo’s alcoholic and disreputable father (Luke Wilson), with his girl-friend in tow, eventually takes the boy off to Las Vegas, where they live in a virtually deserted subdivision. There he makes friends with Boris (Aneurin Barnard), the son of a Ukrainian émigré.

After his father’s death, Theo flees to New York and goes to work for Hobie. Later he descends into doing drugs and sells fake antiques to keep the shop afloat. Little goes right for him. Even his beloved painting is

taken from him. On the verge of committing suicide, Theo’s life takes another dramatic twist and turn.

There are some interesting, lifelike moments here and some interesting performances, but this is not a convincing or affecting work. *The Goldfinch* operates on the surface of current developments, making haphazard use of striking and familiar phenomena—terrorist attacks, drugs, the housing collapse, Russian/Eastern European gangsterism, etc.—to grab the viewer’s attention without shedding much light on the subjects it treats or offering any deep insight into its central character’s feelings and actions. Theo feels like a literary construct throughout. The film takes for granted what it needs to prove: that the original tragedy determines every unhappy chapter of his life.

No explanation of any kind is ever offered for the museum bombing, and no connection made between the general circumstances where such an attack is possible and the other features of contemporary life that might have a bearing on the characters’ situations and fates. One is drawn to the conclusion that *if only* Theo and his mother hadn’t visited the museum that day, his life might have turned out idyllically.

“If only ...,” in fact, runs through the viewer’s mind a number of times. Nearly everything seems the result of a series of unhappy (or occasionally happy) accidents. This indicates that neither the novelist nor the filmmaker has a *coherent* grasp on what has been taking place in the world. There are various hints at Charles Dickens and *Great Expectations*, but there is very little of Dickens’ drama, social outrage and incredibly varied world.

Presumably, the museum attack is meant to be an act of pure, senseless evil. Against that, Theo saves and preserves Fabritius’ *The Goldfinch*. In the novel, he thinks about “the history of people who have loved beautiful things, and looked out for them, and pulled them from the fire.” The notion that high culture alone is a defense against political dangers or personal trauma is a false one, as the history of Europe—and Germany in particular—in the 20th century demonstrates.

This is one of the many muddy and unhelpful responses to the events of 9/11 and what has come after them, along with other events in the new century.

Martin Eden from Italy

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.

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 hadn’t 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 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 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.

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.

The Traitor

Another intelligent Italian film, although less pointed, is Marco Bellocchio’s *The Traitor*. The Toronto film festival also screened Bellocchio’s *Fists in the Pocket* this year, his remarkable debut film released in 1965, a scathing attack on many of Italian society’s sacred cows. The collapse of the radical wave in Italy had serious consequences for Bellocchio, whose discouragement in part led him to trade his

conception of Marxism for Freudian psychoanalysis.

In any event, he remains a gifted filmmaker and this telling of the story of Tommaso Buscetta (Pier Francesco Flaminio in an extraordinary performance), the first high-ranking figure in the Cosa Nostra to inform on the crime organization, rings utterly true as far as it goes.

Buscetta fled to Brazil in the early 1980s to avoid a battle between Cosa Nostra factions in Sicily over the heroin trade. His clan was outnumbered and losing. However, his flight leads to his sons and brother being murdered in Palermo in retaliation or out of spite, and he expects to become the next victim. Extradited to Italy in 1984, Buscetta meets with Judge Giovanni Falcone (Fausto Russo Alesi) and spills the beans. He ends up in a witness protection program in the US in a succession of unlikely locations, and dies in bed at 71, his greatest ambition.

Asked by an interviewer for *Variety* why he was drawn to the character, Bellocchio replied, “What I like about this character is that he’s neither a victim nor a hero. He’s a very determined man, always on the run. He’s a survivor. Buscetta had to continuously navigate really dangerous situations. He fled to Brazil because he knew there was a war within [the] Cosa Nostra and he belonged to the losing faction. But he never imagined that the winners would go as far as setting out to exterminate his family. He’s continuously trying to build back his life. He loves his family and in order to stay alive gradually decides to collaborate with justice and therefore to betray the Mafia.”

As noted above, *The Traitor* strikes one as *thoroughly* truthful within fairly narrow parameters. It does not stray in the direction of making any wider analysis of Italian society. The film is an accomplishment, but one still has the feeling that certain ideas and concerns were knocked out of Bellocchio by the difficulties of the 1980s and 1990s and have not returned to him.

To be continued

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