Netflix: Phenomenology of the Teen Drama Genre in Italy

by

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ABSTRACT

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In the era of online streaming services, the distribution of TV content has altered the old paradigm of the 'one-way flow' of media products. An Internet-distributed television such as Netflix enables shows to circulate more seamlessly, across national borders, allowing viewers to access content that would have been more difficult to find in the past. With a presence in 191 out of 195 worldwide countries reached and 260 million paid subscribers, Netflix stands as the most prominent global Internet TV service.

Most research attention on Netflix has discussed how this online streaming service categorizes its shows and targets them to spectators, as part of the personalization and recommendations system (PRS). Scant consideration has been given instead to the effects of Netflix's technological affordances on the writing of TV series. This dissertation addresses this gap in the literature by exploring how Netflix conceives shows aimed at a potentially transnational audience, with a specific emphasis on the teen drama genre in the Italian mediascape.

Through a post-structuralist analysis of the teen genre, which considers genre categories as culturally dynamic and changing constructs, this study examines Zero and Baby, two teen shows written, produced, and filmed in Italy. The examination demonstrates that, because of the friction between Netflix's global reach and its need to produce shows ingrained with local cultures, this

online streaming's products emerge as fascinating examples of *glocal* dramas. Zero and Baby reveal elements in the text that specifically cater to a local viewership and counterbalance the features of a genre such as teen drama, highly globalized because of the spread of American youth content in media. The results of this analysis add to the field of media studies that examine the increasing number of youth-oriented dramas on Netflix, developing a theoretical understanding of the impact that this online streaming has on the writing of TV shows and genre formation.

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To my biological family, my mother Cristina, my father Antonio, and my brother Giovanni, I owe everything. Without my parents (even though they are no longer physically present) I would not be the person I am. My mother taught me to smile back at Life even when it makes you cry. To my aunts and uncles, my cousins, and every family member who stood by me, I owe the strength that made me keep going even when Hope had left my body.

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1.1 Introduction

In the era of online streaming services, the distribution of TV content has altered the old paradigm of the 'one-way flow' of media products. An Internet-distributed television such as Netflix enables shows to circulate more seamlessly, across national borders, allowing viewers to access content that would have been more difficult to find in the past.

Since 1997, when Netflix provided its customers, primarily based in the US, with movies on Digital Versatile Discs (DVD) ordered online and sent by mail, the company has come a long way. Today, with 191 out of 195[1] worldwide countries reached and 260 million paid subscribers at the time of writing, Netflix represents the most prominent global Internet TV service (Tony Maglio 2024). Nor did the introduction of its ad-supported version at the end of 2022 seem to have halted its run. Notwithstanding concerns about a potential drop in users because of the added commercials, Netflix managed to achieve a further global rise of 30 million members by the end of 2023 (Brad Adgate 2022)[2].

To date, considerable scholarly discourse has grown about Netflix, exploring the subject as a medium (Television or post-TV?), its content (what does the online streaming service offer?), and its audience's viewing behaviors (how do people watch Netflix?) (Kevin McDonald, and Daniel Smith-Rowsey 2016; Amanda Lotz 2018; Jenner Mareike 2018; Timothy Havens 2018; Ramon Lobato 2019; Mayka Castellano and Melina Meimaridis 2021).

[1] China, North Korea, Russia, and Syria are the only countries where Netflix is not active

[2] Adgate examined Netflix's forecasted growth estimate and successfully predicted the attainment of 30 million subscribers by the end of 2023 one year prior.

A few literature contributions have specifically discussed how this online streaming service organizes and categorizes its shows, as part of the personalization and recommendations system (PRS) (Alexis C. Madrigal 2014; Niko Pajkovic 2021). By means of advanced algorithms, PRS collects data pertaining to users' viewing habits, such as the content and duration of their consumption, the specific devices employed, the geographical locations in which the viewing occurs, the time spent searching, and even instances in which users pause or discontinue consuming content (Nick Srnicek 2017; Sudarshan Lamkhede and Das Sudeep 2019). The data collected is utilized by PRS to categorize and make content visible on users' homepages. In fact, categorizing content on the platform depends on the centrality that spectators have in the Netflix ecosystem, given that similar shows are recommended through PRS based on viewers' watching history in a sort of eternal return of the same.

Nevertheless, viewers are not the only parameter for content classification. Facilitating the cataloging and visibility of Netflix' shows is also a methodical content tagging process that this online streaming implements by assigning different descriptive keywords or *tags* to each media product (Alexis C. Madrigal 2014; Emily Lawrence 2015). In Netflix's lingo, labels or *tags*, such as *romantic*, *Italian*, and *feeling good*, describe the features of a media text and function as genres since they serve as a means of classifying products, favoring their retrieval by users. Defined by Alexander Madrigal as *altgenres*, these tags revise traditional genre categories – even though performing their typical categorization function – as they consider elements from a media text that canonical genre theories do not take into account.

While Netflix's creation of altgenres has been studied mainly at the level of content categorization and viewing behaviors, scant consideration has been given to how it might have impacted the formation of genre categories at the stage of writing a TV series, a gap that this

project intends to fill. My dissertation project aims in fact to examine how online streaming platforms like Netflix shaped the formulaic conventions of teen series such as plot, themes, characters, and aesthetic forms – while producing content intended for a transnational viewership.

When Netflix undertakes the script of a TV series, it draws upon genres or "types" [3] that have been fixed by old television: soap opera, sitcom, horror, and drama (including their respective subgenres)[4] are the starting points for Netflix when creating TV content. Culturally constructed to conventionally classify content in the stages of production, analysis, and reception, genres lack the cultural elements distinctive of a nation. Jenner Mareike claims that "genre theory often seeks to downplay the cultural specifics of the national iterations of the genre in favor of creating inclusive categories" (Mareike Jenner 2021, 183).

Following this argument, teen drama is a television (as well as cinema or literature) genre whose stories center around the life experiences faced by adolescents. No matter in which country or language they are produced, teen dramas will frequently delve into topics such as self-identity, peer pressure, academic demands, sex and virginity, relationships, and family dynamics.

This project posits that, contrary to existing genre categories that de-emphasize the cultural elements inherent in the national adaptations of a genre, the imperative for Netflix to create content that reflects the diverse languages and cultures within the national markets it operates, brings national genre variations necessarily to play, impacting, in turn, the writing of shows.

[3] As film and television analyst Jane Feuer reminds us, the word "genre" has a French etymology that translates into the word" "type" or kind" (Jane Feuer 1992).

[4] Consider medical, legal, and family for the drama genre, for example.

To demonstrate how the national culture of a Netflix product might be emphasized in the staging of the story, I conduct a close reading of two Italian-language Netflix TV dramas, *Zero* (2020) and *Baby* (2018-2020), employing both a semiotic and discursive approach[5].

On the one hand, via the semiotic approach, I study these two shows pointing to the cinematic language in the texts that contributes to conveying the Italianness of the series. As semiotics "is the study or science of signs and their general role as vehicles of meaning in culture" (Stuart Hall 1997, 6), analyzing the cinematic language of *Zero* and *Baby*, such as shot compositions, soundtrack, editing, and the teen genre conventions, serves to understand how the "meaning" of the Italian culture was constructed in the text.

On the other hand, via the discursive approach, I consider the teen genre to which these two series belong more widely as a "cluster (or formation) of ideas, images, and practices, which provides ways of talking about, forms of knowledge and conduct associated with […]" the teenage culture (Stuart Hall 1997, 6). According to the discursive approach, analyzing the phenomena of teen media culture requires more than just studying texts. It is necessary to explore a variety of elements that contribute to the construction of the meanings of teen culture to fully understand it. Factors such as television industry strategies, historical background, and audience response, need to be taken into account to fully comprehend the language and meaning of teen media culture.

As a result of my study of the two series *Zero* and *Baby*, I demonstrate that, as a consequence of the friction between Netflix's global reach and its need to produce shows ingrained

[5] By differentiating between the semiotic and discursive approach in media analysis, I draw upon Stuart Hall's studies from his book Representation (1997). Stuart Hall's 1997 study on media representation delves into the process by which media and cultural materials construct significance and shape our understanding of the world. Stuart emphasizes in the introduction to his book that the distinction between the semiotic and discursive approaches is based on the theoretical work of Ferdinand de Saussure (semiotic approach) and Michel Foucault (discursive approach).

with local cultures, this online streaming's products emerge as fascinating examples of "glocal" dramas.

In defining *Zero* and *Baby glocal* teen dramas, I draw upon the concept of glocalization conceived by sociologist Roland Robertson (1997; 2014 and Joseph Straubhaar 2007), who, in his studies on adaptation, points out that global products and services go through a process of indigenization when introduced in local markets. The traits of the local receiving culture, in other words, are not necessarily lost but find a way to hybridize with the global products introduced.

Applying Robertson's theory to the study of television programs means countering the notion that the portrayal of local cultures on screen is disproportionately disadvantaged in the era of television content globalization. In a globalized market characterized by the growing prevalence of multi-directional TV flows (Albert Moran 2009), wherein for media products it has become easier to traverse from one national market to another because of the internet, it would be limited to argue that "delocalization" and "deculturalization" necessarily take over. According to these latter concepts, media products would minimize the presence of local cultural references in a text so as to have "greater international appeal" and thus not discourage those viewers who may be unfamiliar with the original culture (Andrea Esser 2015, 93).

In contrast to the idea of "delocalization" and "deculturalization", *Zero* and *Baby* reveal elements in the text that specifically cater to a local viewership and counterbalance the features of a genre such as teen drama, highly globalized because of the spread of American youth content in media. In *Zero*, for instance, the emphasis on Italian culture is significantly sought with meticulous work on the soundtrack that features rap and trap artists from the Milan scene. Also, exploring on the screen the difficult integration of the Afro-Italian community in the country, the show delivers a realistic account of a national issue. The real-like story narrated in *Zero* demonstrates an

understanding of the genre conventions of social drama, historically very popular on Italian television.

In *Baby*, on the other hand, the city of Rome plays a significant role through the recurrent shots of the city, and together with the narrative, often reminds spectators of the Italian setting of the story. The emphasis on the territoriality of the narrative is also accentuated by basing the plot on real-life news events well known to the public discourse, such as the child prostitution scandal[6] that occurred in 2015 (Nick Vivarelli 2018).

Through an examination of *Zero* and *Baby* I aim to develop a theoretical understanding of the impact that Netflix's productions have on the writing of a show and genre classifications. This analysis thus extends beyond these specific series as it explores how Netflix negotiates its dual identity as a global television platform and a local television producer when scripting teen dramas. In this study, Netflix's negotiation process is analyzed by considering the following research inquiries: How does the online streaming service effectively create teen shows that cater to a domestic viewership while also resonating with an international audience? As the tension between global and local interests exerts an influence on the textual elements of a series, can the existing genre categorization framework proposed by contemporary genre theories adequately analyze Netflix's TV series? If not, could it be necessary to adopt a novel approach and terminology when conducting research on the television shows produced by this OTT (Over The Top)? [7]

[6] The cause of popular outrage for the *Parioli Baby Prostitutes* – a reference to the wealthy neighborhood of Rome, the Parioli, where the teenagers were from - was the revelation that the two teenagers resorted to prostitution in order to fund their purchases of branded clothing and electronics. Furthermore, it was revealed that prominent individuals, including the spouse of Alessandra Mussolini, a member of the right-wing Forza Italia party and niece of the same name dictator, were involved in the prostitution ring.

[7] The etymology of the phrase "over the top" can be traced back to its original usage in the context of content delivery, wherein it denoted the dissemination of media products directly to audiences "over" the internet, thus circumventing conventional cable or satellite television providers.

Two are the key factors that have shaped my decision to choose teen drama as the genre for my study, specifically focusing on the Italian market. On the one hand, there exists a significant proliferation of dramas revolving around youth within the Netflix platform, which has expanded their availability across multiple national catalogs. According to Mareike Jenner (2021), there is a global trend of Netflix producing teen series in various languages, including Italian. And notable examples of such shows in the Italian language are *Baby* and *Zero*.

Similarly, in an article published on the pop culture website *Decider*, Meghan O'Keefe (2020) claims that there is a recent surge in teen-oriented programming in the television landscape. O'Keefe suggests that this trend was initiated by Netflix, following the success of the teen drama series *13 Reasons Why* in 2017 (2017-2020). Since then, Netflix has actively sought out licensed and produced content targeted towards teenage audiences (Megan OKeefe, 2020).

Along with the new "wave of teen-oriented programming" theorized by OKeefe and Jenner, what corroborated the fixation of Netflix for teen content is also the 2017-18 annual reports created by the US-based data science company Parrot Analytics. These reports highlight that in those two years, the teen series *Stranger Things* (2016 -) and *13 Reasons Why* are in the top ten of the most-watched Netflix shows in ten countries of the eleven surveyed[8]. Parrot Analytics bases its findings on Demand Expressions, the index that measures interest in TV content by collecting data on the online users' interactivity with shows. In a straightforward manner, the index was computed to gauge the degree to which individuals engaged in discussions about the television series *Stranger Things* and *13 Reasons Why* on social media platforms, shared these discussions among their peers, and consumed content pertaining to these shows on streaming services.

[8] Australia, Brazil, Canada, France, Japan, Germany, Italy, Mexico, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the USA are the countries on which Parrot Analytics drew up this study.

I argue that by serving as an indicator of the significant popularity of *Stranger Things* and *13 Reasons Why* on Netflix, this index might suggest why the online streaming service has begun to devolve part of its production to the narratives of teen television. Starting with 2016, when *Strangers Things* became a global hit, Netflix seems to have embarked on an endemic creation of teen shows. After what seems almost to be the "year zero" of Netflix's teen television, the number of youth shows produced worldwide by the platform rose significantly, recording new titles in different countries. For reasons of brevity, I can point out only a few teen series, whose different countries of origin are important to note. Due to their geographical regions of production, these shows suggest a mapping of teen content by Netflix that goes beyond the American market. *Chilling Adventure of Sabrina* (USA, 2018 - 2020), *Sex Education* (the UK, 2019 -), *Elité* (Spain, 2018 -), *Sintonia* (Brazil, 2019 -), *Baby* (Italy, 2018 - 2020) and *Blood and Water* (South Africa, 2020 -) are proof that the interest of Netflix in developing teen content unfolds at a more transnational level.

On the other hand, another reason why I chose to analyze *Baby* and *Zero* is that they were initially conceived for the Italian market, which historically has never been a well-established TV landscape for the teen genre (I return to this matter in Chapter IV). Examining how a television genre like teen drama has been adapted for the Italian market might serve as a valuable case study for exploring the effects of the tension between global and local forces operating in Netflix. Assessing the extent to which screenwriters of *Baby* and *Zero* developed these shows as *glocal* products – I contend – can help advance genre theories in the era of online streaming, providing new theoretical categories capable of analyzing media content produced by platforms such as Netflix.

1.2 Chapter Outline

This dissertation examines the textual strategies utilized in the television series *Baby* and *Zero* that allow Netflix to adapt the teen drama genre – which has gained global popularity as a result of successful American teen shows from the 1990s – to the national Italian market. This examination is achieved by initially contextualizing Netflix – and more specifically – focusing on the similarities and differences this online streaming service presents in comparison to traditional broadcast. I start with this comparison to ascertain the elements that Netflix automatically adopts from old television.

This online content provider effectively incorporates strategies, languages, and genres from broadcast TV before *glocalizing* teen dramas. In order to comprehend the production process that Netflix employs for *Baby* and *Zero*, I must establish a comprehensive understanding of Netflix as a TV platform, its operational mechanisms, and the influences it draws from traditional television.

In the process of contextualizing Netflix, I also shed light on one of the contributing factors to the *glocalization* observed in *Baby* and *Zero*, specifically the transnational nature of this platform. Having to operate at the intersection of global and local television is, for Netflix, the result of editorial decisions and transnational regulations that I examine to make sense of the use of *glocalization*.

The emphasis on Netflix and the necessity to contextualize draws upon the underlying theoretical framework of my project, which is rooted in the post-structuralist idea of genre. The approach to genre that I take in analyzing the Italian teen dramas is post-structuralist in the sense that it aligns with the school of thought according to which genre is not and cannot be considered exclusively a textual matter (Jane Feuer 1992; Jason Mittell 2004). In other words, what defines genres does not solely lie in decodifying and classifying the conventions of a text, such as character

types, settings, soundtrack, subjects, and iconography. On the contrary, the concept of genre should be understood as a categorization process that extends beyond media texts and encompasses various cultural domains, including media industries (such as Netflix), spectators[9], policies, analysts, and historical context.

The primary goal of Chapter II is, therefore, to examine the intersection between Netflix Studies and Genre Studies within the existing academic discourse. In the forthcoming review of the literature on Netflix, I emphasize that the examination of genres linked to this online streaming service has primarily focused on two out of the three functions typically associated with the category of genre as a cultural construct.

As Jane Feuer outlined in her 1992 work, genres serve, in essence, as a means of organizing and classifying artistic works, thereby aiding in the recognition and understanding of distinctive patterns, subjects, and anticipations associated with each media product by both consumers and producers. Genres, in fact, play a crucial role in a text's writing and *production, structural analysis*, and *reception* (Jane Feuer 1992, 144).

The existing scholarly discourse on Netflix has focused predominantly on the significance of genre in terms of textual analysis and audience reception. In other words, academics have primarily concentrated on how this online streaming service employs the genre category for the purpose of categorizing and organizing content within its catalogs (as proved by the discussion on *altgenres*). Conversely, there needs to be more research on the subject of text creation, specifically

[9] In accordance with a post-structuralist perspective on genres, it would be illuminating to undertake an examination of Netflix viewers in order to gain insight into their potential impact on defining the teen drama genre. Within the field of genre studies, for example, it is emphasized that viewers' laughter in situation comedies (generally post-edited) serves as an element external to the text that effectively defines the comedic tone of this genre. Studying the spectators of Baby and Zero would help me then to shed light on the nature of the texts as well. It might be surprising to find out that spectators are not only teens or perhaps they are not teens at all. And that would explain why Netflix's teen dramas can be gory and edgy in their narratives. As interesting as it may be, however, the focus on the target audience represents a distinct project that I may undertake in the future.

regarding how Netflix reconsiders genres at the root when scripting a show. This dissertation aims to address that need, exploring the category of *glocalization* as a means of comprehending the manner in which Netflix has rehashed the teen drama genre within the Italian market.

In order to frame the teen drama genre before Netflix, Chapter III traces the genealogy of the media representation of youth through the lens of cinema and television in Western media culture, with a particular focus on the USA, as the scholarship on youth culture generally agrees that it was the American media industry that first exploited the teenager demographic (Glyn Davis and Kay Dickinson, 2004; Ross and Stein, 2008; Faye Woods, 2016).

The genealogy of teen media culture in the USA can be traced back to various historical and cultural influences, including social changes, shifting youth demographics, and technological advancements that are analyzed in the following chapters. Youth culture in Western mass media has a history whose origins are sociological, i.e., it was contingent upon the structural changes that took place within Western society between the 19th and 20th centuries, when generations of youth gained increasing social, political, and economic power. Before reaching the historical moment in which mass media, such as cinema and then television, created content for teens, Western society saw, in fact, youth grow in numbers and become economically independent and increasingly tech-savvy. As a consequence of their gaining spending power, youth opened the gates to a new market where cultural products, such as teen music, movies, and TV programs, had a reason to be produced as they had potential buyers.

Examining the historical context and underlying factors that led to the formation of the teenage target as a sociological category that media could commodify, as well as the teen drama genre, is an integral component of the post-structuralist framework employed in my project. In other words, in order to comprehend how Netflix *glocalized Baby* and *Zero*, I first need to gain

insight into the social and economic rationale behind the establishment of the teen media culture, including teen TV drama series.

Always within a post-structuralist perspective, Chapter IV's primary focus is analyzing the teen genre in Italian film and television before the advent of Netflix. In the first section of the chapter, I highlight certain critical aspects of the history of the teen film genre, starting with the lack of scholarly focus on adolescent movies within the academic discourse. According to Catherine O'Rawe, cinema criticism has historically prioritized neorealist filmmakers and films while disregarding less prominent genres.

Building upon more contemporary literature contributions on the topic, I point to a history of Italian teen films that lacks a stable and long-lasting production of movies for teenagers. In an effort to define the morphology of the Italian teen film, I analyze two films that might epitomize the characters, subjects, and conventions of the Italian teen movie. In the examination of Italian youth film, necessarily limited given the constraints of my project, I point out that the genre did not fully emerge until 2004 with *Tre Metri Sopra il Cielo*.

In the following section of Chapter IV, my attention is directed to Italian TV, first with a concise overview of the television milieu prior to the advent of Netflix. As I show, Teen Television has had a sparse presence in comparison to the US, since Italian TV has historically disregarded the youth demographic in its content development and also limited locally produced teen shows. One reason is that broadcasters have seen teens as part of a general audience that is not commercially valuable enough to be targeted.

The relatively limited efforts that Italian national television has made to reach the young adult market in comparison to the United States left a void in teen series within the TV offerings that were filled by the import of the 1990s American teen shows. As a matter of fact, the paucity

of locally produced youth-oriented shows by the national channels does not mean that Italian viewers were uninterested in the teen genre. On the contrary, the consistent rating success of American teen dramas that invaded Italian television schedules in the 1990s, such as *Beverly Hills* (1990-2000) and *Dawson's Creek* (1998-2004), testify to Italian audiences' particular affinity for this genre. In my dissertation, I acknowledge this gap between market demand and supply in teen dramas on Italian national television as one possible reason for understanding Netflix's significant investment in this TV genre.

Chapter V focuses on the examination of the glocal TV series *Zero*. To begin, I contextualize the program within the teen male melodrama genre. Expanding on the research conducted by Miranda J Banks, I demonstrate that the TV program *Zero* may be classified as a 1990s teenage male melodrama due to its focus on the male protagonist, Omar. As a Black Italian who struggles to integrate into Italian society, as a young adult who finds it difficult to conform to the established norms set by adults, and as a hero who carries on his shoulders the burden of saving others, Omar embodies the self-sacrificing and heroic protagonist of teen male melodrama.

Emphasizing *Zero's* adherence to the teen male melodrama means classifying this Netflix TV series as an American teen program. This confirms the aspect of glocalization in the series that involves assimilating and reproducing global trends. Zero also adheres to the traditions of the American teen genre with its use of popular music. The soundtrack of *Zero* is notably influenced by American youth drama, namely in the seamless integration of pop music into the visuals. This influence follows the established logic of the music cable channel MTV and was further incorporated with the emergence of the teen genre.

Simultaneously, *Zero* incorporates the formal characteristics of the American teen drama genre with social, political, and cultural narratives that are relevant to Italy. An illustrative instance

of this hybridization is the meta-diegetic significance of the soundtrack, which utilizes both the public persona of pop singer Mahmood and his songs to highlight the contemporary problems of inclusion and prejudice faced by second-generation Italians in the country. *Zero* serves so as a social commentary, offering a critical viewpoint on Italy's public political and social discussions. Adapting the program to issues that are important to the Italian public debate depends on the glocalization phenomena that encourage cultural resistance and adaptation to the global trend of teen drama.

Chapter VI examines how glocalization influenced the making of the Netflix teen series *Baby*. Centering on a storyline that focuses on the growth and development of adolescent characters, and incorporating visual elements that are reminiscent of the genre, *Baby* can be considered a teen drama. In the first part of the chapter, I demonstrate the program's adherence to the genre popularized worldwide by American media. I ascertain that adherence by using a comprehensive approach that extends beyond just textual analysis. Before analyzing the text of *Baby*, I begin by examining how Netflix classifies the program on its site using tags and altgenres, categorizing it as youth-oriented content. Then, I move to the promotional materials of the show, such as the covers. Through a post-structuralist examination of the show, I also delve into the creative process by reporting some interviews with Baby's screenwriters.

In spite of the aura of teen content, in the second part of the Chapter, I demonstrate that the impact of glocalization on the series makes *Baby* a glocal teen content. To prove so, I highlight how this series emphasizes the Italian cultural elements in the text by insisting on the city of Rome as a backdrop and casting local actresses well-known to the Italian audience. In the end, glocalization guarantees that the elements of Italian culture are not diminished to a peripheral

aspect of the narrative in *Baby*. On the contrary, irrespective of its genre, Baby conveys a tale that resonates with an Italian audience due to its cultural allusions inside the text.

CHAPTER II

EXPLORING PRIORI RESEARCH ON NETFLIX AND GENRES: A CRITICAL REVIEW

2.1 Unpacking Netflix: Continuities and Discontinuities with Old Television

In the aftermath of the rise of Netflix, most media critics have looked at online streaming as an almost biblical event – somewhat like the universal flood or a new Messiah – responsible for causing the death of TV. In her book *We Now Disrupt This Broadcast,* Amanda Lotz points out that in debate on new media, 2010 – the year Reed Hasting and Marc Randolph launched Netflix as a streaming-only service –was the watershed between linear and nonlinear television (Amanda Lotz 2018). While linear TV refers to the experience of television dictated by the scheduled programming of TV networks, nonlinear TV is the "personalized delivery of content independent from a schedule" through the internet (Amanda Lots 2017, 2).

For much of linear TV history—before Netflix—broadcasters bound their spectators to daily schedules so that they could tune in at fixed time slots to watch their favorite content. From the TV industry's perspective, linear television and scheduling functioned to build up a steady and predictable audience permanence on networks, which is critical to guaranteeing favorable ratings to TV shows and thus ensuring solid revenues from commercials.

Starting with the twenty-first century, however, TV consumption has been progressively transitioning to nonlinear, i.e., an increasingly decentralized, self-regulating[10], and asynchronous way of consuming content independent from TV schedules. That transition ultimately culminated

[10] Here the words decentralized and self-regulating mean that spectators can watch content more independently from channels' centralizing programming strategy.

in the era of Over The Top (OTT) [11] services such as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Hulu, and Disney+ that enable spectators to watch what they crave whenever and wherever they want.

In discussing Netflix, scholars generally debate the continuities and discontinuities between linear TV and post-network television. As much as the innovations of Netflix are emphasized, there is a tendency to highlight how this OTT draws from old television in several ways (Amanda Lotz 2018; Mareike Jenner 2018; Timothy Havens 2018; Ramon Lobato 2019; Mayka Castellano and Melina Meimaridis 2021).

One of those ways pertains to the content offered by Netflix. During its initial stages and for a significant portion of its inception, the majority of television programs available in Netflix's collection were produced, broadcast, and distributed first through traditional TV. The integration of programs from linear television into Netflix's catalogs was in fact facilitated through licensing agreements, resulting in minimal difficulties and relatively affordable expenses (Mayka Castellano and Melina Meimaridis 2021).

Even after Reed Hastings and Marc Randolph's company gained market traction and more subscribers to the point where media conglomerates became more rigid in negotiations and put in place conditions that made it hard to renew contracts, a large amount of content on Netflix was still borrowed from linear television. As Michael L Wayne points out, in March 2016 (after six years of the switch to streaming-only service), "of the nearly 1200 shows available on Netflix [...] only 98 (about 8%) were Netflix Originals" (Michael L Wayne 2018, 730). Hence, while Netflix was initially perceived as the catalyst for a paradigm shift in television, its content demonstrates

[11] The etymology of the phrase "over the top" can be traced back to its original usage in the context of content delivery, wherein it denoted the dissemination of media products directly to audiences "over" the internet, thus circumventing conventional cable or satellite television providers.

that it would be, in fact, inadequate to establish a definitive demarcation between the era of traditional networks and the advent of online streaming.

Not only did (and does) Netflix buy licensed products from networks, but it has also fallen into the steps of traditional television while producing its branded series. In stressing the continuity with cable channels, for instance, Dana Renga contends that Netflix's Originals are indebted to the narrative structures, genres, and high-budget production values of contemporary American "quality TV" (Dana Renga 2019).

This latter term is an expression coined by media scholars to describe scripted TV shows which, by counting on large budgets, can borrow highly paid and well-known actors from Hollywood, create special effects with an increased reliance on computer-generated imagery (CGI), and film in location. These elements have brought to these series an audiovisual sophistication often associated with cinema that critics acknowledge as a praxis of "artification"' for which they coined the expression “quality TV”. The quality of such series also has to do with narrative complexity, strong writing, and a multifarious storyworld where characters, events, and temporalities develop in ways that are in stark contrast with the oversimplified and episodic storytelling typical of free-to-air television (Jason Mittell 2015).

Since the category of quality TV garnered significance in connection with series à la HBO, such as *Sex and the City* (1998 -2004) and *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), Netflix drew inspiration from this cable's productions in its first endeavor to create a globally successful show, resulting in the release of *House of Cards* (HOC, 2013-18) (Ed Finn 2018)[12]. In accordance with the quality

[12] It is no coincidence that HOC before it received green light from Netflix had also been pitched to HBO. When in 2013 screenwriters Mordecai Wiczyk and Asif Satchu presented the pitch of HOC to the most critical American networks, including HBO, they were greeted with perplexity. The fear was that political drama no longer worked in television as a genre since *The West Wing* (NBC, 1999 - 2006).

television paradigm, Netflix provided a financial investment of $100 million to support the production of the political drama pivoting around the life of Democratic politician Frank Underwood. The budget allocated to HOC – which at the time made it the most expensive drama ever produced for television (Alberto Pasquale 2019) – also facilitated the casting of Kevin Spacey – an Academy Award winner for his role in the film *American Beauty* (1999) – as the central character of the show, bringing to the series a significant boost in popularity and recognition on a global scale.

The logic of releasing major quality TV productions such as HOC is, according to Timothy Havens, part of a brand hierarchy strategy that allows one to compare further Netflix and cable channel HBO. Netflix, like HBO, focuses on *product branding* and *service branding* in order to set itself apart from the competition in the media industry via both its original shows and the watching experience it provides (Timothy Havens 2018). In the same way as HBO made its own name through groundbreaking and high-quality original TV series that created a buzz and were not hampered by regulations on language and topics, Netflix has become associated with shows such as *HOC, Orange is the New Black* (2013 - 2019), *Stranger Things* (2016 - 2024), and *Squid Games* (2021 -)[13]. These productions are considered innovative and disruptive due to the exploration of subjects such as political corruption (*House of Cards*), minority group integration (*Orange is the New Black*), the struggles of the working class (*Squid Games*), and an adept blending of genres able to cater transgenerational spectators (*Stranger Things*).

[13] Orange is the New Black is possibly one of the most controversial Netflix series due to the unconventional and provocative stories about female prisoners and minorities in the USA. According to Kasey Moore, Stranger Things (as an English Netflix original series) and Squid Game (as a non-English Netflix original series), on the other hand, have garnered the most global views to date (Kasey Moore 2023).

This effort from Netflix demonstrates, furthermore, the OTT's intention to rival linear television rather than online content platforms like Hulu. Although this latter has embarked on the production of original series like Netflix, it still retains the nature of an online archive or catch-up television[14], limited mostly to the US territory due to geo-restrictions and licensing laws.

As Havens further discusses, Netflix's brand strategy does not only apply to its programs but also encompasses its service. Similar to HBO, which, by exploiting cable technology, delivered high-quality pictures and sound paid for by viewers, and free of sponsorship limitations, Netflix has established a distinguishable brand identity via its viewing experience. The platform is, in fact, known as a "disruptive, youthful, individualistic, [and] techy" content provider (Timothy Havens 2018, 327). These characteristics do not pertain to its programs as much as the nature of Over The Top (OTT). By delivering its content “over” the internet, thus circumventing conventional cable or satellite television providers, Netflix guarantees subscribers a user-driven viewing experience in which spectators have control over media products and time spent watching.

This self-governed viewing, which allows spectators to watch multiple episodes in succession, seems to have started when Netflix, in 2013 – much to the surprise of the TV industry professionals – published the entire season of *House of Cards* on its platform, letting subscribers set the time and pace of viewing.

As Djoymi Baker claims: "Binge-viewing has become such an essential part of the Netflix branding that the company now harnesses the concept for both its production and marketing." (Djoymi Baker 2017; 31). An example of what Baker advocates is “We Watched it All’, a video

[14] As Kevin Sanson and Gregory Steirer remind us, Hulu was born in 2007 as a joint venture between News Corporation, NBC Universal, and Providence Equity (while it is now majority owned by The Walt Disney Company) with the purpose of aggregating programming from broadcasters and delivering an archive of older shows to its consumers (Kevin Sanson and Gregory Steirer 2019).

posted on Netflix official YouTube channel in December 2020. Something between a holiday greeting post and a marketing campaign, this video shows a man in his early thirties – the age range that coincides with the highest proportion of Netflix's subscribers (Julia Stoll 2022) –singing a song about all the Netflix series he watched during the pandemic year of Covid-19.[15] In the song, the protagonist chants: "Is it Wednesday? Is it Friday? Time means nothing to me at all", expressing a disregard for the concept of time, and thus specifically referencing the rejection of conventional time slots and schedules that were prominent during the period of network television.

The shift to a sort of timelessness when watching content is attributed to the rise of streaming platforms like Netflix, where TV temporal constraints are no longer significant. Nevertheless, associating Netflix with binge-watching, as if the online streaming created it, would be a misconception. In fact, archetypal forms of marathons already occurred in old television by fans who relied on home video systems (VHS) and then Digital Video Discs (DVD) to overcome the frustrating delivery of shows in installments (Amanda Lotz 2018; Mareike Jenner 2018).

Ultimately, the coexistence of content originating from linear television on Netflix, the production of shows that follow in the footsteps of quality TV, and the stretching of a viewing practice that had already begun in the TV broadcast era with fans' marathons, collectively challenge the notion of a distinct demarcation between linear television and Netflix.

The prophecy of the death of television proved to be as reductionist as the theory of technological determinism on which it relied because it endorsed a causative relation between technological novelties and changes of social and cultural nature within society that was too simplicist. People did not start watching content via streaming, abandoning linear television because of the advent of Netflix. On the contrary, viewers were provided with Netflix when the

[15] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IYx8Keoxl50

practice of watching shows on the internet – very often through unofficial websites and illegal file-sharing (Michael Strangelove 2015) – has already been instilled in spectators.

More than the discontinuities, the continuities between Netflix and linear television highlight the need to examine the logic and genres of traditional television while assessing Netflix's TV shows. For that reason, in Chapters I and II, I explore the genealogy of teen media culture in the US and Italian markets, respectively, before the advent of Netflix.

2.2 The Importance of Being Transnational: The Rationale Behind Glocalization

Prior to delving into the effects of *glocalization* on *Baby* and *Zero* and the reasons behind its significance in scholarly inquiry on genres, I first examine the underlying factors that render *glocalization* consequential in producing Netflix's content i.e., the transnational nature of this online streaming service.

Despite its extensive global reach – given its presence in 191 out 195 countries – Netflix has adopted a business strategy that aligns with the concept of operating within multiple national markets accordingly (Mareike Jenner 2018; Ramon Lobato 2019). What makes Netflix a transnational company, in other words, is the awareness that each television domestic market has its own variables, such as languages, genre preferences, and TV customs[16].

In order to grow in a domestic market, Netflix knows that it must take into account these in-country variables, a lesson learned the hard way by this OTT when it entered the Japanese media landscape in 2015, for example. As reported by Ramon Lobato (2019), because Netflix was unable

[16] National incomes are one of the variables that Netflix takes into consideration. That is why, for instance, in Colombia the premium subscription per month costs $7.99 while in Canada it is $15. Price differentiation means trying to accommodate the disposable income of the local consumer (Rebecca Moody 2023).

to offer one of the most in-demand genres in Japan. i.e., manga, Netflix's growth was significantly slowed down in this country.

Lobato also highlights Japan's case as a means of illustrating Netflix's transnational expansion strategy, underscoring that the company assimilated the lesson of music cable channel MTV in the process of establishing its international presence. In the 1980s Viacom initially exported the pop-culture phenomenon of MTV, with the expectation that non-American viewers would appreciate English-language video clips that mainly featured American and British artists. But the cable channel experienced a swift decline in viewership in a few non-English speaking countries, prompting the need to localize its brand.

The process of localizing the MTV brand involved the transmission of programs that resonated with national audiences, facilitating a stronger sense of identification. Typically, in the context of MTV, programming was customized for specific local viewership by employing target languages, native television hosts, and television formats that better reflected the culture of the respective country. By examining the transnationalism of Netflix through the lens of MTV's case, Lobato points to the necessity for this online streaming to negotiate what national audiences might want and what a global reach – that Netflix aims to keep – might encompass.

Nevertheless, for Netflix, transnationalism is more than a business strategy encompassed to expand. In certain instances, it can also be regarded as an act of imposition. The decision to create television shows in the target audience's language and produce them *in loco* is also dictated by regulatory requirements imposed on Netflix by territorial laws. A good example of a local policy measure is the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD) that member states of the European Union implemented in 2018 with the rise of Netflix to regulate Video on Demand (VOD) platforms. According to AVMSD, services such as Netflix must incorporate in their libraries a

minimum of 30% content produced locally (Catalina Iordache et al., 2021). As a result of this regulation, Netflix was compelled to augment its productions within the European market, creating content in languages other than English and deliberating upon potential target demographics within Europe.

I point back the productions of *Baby* (2018 - 2020) and mostly *Zero* (2020) – due to the temporal proximity with AVMSD – to Netflix's need to localize the brand in order to meet the requirements of 30% local content. In fact, after it entered Italy in 2015, Netflix had not embarked on Italian original TV series until 2017, when it released *Suburra*, its first crime TV series in the target language and only content produced locally since its inception in the Italian market. Although, as Renga points out, the success of *Suburra* (2017 - 2020) led to the release of two other Netflix originals in Italian the following year (*Team: Juventus* and *Baby*), it is only as of 2020 that we see a certain surge in content produced in Italy. Following 2018, the year of the AVMSD directive, Netflix's Italian productions increased noticeably, with the three seasons of the teen drama *Summertime* (2020 - 2022), and the single season *Zero* (2020), *Curon* (2020), *Lunapark* (2021), and *Strappare Lungo i Bordi* (2021 -), to name a few.

The imperative for Netflix to create content that reflects the diverse languages and cultures within the national markets it operates is also contingent upon the nature of its subscriber base and its viewing habits. In spite of being part of the global village envisioned by Marshall McLuhan (1964) – characterized by enhanced communication and technological progress that foster a sense of interconnectedness and interdependence among global societies – national users of Netflix might continue to seek out content that aligns with their cultural background.

I base this hypothesis on the studies conducted by Joseph Straubhaar (2007), which highlight a consistent demand for domestically produced television shows within national

programming. By sampling several countries, grouped into six geocultural or cultural-linguistic clusters (Latin America, the Anglophone nations, East Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa), Straubhaar noticed that "national production increased over time and national production was most clearly reflected in each country's prime time programming." (Joseph Straubhaar 2007, 165). Straubhaar's examination, which spanned four decades, ranging from the 1960s to the 2000s, was meant to highlight a general greater preference for locally produced TV programs compared to those imported from foreign countries.

In the third chapter of my dissertation, I provide a more comprehensive analysis of the Italian television landscape, specifically focusing on the identity of national broadcasters and their historical lack of interest in teen media culture. However, I here draw upon Straubhaar's argument to point to its continued relevance for Italian TV programming. On September 7th 2023, for instance, it was observed that 80% of the content broadcast in prime time consisted of domestically produced programming (Table 1).

As seen by the data reported in Table 1, among the primary nine free-to-air channels, *Italia 1* was the only broadcaster that dedicated its entire prime-time programming to foreign shows, such as the US series *NCSI* and *Chicago Fire* (dubbed in Italian). In addition, even *Canale 8* and *Canale 9* – which are affiliated with *Sky Group* and *Discovery*, respectively, and thus non-Italian television companies – broadcast locally-produced content in part of the prime time. Specifically, *Canale 8* with the commentary in Italian to the soccer match UEFA, and *Canale 9* with one episode of the Italian adaptation of the German TV format *Cash or Trash*.

Prime Time	RA1 1 Public Broadcast	RAI 2 Public Broadcast	RAI 3 Public Broadcast
20:30	Techetechetè Italian, entertainment (mash-up of historical footage from old TV programs)	News Italy 2023	Un posto al sole Italian soap opera (1996 -)
21:25	Ulisse il piacere della scoperta Italy, documentary, 2023	Rimetti a noi i nostri debiti film, Italy, 2018	Volevo nascondermi film, Italy, 2020
	RETE 4 Mediaset - Commercial Television	CANALE 5 Mediaset Commercial Television	ITALIA 1 Mediaset - Commercial Television)
20:30	Stasera Italia Italy, infotainment, 2023 * Derived from the combination of the terms “information” and “entertainment”, infotainment refers to programs that present news content in a manner that is intended to be more entertaining for the audience.	Paperissima sprint Italy, entertainment (candid camera-like show)	NCSI US, crime series
21:25	Dritto e rovescio Italy, infotainment, 2023	Circomax una notte di hit Concert (Italy, 2023)	Chicago Fire x 2 US, crime series
	LA 7 Cairo Publishing	CANALE 8 Sky Group	CANALE 9 Discovery
20:30	In Onda ESTATE Italy, infotainment, 2023	UEFA European Qualifiers Francia – Repubblica d'Irlanda Sport (Live event with commentary in Italian)	Cash or Trash – Chi offre di più? Italian adaptation of the German TV format Cash For Trash
21:25	In Onda ESTATE Italy, infotainment, 2023	22:45 Earthquake (movie, US, 2015)	The Other Woman (movie, US, 2015)

Table 1. Programming of the main free-to-air national broadcaster on September 7th 2023.

Although this data may be considered circumstantial, it also arises on other programming days, providing more evidence of the continued interest in local shows, particularly during prime time. When examining the rationale of Netflix's transnationalism, I consider – on the example of

Straubhaar and Lobato – the significance of nationally produced content in Italy to be of great importance in understanding why Netflix has opted to glocalize series such as *Baby* and *Zero*.

As Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni (2015) state briefly in the article *Saints, Cops and Camorristi. Editorial Policies and Production Models of Italian TV Fiction*, the need for national content on television can be partially explained through the idea of *imagined community* theorized by Benedict R. O. Anderson. According to Anderson, there is a feeling of affiliation to a specific nation that is ignited by the series of geographical, historical, political, and linguistic conventions that are culturally associated with the country of reference. These conventions have ingrained themselves within the collective consciousness of a specific national populace, serving to evoke notions of homeland and the associated emotional connection to it.

In accordance with Anderson's idea of *imagined community*, the experience of being Italian entails the recognition and embrace of a multitude of culturally constructed symbols that have ingrained themselves within the collective consciousness of individuals residing in Italy. These symbols include – but are not limited to – the tricolor green, white, and red flag, the vineyards of Tuscany renowned for the production of fine Chianti, and the lemon groves adorning the Amalfi coast.

On the screen, more specifically, the sentiment of affiliation or profound acquaintance with the idea of Italy can be effectively conveyed through various means, such as the use of language, filming on location, narrating historically significant events widely recognized by the in-country populace, and even casting actors of national prominence[17].

[17] Consider the resonance in newspapers and social media that the television series *White Lotus* (HBO 2021 -) is generating in Italy through the inclusion of Italian actress Sabrina Impacciatore in the cast for the second season. While one could contend that casting the actress or setting the show in Italy were not specifically intended to promote the product within the local market, it is evident that the series has generated considerable attention in the Italian public discourse also because of Impacciatore (Gianmaria Tammaro 2022).

In agreement with the concept of the *imagined community*, I claim that by fostering a sense of belonging among Italian viewers, the recognition of Italian locations, characters, and narratives depicted on screen by the audience as distinctly Italian, ultimately leads to the consumption of content, whether be a Netflix show or any other TV company's media products. The significance of fostering viewer connection to the content thanks to the imagined community may thus explain Straubhaar's findings of the predominance of national programming in prime time and – more importantly – why, after more than two decades from those findings, Netflix must continue to adhere to the approach of *glocalizing* its products to expand in the single local markets.

2.3 Television Genres: Not Only Does the Text Matter.

In this section, I start by presenting the category of genre in film and television criticism, traditionally utilized as a benchmark for the production and analysis of media content such as movies and series. I then continue with a comprehensive overview of the theoretical frameworks employed in my scholarly inquiry. Specifically, in my thesis, I draw upon an examination of genres as the product of cultural practices in the way informed by Jason Mittell. According to Mittell, when defining genres on TV, one cannot rely merely on the textual elements of a program but should also consider "the key specificities of the television medium, which are formative of the genre categories we may wish to analyze" (Jason Mittell 2004, 2). Adapting the importance of the specificities of the medium in defining genres to the post-network television era, in the next section, I illustrate how Netflix had contributed to revisiting the concept of genre because of its computational analysis and algorithms.

My semiotic analysis of the Italian teen dramas *Baby* and *Zero* is indebted to the post-structuralist concept of genre, as expounded upon by Jason Mittell. Mittell's examination of genres as cultural constructs that are dynamic and constantly changing, rather than rigid and fixed Platonic

categories, serves as a central framework for my study on teen drama. "Genre is best understood as a process of categorization that is not found in media texts, but operates across the cultural realms of media industries, audiences, policy, critics, and historical context" (Mittell 2004, XII). Mittell's consideration of genres draws upon the idea that, despite the wide variety of methods and approaches used, most applications of genre theories primarily define genres based on the characteristics inherent to the text.

Following this misconception of genres as textual categories, the class of teen series would identify shows in which the protagonists are adolescents, topics such as first sexual intercourses and self-discovery are essential to the identity formation of the protagonists, and the soundtrack plays a key role in the narrative construction (Glen Creeber 2018). Believing that these elements, specifically textual in nature and commonly observed in series classified as teen shows, unmistakably determine the essence of teen dramas would entail falling into the misunderstanding that genres are just a matter of text.

In the context of Italian television (as elucidated in Chapter IV), for example, the textual categories that characterize the teen drama genre I mentioned are also seen to a lesser extent in what may be more accurately referred to as *family dramas*, namely television shows intended for a more comprehensive, multi-generational viewership. The reason for that must be found in the target audience of the broadcasters that air these shows. As these channels are in some time slots watched by a transgenerational audience, wherein younger age groups often consume TV with older people, they adapt TV series by multiplying the storylines of the narrative and including plots that are more youth oriented. However, the presence of characters and narratives that are somewhat targeted toward a younger demographic does not allow us to determine the classification

of these shows as teen dramas, thus demonstrating that relying just on the textual elements is insufficient for defining a series.

Undoubtedly, Mittell's proposition of a genre theory that transcends the mere examination of textual elements is not a novel concept in television criticism. Other scholars, such as Jane Feuer before him, have stressed that we cannot conceive genres as rigid formulas established upon textual analysis. In her essay *Genre Study and Television* (1992)– widely regarded as the preeminent introduction to television genre analysis – Feuer repeatedly emphasizes the conventional nature of genres, culturally constructed as units of measurement for creating and interpreting media products such as movies and TV shows.[18]

From the media industry perspective, the notion of genre originates from the idea of content as a commodity. The economic structure of the media industry resulted in a form of product standardization that requires movies and shows to be quickly made as well as have performant market response. The concept of genre is, in fact, predicated on the principles of series production and division of labor that characterize the media industry itself, and it provides a means for media professionals who make content to manage the tension between likeness and originality that arises within the creation of any cultural product in mass production (Jane Feuer 1992).

While we anticipate that any can of Coca-Cola we purchase over time preserves its taste and consistency, we expect that each teen series watched will exhibit certain distinctive attributes while not deviating too much from the canon. A teen drama that strays too far from the type of teen series might not find support from spectators who see their expectations of the genre dashed.

[18] As Jane Feuer points out, highlighting the conventionality of genres is furthermore the French etymology of the word "genre" which translates into "type" or "kind".

Genres, in fact, come in handy as they help govern the creation of a cultural product for which variations are expected but within tightly defined frameworks of similarity.

Similar to Feuer, film critics Rick Altman (1984) and Steve Neale (1980) also place emphasis on the notion of genres as cultural constructs. Both Altman and Neale concur that genres are not impartial but rather ideological classifications utilized by the media industry to regulate audience consumption and interpretation. Steve Neale claims, "In English-speaking countries, the term 'genre' came to be applied to literary works during the nineteenth century, at a point in history at which art of all kinds began to be industrialized, mass-produced for a popular public." (Neale 2018, 24). Genres, in fact, help viewers to orient themselves to the media offerings. People who are, for example, fond of coming-of-age stories know that they will most likely find them in teen dramas, which, on the other hand, have little chance of including narratives about elders.

Nevertheless, “genres also provide a means of regulating memory and expectation, a means of containing the possibilities of reading” (Steve Neale 2021, 80). The set of conventions, recurring subjects, and topoi that define a genre – in other words – also limit, to some extent, how a text can be interpreted. When applying Neale's concept of containment of reading to teen dramas, it becomes evident, for example, that American youth media culture frequently portrays malls as almost the main habitat for teenagers, conveying one primary interpretation to spectators (Timothy Shary 2014). Within this context, teenagers are depicted spending time with peers and engaging in consumer activities that are often presented as representative of this social group and highly desirable. While the idea of the mall as a natural environment for teenagers passes as realistic and glamorous, the underlying media industry's mission to foster consumerism may not be readily apparent to young spectators.

It is indeed the responsibility of critics to question the genre categories constructed by the media industry, according to Feuer, who furthers the point that this questioning becomes even greater when analyzing TV content. It is so because critics have to set aside existing cinema analyses and theories that are only partially applicable to the study of television, as cinema criticism does not consider the unique specificities of the medium.

Acknowledging the idiosyncrasy of television, Feuer argues that genres in TV, for example, tend to mix and recombine to a greater extent than cinema. The convergence of genres is often seen in television programming because of factors such as the scheduling of TV shows, the use of remote-control devices, and the pervasiveness of channel surfing habits. The advent of the remote control has significantly influenced television consumption patterns, enabling spectators to seamlessly transition between programs and genres without interruption so much that Feuer claims "these new viewing practices could mean the end of genre [...]; it could also mean that a rapid flow from one genre to another will come to represent the typical viewing experience" (Feuer 1992, 158).

On the same line of thought as Feuer, according to whom the medium TV and its specificities play a key role in genre formation, is Mittell. In his book *Genre and Television* (2004), Mittell illustrates, for example, the importance that both scheduling strategies and channel identity had in building the cultural understanding of cartoons as a genre for kids. From the theatrical film productions of the 1930s and 1940s meant for mass audiences (adults included), cartoons shifted into kid-only television content in the second half of the 1960s.

Rather than being driven by changes in content, that shift was facilitated by the establishment of a block of cartoons on Saturday morning by CBS, starting in 1962, with the intention of spreading out the expenses incurred by the production of the prime-time program *The*

Alvin Show (CBS 1961-62). When marketers noticed that the demographic of 6-12-year-olds was more significant in the Saturday morning cartoons slot, though, they subsequently lost interest in the other times of the day when cartoons were broadcast. As a result, the late afternoon and primetime slots saw a decrease in financial investments, causing a severe decline in the genre at those hours. As Mittell clarifies, the numbers of spectators were higher in both late afternoon and prime time, but the concentration of children aged 6-12 – the demographic in which sponsors were more interested – was comparatively more significant in the Saturday morning slot.

Starting with CBS's decision, other networks moved cartoons to Saturday morning, which became the scheduling space *par excellence* for kid content, fostering the cultural association between this time slot, cartoons, and children. Because of channel strategies rather than productive and writing decisions, the substance of animation underwent significant changes during the Saturday morning cartoons, which consisted of a reduction in visual sophistication and the absence of adult-oriented comedy that was prevalent in previous animated content. As a matter of fact, cartoons had remained the same in the transition from cinema to television at the beginning of TV, except for some editing work that served to adapt them to the duration of the time slot they were broadcast.

The case study of Saturday morning cartoons in the USA ensures Mittell emphasizes that there is a textualist assumption in genre theories, wherein scholars often focus primarily on the single text and its features in defining genres, where there are other factors, such as TV schedule, channel strategies, commercial intents, and audience's responses that are equally important. These factors are all elements of the *cultural practice* that define a genre, which must be understood as the system of norms, rules, and frameworks that influence the writing, production, distribution,

and dissemination of knowledge and meaning about a media text within a particular historical and cultural milieu.

Drawing on Mittell's argument of the textualist assumption, below I illustrate how Netflix's categorization of content, due to its computational analysis, operates by two means. On the one hand, Netflix categorizes shows in a way that considers elements in the text, usually neglected by canonical genre theories, such as city settings, actors, languages and countries, and singers' names. The significance of these textual elements in Netflix's re-visitation of genres supports Mittell's idea that the classification of media texts based on genres is relative, with some aspects of a TV program being chosen over others as criteria for classification in an arbitrary manner. On the other hand, the way Netflix classifies content does more than consider the text itself but favors a viewer-based categorization of shows, where spectators become the most significant categorization parameter.

Both ways of categorization alter the concept of genres, as discussed in television criticism, to such an extent that genre studies require new approaches in textual analysis when it comes to the post-network television era. The analytical category of *glocalization* that I propose by studying *Baby* and *Zero* attempts to respond to that necessity. The following section of the project, furthermore, is the juncture at which the fields of genre studies and Netflix studies intersect as the scholarly contributions on the viewing experience on Netflix that I discuss shed light on the changes that this online streaming performs on genre categories.

2.4 Genres According to Netflix: How the Online Streaming Reversed Genre Categories

In the scholarly discourse surrounding Netflix, how this online streaming categorizes its content emerges as a recurring topic. Considerable attention is devoted to the way this OTT classifies and organizes shows for spectators based on their viewing habits by means of algorithms

(Hallinan Blake and Ted Striphas (2014), Jeremy Ryan Matthew (2020), Fatima Gaw (2021), and Niko Pajkovic (2021)).

Netflix Recommender System (NRS) generates recommendations based on users' past data to predict what subscribers will be in the mood to watch. The prediction is calculated based on how users interact with the platform, which entails the content they have consumed in the past, along with the watch time, i.e., how much they viewed a show and even whether they paused it, rewound it, or dropped it. Thus, users serve as the first means for content classification on Netflix.

Categorizing shows and clustering them into genre categories in linear television had been equally contingent upon the viewers that tuned in. Mittell's analysis of the cartoon genre proved that it was because of the children watching the Saturday morning slot that the genre started to be classified as content for kids. However, in contrast to linear television, Netflix offers a more personalized categorization of the shows in which it is not the demographics (elderly, wealthy, Caucasian, employed, educated, teenagers) that matter so much anymore but the *taste communities*.

Among the scholars who shed light on how *taste communities* work, Niko Pajkovic (2021) distinguished himself for having reverse-engined the NRS system by registering three fictitious Netflix user accounts with different tastes in movies and TV shows. For each of the accounts, the *Die-Hard Sports Fan*, the *Hopeless Romantic*, and the *Culture Snob*, Pajkovic imagined content and genres that were representative of their tastes. So, for example, while the *Die-Hard Sports Fan* would watch movies along the lines of *Rocky* (1976) and TV series like *Friday Night Lights* (2006–2011), the *Hopeless Romantic* would opt for films like *The Notebook* (2004) and shows like The *Bachelor* (2002 - present). More sophisticated, instead, the *Culture Snob* would choose movies such as *8 1/2* (1961) and programs like *The Wire* (2002–2008).

Throughout the course of the experiment, Pajkovic systematically selected a different movie or TV show to watch daily on each profile, noting that the three profiles' homepages started exhibiting an improvement in their ability to recommend content that aligned with their preferences. Upon accessing the account homepage of the romance enthusiast, for example, a number of listings titled "*Movies for Hopeless Romantics*" were promptly displayed. Similarly, the section labeled "*Critically-acclaimed Auteur Cinema*" catered to the highbrow viewer, while a multitude of sports-related programs was featured on the homepage of sports fans.

Pajkovic further disclosed that, although the lists of shows on the three home pages seemed to appeal to the tastes of the three profiles, they were also broad enough in scope that they did not always align with the accounts' preferences. Pajkovic intentionally refrained from considering precise demographic classifications, such as age, race, ethnicity, gender, and geographic origin, while creating his fictitious profiles. But so does Netflix – Pajkovic noticed – as the platform categorizes its customers not as individual subjects but as members of the *taste communities* (Jason Lynch, 2018; Elain Jing Zhao, 2021; Michael Wayne, 2021).

The notion of *taste community* pertains to Netflix's central emphasis on discerning not so much the preferences of a specific, discrete viewer, such as Cristina (to come up with one example), a 60-year-old Caucasian woman of Italian descent who identifies as heterosexual and might be into the TV series *Dynasty* (Netflix 2017-2022). Rather, the primary objective of the platform is to ascertain the convergence and correlation between Cristina's preferences and those of other users located across the globe. Once worldwide users whose preferences are congruent or closely resembling Cristina's are identified, they are grouped by Netflix in *taste communities*. According to the experts of the *taste communities*, 2000 "taste clusters" would exist to date (Ana Andjelic 2021).

Identifying the connections among Netflix users so as to cluster them in *taste communities* is also substantiated by the statements made by Todd Yellin. The Vice President of Products at Netflix claimed that the company has ceased utilizing a user's geographical location as a basis for making recommendations for a number of years. "We find [believing that] subscribers in Poland would have different tastes than subscribers in Brazil [...] to be greater and greater nonsense, and we are disproving it every day." (Ashley Rodriguez 2017).

What aggregates users in a *taste community* is not cultural or geographic proximity, nor is it race, ethnicity, or age but the interest in a show. According to the *taste community* deployed by Netflix, therefore, if X, Y, and Z exhibit a shared preference for the television show *Dynasty*, and X and Y had binge-watched *Downton Abbey* (2010 - 2015) on Netflix, it will be plausible for the NRS that Z may also find appeal in the show. Following Pajkovic's experiment, in fact, Netflix Recommendations System will likely advise *Downton Abbey* on the homepage of Z, providing suggestions that align with Z's anticipated interests.

To call upon the theories of French philosopher Gilles Deleuze on the society of control, the individuals who are members of the *taste community* are no longer self-contained and independent entities. In other words, identity is no longer regarded as fixed and immutable in the digital world but rather as a perpetual state of becoming that interconnects with that of other subjects forming the collective of the taste community. *In Postscript on the Society of Contro*l, Deleuze indeed states: "Individuals have become "dividuals," and masses, samples, data, markets or "banks." (Gilles Deleuze 1992, 33). Borrowing the term "dividual" from Deleuze, I see the members of the taste community as users who can be infinitely divided and reduced to data representations through contemporary control technologies, such as the Netflix Recommendation System.

What can be fractionated into units are not only Netflix users and their preferences but also the media texts, which brings the concept of *altgenres* to the discourse on how this OTT categorizes its content. Alexander Madrigal is one of the early proponents of the *altgenres* idea. In his article *How Netflix Reverse Engineered Hollywood*, Madrigal studied the logic and strategies behind the organization of libraries on Netflix in 2014, arguing that that is a job of both advanced technologies and human labor. By exploiting computation analysis and a team of film and television experts, the platform usually tags its media products with micro tags, such as *Italy, Young Adult, Romantic, and Witty* (so to speak), labeled by Madrigal as *altgenres*. "Altgenres can be understood as composite, non-canonical genres constructed from Netflix's controlled vocabulary, with membership determined via a vast store of proprietary metadata about individual works" (Emily Lawrence 2015, 362).

Madrigal also conceptualized the microtags process as a prototypical formula consisting of Region + Adjectives + Noun Genre + Based On... + Set In... + From the... + About... + For Age X to Y and so on. Following this basic formula, the Netflix Italian TV crime *Suburra* is tagged with altgenres such as *Italian, Rome, Blood, Vatican, Crime TV War and Politics*, and *Exciting*. This means that by looking at Netflix's search engine for each of the individual tags, this Italian series will appear. This also means that these tags work as genres in the etymological sense of "type", favoring both the categorization and consumption of media content.

As Madrigal highlights, the micro-tagging process was able to organize a certain limited number of content libraries in roughly 76,897 altgenres in 2014. At that time, in fact, some years after transitioning to the internet streaming service, Netflix had a limited selection of media content available, which is why it was crucial for the platform to maximize the visibility of the media

products to the audience. In these terms, the tagging process became the key, as it has enhanced the discoverability of the media products through the Netflix search engine.

To sum up, then, the PRS system operates on two levels: firstly, it places viewers in a taste community that will be targeted with tailored shows. Secondly, it enhances content by meticulously tagging products to facilitate efficient retrieval.

Assume I have a predilection for narratives that revolve around romantic relationships and conclude with happy endings. Consequently, Netflix has categorized me within a taste community consisting of individuals who are “hopeless romantics” (based on the example of Pajkovic). One day, I decided to look for the words "gay" and "Italian" in the search bar, with the intention of finding an LGBTIQ story that takes place in Italy and is written in the Italian language. Once the two words were searched for, and in accordance with the principles of the *taste community*, Netflix provided recommendations for a selection of romantic comedies set in Italy. Among the recommended shows was Luca Guadagnino's critically acclaimed film *Call Me By Your Name* (2017). The inclusion of this movie in the list is expected due to the prominent portrayal of a love story between the two male central characters, Elio and Oliver[19].

In accordance with the practice of content tagging, however, Netflix also suggested that I might have watched the crime series *Suburra* (2017 - 2020), which happens to be the first Italian-language television series produced by Netflix. Although the show diverges from my preferred genres, it was recommended due to its categorization as "Italian" and "set in Italy." One of the reasons why the online streaming service advised that I view the show is because *Suburra* was probably labeled as LGBTIQ in one of its micro tags. In fact, although the TV series fits into what

[19] For those who have seen the movie, Call Me by Your Name is certainly not the classic romantic film with a happy ending (spoiler alert). But because the Italian Netflix catalog does not have many LGBTIQ titles, it certainly becomes a to-recommend movie.

we would ordinarily consider to be the category of a crime drama, it also includes within its narrative a gay love story between the characters Spadino and Aureliano (Dana Renga 2019). And Netflix believes that might be interesting to me.

2.5 Chapter Conclusion

As I discussed in Chapter II, Netflix is a transnational media company that operates in different national markets. That means Netflix must consider each nation where it serves as a distinct local mediascape with its own media identity. In other words, while creating content for single countries, Netflix needs to be aware that each of them has its long history of TV trends, genre preferences, and viewing habits. Instances, like the one in Japan, where Netflix just imported worldwide genres without considering the preferences of the local audience, exhibited a tepid response to the online streaming service.

As a consequence of Netflix's transnationalism, I notice a fascinating reinterpretation of the concept of genre. In the realm of Netflix, hitherto inconsequential elements of a media text such as the city where the story takes place, now play a crucial role in the process of writing and categorizing an audiovisual product. The reinvention of genres driven by technology advancements, namely the algorithm and the recommendation system, emerge from a few Italian teen dramas, the object of my study. As I will demonstrate in Chapter V and VI, teen series such as Zero and *Baby* become intriguing examples of glocal content, i.e. able to skillfully combine textual elements from the globalized teen drama with the unique media culture of Italy.

CHAPTER III

TEEN MEDIA CULTURE IN THE USA

3.1 The Genesis of Youth in Western Culture

The "teen way" of life ingrained into Western media products is part of a much more complex phenomenon of mass culture that crosses Europe and the United States at different levels and times. The existing literature on the representation of youth in media recognizes the critical role of American industry in inaugurating the lucrative market of teens (Glyn Davis and Kay Dickinson, 2004; Ross and Stein, 2008; Faye Woods, 2016). Faye Woods claims that "[c]ontemporary youth narratives have been enshrined in scholarship as definitely American and teenage" (Faye Woods, 11), as the teenage popular culture represented in media often reflects the American experience. Numerous classic coming-of-age tales and teen dramas in cinema and television are set in American high schools or examine the challenges and quests of American adolescents[20].

[20] In his historical account of Western mass culture, the French philosopher and sociologist Edgar Morin does point out that mass society (and specifically American culture) has placed a particular emphasis on "youthfulness." He argues that that emphasis has its roots in the wave of sociological changes that occurred in nineteenth-century Europe, thus much before the advent of mass media (Edgar Morin 1961). With the Revolutions of 1848, the rise to the power of youth in the social and political hierarchy swept through the old regime and produced a profound social upheaval that prepared the ground for the idea of contemporary youthfulness. For Morin, the connection between political upheaval and the power of young people goes back to the French revolution: "Saint-Just and Robespierre are the almost adolescent heroes of the first revolution of modern times. Subsequently, it was always the new generations who took the lead in revolutionary movements: 1830, 1848, and 1871 in France, then October 1917, the Polish October and the Hungarian revolution of 1956, the Algerian uprising of 1954, etc., etc." (Edgar Morin 1961, Location 2798). In Morin's account of youthfulness ingrained in mass society, these political and sociological transformations are presented as the pivotal moment when young generations, by gaining greater power within the social hierarchy, start slowly decentering the authority of elders. In these political and sociological transformations – like Morin – I discern the germ of a contemporary culture centered on the youth cohort (on media and beyond) that seems to have become less and less dependent on the older generations. Think of the digital divide between the young and older people that the dominance of the Internet has created, with older people often left out by technological advancements. With the digitalization of daily life, old generations turn out to be those in need of guidance, assistance, and training, thus seeing the role of teacher-student reversed as it is youngsters who are now the repositories of knowledge. Although starting the discourse on teen culture with the social upheavals in Europe might sound counterintuitive, I claim that Morin's

The extensive portrayal of teens in the media may be attributed to both social and economic factors, which contributed to the establishment of adolescence as a distinct social group. Chris Barker reminds us that in postcapitalist societies, the family ceased to be the only institution in charge of social reproduction, i.e., the group of activities that together preserve and reproduce life on a day-to-day and generational level (Chris Barker 2008). With the advent of the capitalist machine that grips its participants in an all-embracing work, the family members no longer have the time to take care of their children, either in the private orb – by feeding and educating kids – or in the public sphere – by initiating them to the occupational roles of adults.

As a consequence of the rupture in the family's role in social reproduction, the necessity for "a cultural space of transition, training, and socializing for young people" emerged, which created "a moratorium of structured irresponsibility between childhood and adulthood" (Chris Barker 2008, 407). It follows, then, that adolescence occurred as a transitional phase designed to provide young individuals with the necessary skills and competencies to effectively navigate the demands of a capitalist society once they become adults.

If the social disruptions caused by the revolutions during the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries, as well as the rise of capitalism, began to place considerable importance on the younger generation, it was the emergence of mass media that brought youthfulness additional validation in society. Before television, it was cinema, music, and the press that had

reflections provide a way to consider the media representation of youth that is less American-oriented. Morin's considerations allow for positioning the study on the social rising of the young demographic beyond the American history of media, which seems to be the limit of recent literature on youth culture. Thanks to Morin's analysis, one can understand how, in Western society, – before the American teen way of life was disseminated by US-based media – the viewpoint of the older generations had already started crumbling, becoming anachronistic: a relic of the past that new cohorts of youths did not longer look at.

served as catalysts of youth self-expression, identity formation, and community-building, and played a major role in disseminating American teenage culture.

After the second world war, buoyed by the Marshall Plan, which stipulated the “free flow of information” in exchange for the repayment for the postwar reconstruction, the United States was able to inundate its media products into the European markets with few governmental restrictions (Edward S. Herman and McChesney 1997, 17). As a result, the American press, cinema, and music exported the myth of young Americans into the Western World, with its values of youthfulness epitomized – among others – by the lust for living, rebellion, and ill-tempered boredom. Morin symbolically groups these youth values in the American actor James Dean, defined as the “first hero of youth” (Morin, Location 78).

By focusing on the question of the representation of youth in American media – and extensively in Western culture – in this chapter, I first delve into how US cinema has conceived the teen pic. My analysis of this film genre – which focuses on the genre conventions, such as plot devices, character types, narrative structures, and visual and sound motifs – is delimited to the 1950s and 1980s as the scholarship on youth cinema generally agrees that teen movies in these two decades become more self-conscious and prolific (Timothy Shary 2005; Roz Kaveney 2006; and Catherine Driscoll 2011).

The reasons why the teen pic matured and became more complex in these two decades are to be found not only in the media industry's decision to release products for young people – which defined the "signifying practices of [the] representation" of youth on the screen” (Chris Barker 2008, 7) – but also in the historical and cultural transformations that occurred in that period, such as changes in youth demographics and technological advances in media. Young people had grown

in number and spending power to such an extent that the release of cultural products for teens, such as teen music, movies, and TV programs, started to be beneficial to the media industry.

In my analysis of youth media, the need to understand the sociological and cultural changes of the time draws upon the idea of genres as *cultural practices* discussed in Chapter II. As Mittell states, "[...] the confines of the text cannot be the sole repository for generic definitions" (Jason Mittell 2004, 8) as cultural changes, media industry decisions, and public responses can equally determine genres and their conventions.

After summarizing the conventions of the teen film genre and the iconic imagery that has become synonymous with the teen pic, I investigate the establishment of teen dramas in linear television[21]. Before Netflix, coming-of-age stories centered around the formation of adolescent characters moving into the adult world had aired abundantly on legacy media (Glyn Davis and Kay Dickinson, 2004; Ross and Stein, 2008). By examining how linear television developed televised narratives pivoting around the demographic of young spectators, I propose an excursus of Teen TV that outlines the set of formal conventions characterizing the teen drama genre. Defining the formulaic conventions of the teen series prior to Netflix, such as plot, themes, characters, and aesthetics of teen dramas, will provide the framework necessary to evaluate how this online streaming has reconceptualized this TV genre in the era of online streaming.

3.2 Teen Cinema in the USA: From *JDs* to Generic Experimentation

As discussed in the book *Teen Film. A Critical Introduction* (2011) by Catherine Driscoll, the scholarly debate on youth cinema is divided, as scholars are at odds about the development of

[21] The term linear television refers to the TV experience dictated by the scheduled programming of networks, in contraposition to nonlinear TV described as the "personalized delivery of content independent from a schedule" through the internet (Amanda Lotz 2017, 2).

teen film in the USA. Thomas Doherty believes that the trajectory of movies for adolescents is merely a series of revitalizing and reinventing of practices from the 1950s teenpic (in Catherine Driscoll 2011). Conversely, Timothy Shary (2005) and Roz Kaveney (2006) both agree that the cyclical experimentations the teen film went through over the decades led, in the 1980s to a "more codified approach to teen films" (Shary 2005, location 1235). Echoing the views of Shary and Kaveney, Driscoll acknowledges that the 1980s youth cinema, and particularly the cinematographic works of John Hughes, contributed to fixing the formal norms that still characterize this genre to this day (Catherine Driscoll 2011).

In this section, building upon the contributions of these scholars, I outline the template of the teen film in the USA via the experimentation with genres on which the cinema industry embarked. In the second half of the twentieth century, generic experimentation in American cinema eventually led to the crystallization the formulaic stock characters, settings, and subjects in teen movies. Pinpointing the social and aesthetic origins of American teen films helps provide the theoretical framework necessary to analyze the teen movie genre in Italy. As the origins of the teen film can be found in the US media landscape, I must bear in mind its conventions while tracing back the beginnings of this genre in Italy. As I highlight in Chapter IV, however, the history of teen film in Italy is a fragmented one because film industry did not invest in this genre, and film historians did little to analyze the few – yet existing – examples of teen films they considered non-representative of Italian cinema (Catherine O' Rawe 2014).

According to Shary, in contrast to the pre-World War II period, when the production of teen movies was contingent upon the studios' decision to exploit the fame of pre-teen and teen stars (see the examples of Shirley Temple and Judy Garland), youth cinema started evolving in the 1950s via a more sophisticated and realistic portrait of adolescence on screen. The harbinger of

this shift was the birth of American International Pictures (AIP) which, under the control of James H. Nicholson and Samuel Z. Arkoff, became one of the key film production companies to capitalize on a burgeoning adolescent market (Timothy Shary 2005).

Nurturing the production of teen movies was, in fact, a flourishing postwar economy that, by redirecting society into "the centrality of consumption" (George Ritzer and Nathan Jurgenson 2005, 15), did not spare adolescents and instead bestowed upon them newfound feelings of social mobility and freedom in the nascent consumerist American society. Bill Osgerby claims that the socioeconomic foundation of the adolescent market was thriving in the United States as "youngsters enjoyed augmented disposable income during the 1950s and 1960s." (2004, 78). Relying on higher family incomes gave a fresh impetus to the "discretionary spending" of young people, which started to be associated with certain goods. Purchasing records and record players, bicycles, motorcycles, and cars became synonymous with teens' consumption patterns and distinctive of this socioeconomic group.

Having a vehicle became to represent the social and economic autonomy of teenagers from their parents, as it allowed young individuals to break free from the limitations of their home and provided a means for self-expression. Shary claims that the independence associated with the car became formulaic of adolescent iconography – on and beyond the screen. Thanks to owning or driving family vehicles, teenagers could flee domestic restrictions and live an increasingly secret life from their parents, which inspired the plots of teen movies (Timothy Shary 2005).

The car is precisely the catalyst of the events in one of the most quintessential teen films in the history of US youth cinema, *Rebel Without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray 1956). The protagonist Jim (James Dean) gets into a knife fight after his antagonist Buzz (Corey Allen) punctures one of his car's tires. Later a deadly car race (Figure 1), in which Buzz tragically dies, becomes the

turning point in the movie that brings closer the three main characters Jim, Judy (Natalie Wood) and Plato (Sal Mineo) in an unspoken love triangle.

Figure 1. The scene of the car race from *Rebel Without A Cause*

For Driscoll, this movie is “a staple of histories of teen film,” since *Rebel Without a Cause* canonizes the themes of “youth as a social problem, the institutionalization of the teenager, and youth as a celebration of present pleasure and future potential” (Catherine Drisroll 2011, 29). The example of *Rebel Without a Cause* remains important in the scholarship on the representation of youth in media because it sheds light on the American teen film's fixation with the topic of "juvenile delinquency" (JD) in the 50s, a reflection of society’s fear of the increased power of youth. This fear, however, was not entirely unfounded, as the rise of organized gangs among youths led to a 45 percent increased in the number of teens charged with crimes between 1948 and 1953 (J. Ronald Oakley 1993).

Echoing society's belief that adolescents are a danger, American youth cinema channeled a sociological desire to control and contain teen anger and restlessness that emerged irrationally, without a reason – or, more precisely, “a cause”, as the title of the movie itself suggests. Because

of James Dean's star persona, *Rebel Without a Cause* glamorizes adolescents' unreasonable behaviors. Yet, it nevertheless amends and almost cures them by the end of the movie, thus re-establishing the initial social order associate with the adult community. The return to the social norm occurs because - as Lori Bindig argues - youth-oriented media "maintain a dominant point of view" (Lori Bindig 2008, 13). Ultimately, despite the portrayal of rebellious young people on the screen, the prevailing cultural values are reaffirmed.

That is why in the film, the death of Buzz and then Plato – killed at the hands of the police who shoot him despite Jim's attempt to mediate between the parties – are presented as the ultimately cathartic resolution that permits Jim to find his place in the world. At the end of the film, despite the tragic conclusion because of Plato's killing, Jim finds the moment to introduce Judy to his parents as his girlfriend while his friend's corpse has not been taken away yet by the police. Jim's parents respond with a smile to this untimely introduction as a sign of approval and satisfaction for their son's change of heart. The crisis is eventually averted, and the disturbing upheaval of youths is contained thanks to the law and family.

The containment of youth by social institutions is, in fact, the second theme that denotes the teen pic, according to Driscoll, who speaks of "the institutionalization of the teenager" (2011, 29), referring to those social infrastructures that manage adolescence, such as the law, family, and school. As the verb to institutionalize implies, sending someone into an institute (such as a mental or social facility), school, family, and law seem almost to give off the aura of social places where harmful teens are kept under control and within prescribed limits. In teen movies and teen TV shows, these institutions are often portrayed as antithetical and oppositional to teenagers because of unapproachable teachers and parents who only care about enforcing rules and discipline.

Based on the actantial model developed by the French semiotician Algirdas Julien Greimas (Louis Hébert 2019), the adult characters serve almost as obstacles to the main teen protagonists' actions that drive the plot. Adapting Greimas' semiotic study of literary and cultural texts to the teen stories, teachers and parents are the "Opponent," i.e., the actants whose relationship to the "Subject", the main characters, is defined by obstructing the subject's progress and creating conflict[22].

On the other side of the fence, students are organized into neat subgroups. The school setting (primarily high schools as teens are the protagonists of youth films) emerges as a social microcosm where adolescents are neatly grouped according to age, class, gender, and ethnicity. This in-school classification of students and their division into subgroups, which echoes the sense of social order typical of society, is functional to the practice of characterization in teen movies in the following decades. The outcast, the popular kid, the white, blonde cheerleader, the bully, the group of Black students[23], and the athlete, are a few examples of stock characters that derive from that in-school classification.

Driscoll does not explain Rebel Without a Cause's celebration of extemporaneous gratification and enjoyment experienced in the present., but I contend that that may be traced to the scene in which the main protagonists hide out in an abandoned house in the woods to avoid Buzz's vengeful friends out to get Jim. Jim, Judy, and Plato enjoy chasing each other about the

[22] Greimas's actantial model posits that characters and elements inside a story may be classified according to the function they play in the narrative. Referring to these functions as "actants", Greimas identifies six actantial entities: the 'Subject', 'Object', 'Sender', 'Receiver', 'Helper', and 'Opponent'. The 'Subject' refers to the primary character responsible for carrying the plot via their actions, while the 'Object' is generally the mission, desire, or desired destination that the primary characters are striving to achieve. Each object has a 'Receiver', which is the character or entity to which the Subject aims. While the 'Sender' is the trigger responsible for initiating the journey of the subject, the Helper is a figure or entity that provides assistance to the Subject in order to facilitate their mission, in contrast with the 'Opponent', which hinders the Subject's advancement and generates discord.

[23] It is not the purpose of this project to discuss the marginal representation that ethnic minority groups such as the African American community have received in teen film. On this topic, see Timothy Shary 2005.

place, and when they take a break, they acknowledge how peaceful that moment is for them. Their current happiness is so poignant that they even joke about staying there indefinitely.

Like this scene from *Rebel Without a Cause*, teen films frequently place a significant emphasis on the present pleasure of adolescence, spotlighting the exhilaration and amusement of extemporaneous activities such as going to parties, embarking on a road trip, and doing compulsive shopping. Those activities are usually presented as positive aspects of the adolescent experience and counteract social conformity as teenagers engage with them, often breaking the rules and norms dictated by society. Borrowing a parent's car, or worse, driving without a license, skipping school, and throwing illegal parties are forbidden behaviors that do not necessarily meet social consequences in teen movies. What emerges is a portrait of teenagers that celebrates personal freedom and aimes to give validation to this demographic.

Approving teenage behavior on the screen, especially behavior connected to consumerism, becomes the key in youth media culture to promote the spending habits of teenage viewers. In contrast to adults, Levine and Parks argue that youths "consume indiscriminately, with a carefree attitude, and, most importantly often" (Elana Levine and Lisa Parks. 2007). This is also why, they contend, advertisements and marketing increasingly portray adolescents as role models in an effort to cultivate consumerism among older people. Being youthful becomes synonymous with self-reliance, freedom, defying convention, and, above all, consumption.

Apart from its contribution to defining teen movie subjects, settings, and characters, *Rebel Without a Cause* is considered by much scholarship on teen cinema as a pivotal movie for implicitly showing Hollywood's intent to create a specific target audience profile for this genre. In accordance with Alan Betrock's *Peter Pan Syndrome syllogism*, the 19-year-old male audience (white and cis male) became the most significant potential viewers for youth movies in those years

(Shary 2005, 92). Betrock bases his theory on the premise that younger children would likely be interested in movies and television programs made for older children, but not vice versa, and that females will watch whatever is popular with boys, but most likely not the other way around[24].

Keeping in mind the young male population identified by Betrock, at the beginning of the 1960s, AIP (American International Pictures) began experimenting with adolescent film, concocting a broad range of teen subgenres that included rock movies, beach pictures, teen horror flicks, and teen melodramas. Leaving aside the beach movie and horror movie[25], I focus below on rock movies and melodramas because these subgenres refine some of the textual conventions of the teen film that continue to exist in youth media culture today, including teen series. These textual conventions come in handy when I analyze Netflix teen shows' *Baby* and *Zero* in chapters 4 and 5.

On the one hand, rock movies are an indicator of how music and cinema have at some point coalesced, foreshadowing how teen films – and then TV shows – would deploy music not so much – or at least not only for – the narrative function that a song may have by enriching the story and emotional engagement but also for the commercial drive (Rachel Moseley 2008). As will be discussed later in the chapter, the commercialization of the soundtrack of TV series through the release of music albums in the 1990s cemented a cross-promotional relationship between TV and the music industry. Through a symbiotic connection between TV series and music, television became a platform for launching new musical talent and music trends among teenagers. That symbiosis certainly saw its beginning in rock movies.

[24] It is important to acknowledge the presence of gender bias in this audience classification, as films with a male focus are often seen as "neutral/universal", whereas women-centered movies are labeled as "chick flicks."

[25] For a more in-depth analysis of which see Shary 2005.

Rock films sprang naturally from the rock music genre whose origins in rhythm and blues and country, with a twist of riotous and boisterous sound, were considered a departure from the music of previous generations, viewed as somber and conservative by older generations. Because of its unconventional musicality and by addressing youth-resonant themes, such as adolescent romance, rebellion against authority, and the yearning for independence in its lyrics, rock and roll soon started to resonate with the rebellious youth at the time (Lisa Scrivani-Tidd 2006).

During the 1950s and 1960s, a considerable number of films were produced that focused on the genre of rock 'n' roll and its rock vocalists. The films featuring rock musicians, such as Little Richard, Elvis, The Platters, and Fats Domino, however, had little connection to teenagers, save for capitalizing on the culturally established relationship between this musical genre and the teenage demographics. According to Timothy Shary (2005), the primary emphasis of these films was the promotion of the musical component rather than the exploration of the experiences of teenagers in that era. As a consequence of the films' heavy dependence on the prominent musician associated with the project to promote, these movies tended to have underdeveloped narratives and characters.

On the other hand, throughout the 1960s, teen melodramas also had a significant role in the development of teen cinema by contributing to a language that continues to have significance within this genre. Starting off after the studios' decision to eventually stop dismissing teen issues as typical teenage rebellion or passing fads, teen melodramas charted new territory in narratives, investigating youth topics in a more realistic and less farcical way.

Fostering the tendency of teen melodramas to narrate youth via a broader spectrum of subjects was certainly the change of the Production Code. In 1967, the set of moral guidelines and rules that were meant to make Hollywood pictures "presentable" and "safe" for the public at large

shifted into the MPAA Rating System (Stefano Guerini Rocco 2017). With the advent of the new code, producers and screenwriters gained more autonomy from the previously imposed censorship that sought to suppress any topic deemed controversial. Youth films started then to treat more serious and likely subjects with which teenagers could relate, including sexuality, mental health, drug use, and other taboo subjects like teen pregnancy.

The expansion of thematic content in adolescent movies, however, led paradoxically to a decrease in both the popularity and output of films targeted at teenage audiences throughout the 1970s. Producers and authors, in their pursuit of differentiating the genre, progressively adopted more radical approaches in content selection, ultimately reaching a level of experimentation that rendered their work unsuitable for mainstream viewership. Consequently, teen movies of the 1970s were relegated to the realm of niche or independent cinema, characterized by limited distribution.

Shary highlights that a revitalization of the teen movie genre occurred eventually in the 1980s with the debut of novel filmmakers such as John Hughes and innovative ideas that reinvented teen films for subsequent generations. As I explain in the next section, the history of the 1980s youth media representation in the United States is a multifaceted story in which more than one cultural trend as well as medium are intertwined. The rise of multiplexes, videotape distribution, MTV aesthetics, and its influence on cinema, along with the success of John Hughes films, helped inaugurate a new phase of media youth culture destined to influence the production of teen content of the following decades.

3.3 The Transmedial Nature of Youth Culture in the 80s: From the Mall to Hughes' Teens

There were several reasons behind the resurgence of the teen movie genre in the 1980s. The first was sociological in nature and related to the rise of shopping malls as prominent social gathering places for teenagers. During the 1980s, shopping malls became the hubs for adolescents to convene, socialize, and engage in various pastimes, thus reinforcing the idea of youth as a social group. As Margaret Morse claims in her analysis of the shopping centers, at the mall, teenagers would hang out and spend their money on food and video games, recreating "the lost community of the street and the agora now under the private management of the arcade"(Margaret Morse 1990, 198).

Nevertheless, the mall has been essential to the youth culture of the 1980s not only for sociological reasons but also for the media production of youth content. During those years, the notable installation of the multiplex in shopping malls resulted in an increase in the availability of movie theaters and, subsequently, a higher demand for media products, including youth-oriented films. "In order to avoid an inevitable homogenization of the teen genre, Hollywood revised its 1950s formula by intensifying the narratives of youth films by placing teenage characters in previously established genres with more dramatic impact" (Timothy Shary 2005, 167-168).

The films written by John Hughes, widely recognized as the father of teen cinema, are the result of this intensification of youth-oriented narratives. In the following analysis, I examine the archetypal teen film from the 1980s, *The Breakfast Club* (1985), in which Hughes explores the intricate moral universe of teens, ultimately transcending the simplistic dichotomy between "bad" and "good" teenagers.

When the multiplex effect eventually wore off in the late 1980s – after teen movies started to be less than successful at the box office – the cinema industry would find another way to funnel

the copious production of teen films. James King points out the centrality of the videocassette and video rental market for the survival and development of the teen movie genre in the mid-80s, when "videotape rental in the United States totaled $1.2 billion" (James King 2019, 210).

Starting off with a capital of around $200 million at the beginning of the decade, the video rental industry saw significant growth over the years, becoming essential to some sub-genres of teen movies that were struggling to be distributed, such as horror. By circumventing the prescriptions imposed by MPAA ratings that prevented some movies from being released, in fact, the videotape market guaranteed distribution to those teen horror films that wouldn't have ever been distributed, giving this subgenre – and teen movies in general – the chance to rise in popularity among adolescents.

With the branching out of new distribution channels, due to the proliferation of video rentals and videocassettes, more demand for new teen films and increased interest in potential adolescent viewers ensured that the teen genre experimentation would continue.

As the role of videotapes in the resurgence of the teen movie genre highlights, the spread of teen media culture in the 1980s also has technological reasons. The convergence of the realms of film and television in videotapes serves to underscore that the history of teenage media culture in the United States defies simplistic compartmentalization within a single medium. Beginning in the 1980s, it became evident that youth culture was being shaped by several media and agents, namely the media industry and adolescents themselves. In the section on the representation of youth culture on American TV, I reference videocassettes (before DVDs) as part of the transmedia narrative universe of teen series developed across more than one medium (television, videocassettes, DVDs, CDs, and TV series branded merchandising). While the primary purpose of these commodities was to generate profits for the television business, they also inadvertently

facilitated the illegal circulation of teen content because of the phenomenon of piracy perpetrated by teenagers who reappropriated teen culture.

In addition to the example of videotapes, another technological occurrence showcased in the 1980s the reciprocal impact of cinema and television on the formation of teen media culture in the United States: the birth and spread of the American cable and satellite television channel MTV. Established in 1981 by Warner-Amex Satellite Entertainment, MTV was exclusively devoted to the music video genre, which was gaining momentum as an effective means of promoting and commercializing music (Jack Banks 1996). In the section dedicated to American TV teen dramas, I return in more detail to how cable channels, including MTV, endorsed the circulation of media youth content by increasing the amount of airtime devoted to teen shows. In the same way as multiplexes – as conjectured by Shary (2005), and videotapes, as inferred by King (2019) – cable TVs would be instrumental in the generic experimentation of teen dramas.

Below, however, I focus on the assimilation of the MTV aesthetic inside the visual conventions of teen movies, as highlighted by my close reading of a scene from one of the most iconic teen films written by John Hughes, *The Breakfast Club* (1985). In the scene analyzed, the protagonists engage in a dance sequence that emulates the style of music video productions that in those years were consolidating because of MTV, further corroborating the idea that the formation of the teen youth culture in that decade is highly transmedial.

The literature on how the music video genre began to affect the narrative construction and visuals of movies in the 1980s recognizes the role played by MTV, so much so that scholars metonymically speak of visual style à la MTV in relation to some movies (Marco Calavita 2007; Ilaria Moschini 2011), usually referring to a flashy cinematic technique, among other things. MTV's aesthetics consist of stunning and attention-grabbing components such as brilliant colors,

fast-paced editing, and dynamic camera motions, whose aim is to dazzle spectators. John Fiske's defines MTV's style as postmodern and poststructuralist, noting how the music videos aired on this MTV and channel programming are characterized by a montage that is non sequitur, i.e., the images do not always or necessarily connect with each other logically. Fiske speaks more specifically of "a mosaic of fragments: not sense, but sensation. Energy, speed, image, youth, illusion, volume, vision, senses, not sense." (John Fiske 1986, 77).

The dance scene from *The Breakfast Club* is particularly evocative of the music videos broadcasted on MTV, so much so that King refers to this sequence as "MTV bottled" (James King 2019, 352). Building upon King's idea, I contend that the dance scene from *The Breakfast Club* is to music video clips as Hughes' film is to the music culture spread by this cable TV.

In the sequence, the five teenagers who have spent all Saturday in detention indulge in a liberating and cathartic dance to the notes of *We Are Not Alone* by Karla De Vito, and the scene recalls the nonsensical yet sensational visuals à la MTV described by Fiske. After being forced to spend hours together, wealthy and popular girl Claire (Molly Ringwald), jock Andrew (Emilio Estevez), disadvantaged troublemaker Bender (Judd Nelson), eccentric and introverted Allison (Ally Sheedy), and nerd Brian (Michael Hall) start dancing individual choreographies that the editing meshes together. Each character jigs in his or her own way, so the dance composition does not appear smooth and homogeneous; in fact, quick and abrupt cuts shuffle the sequences to create a fast-paced, song-influenced montage that enhances the visual effect and emotional experience.

Although the scene seems gratuitous because it does not advance the plot, the viewer might yet respond to it by attributing some significance to the sequence. As Fiske argues about MTV's post-structuralist style, it is the viewer who makes sense of the arrangement of the images in music video clips, which is often sensationalist, i.e., aiming at provoking viewers' emotions. I argue that

one of the meanings of this scene might lie in the song's refrain, for instance. With the lyrics repeating the words "*We're not alone because when you cut to the bone, we're not so different, after all, we're not alone*," the refrain sounds almost like a call for identification with the protagonists by the adolescent viewers, a reminder of teenage collectivity.

Alternatively, the meaning of this scene might also be to remark on the individuality and idiosyncrasy of the characters through their different dance style. Claire, for example, is the one with the most rhythm among the five protagonists: she follows the tempo of the diegetic song with stylish moves that align with her character's personality. Given her likable temperament and widespread popularity in school, even her movements must be fashionable. Her steps, furthermore, almost resemble the choreography from a music video, with the camera accentuating their synchrony with the song through a series of repeated close-ups, which places her in stark contrast to Allison's moves. In line with her eccentric and enigmatic personality, Allison shakes her body almost in convulsion, kneeling on the floor pretending to be dead.

Nevertheless, what makes the connection between the music culture of the time and *The Breakfast Club* even more apparent is the interesting cross-promotional strategy with another song from the movie, *Don't You Forget About Me*, by the British rock group Simple Minds. As can be read in King's reconstruction of how the film's soundtrack was created, Hughes pushed for the song to be part of the film, although the rock group did not want to be associated with American teen media content (James King 2019). The song was eventually incorporated into the movie's finale, where its refrain, *"Don't You Forget About Me,"* functions almost as a request to the viewers to remember what they have have learned about the characters. While at the outset of the film, spectators might only see the group members by the high school stereotypes/labels by which they

are known at school and represented (the nerd, the beauty queen, the jock), they learn by the end of the story that being teenagers is more than that.

Following the cross-promotion strategy, whereby the music and cinema industries collaborate to mutually enhance their reaching target audiences, select scenes from *The Breakfast Club* are included in the music video for the song "Don't You Forget About Me." During the performance of the song by Simple Minds band members, some scenes from the film are shown on screens placed on the set. Displayed on these screens are the film protagonists who interact and dance, seamlessly integrating themselves into the performance of the band in the video clip.

In addition to its soundtrack that emerges from the transmedial nature of teen culture, bringing together film, television, and music productions, *The Breakfast Club* was also highly influential on the teen cinema and TV dramas of the following years for other reasons. According to Rob Kaveney: "The Hughes films [...] created or crystallized many stock expectations and character types that we find in the canonical work of the teen genre over the ensuing two decades (Rob Kaveney 2006, 3). For Kaveney and most of the literature on Hughes, much of the merit of this movie (and the others of the director's corpus[26]) arises from a kaleidoscopic representation of adolescence.

The Breakfast Club portrays the American teen character types of the beauty queen, nerd, jock, and outcast as the result of the social stratification that compels students to identify with a particular group inside an institution, such as a school. The movie presents the affiliation to a social

[26] Hughes wrote and directed more than one movie about teenagers. Generally, there are six films considered part of his corpus, to which The US media from the 1980s referred as the "Brat Pack", for the recurring of the same actors such as Molly Ringwald and Anthony Michael Hall. *Sixteen Candles* (1984), *The Breakfast Club* (1985), *Weird Science* (1985), *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986), *Pretty in Pink* (1986), and *Some Kind of Wonderful* (1987).

group as a coping mechanism in an institution where class, family history, assessments, scholarships, and future expectations are often more a challenge rather than an opportunity.

While crystallizing the stock characters of teen films, Hughes also tries to dismantle these conventions, showing how, despite any categorization, each character from the movie is much more than what the rest of the community thinks of them. The character of Bender is an excellent example of how Hughes deconstructs the teenage stock characters. Bender's personality superficially aligns with the archetype of a bully, impersonating the rebel who challenges authority in a school setting by means of an aggressive temperament. At the movie's beginning, spectators see him constantly mocking the other characters, especially Claire and Brian, whom he assumes must be wealthy and spoiled. Later on, the tension escalates to a verbal exchange that almost takes the form of a therapy session. Like the others, Blender's facade crumbles in this peer counseling scene, disclosing to the group that his parents abuse him, and to the dismay of the rest, he shows a cigarette burn on his arm.

Ultimately, the enduring popularity of John Hughes' films lies in their ability to capture the essence of the 1980s teenage generation and the struggles that came with it. Compared with the teen pic of previous years, *The Breakfast Club* deals with issues relevant to teens, such as social hierarchies, peer pressure, parental expectations, identity formation, and the search for acceptance. The film maintains a subtle moral undertone that never categorizes adolescents as good or evil or explicitly condemns their behavior. Hughes, in fact, encourages viewers to contemplate the complexities of adolescence by demonstrating on screen that there are multiple acceptable ways to navigate the teenage years. His portrait of adolescence is concerned with negotiating social norms and cultural expectations through narratives in which being a teenager can be both a problem and a celebration. Perhaps it is for this reason that his films depict a conception of

adolescence that extends beyond the fictionalized representation of middle-class suburban life in the United States, resonating with teenage populations around the globe.

3.4 Teenagers Go on TV: The Proliferation of American Teen Dramas

Although the teen picture prior to television inaugurated the themes and tones of youth culture in mass media, scholars Glyn Davis and Kay Dickinson recognize American TV as the medium that more effectively constructed the imaginary and influenced the viewing tastes of the demographic of teenagers (Glyn Davis and Kay Dickinson 2002).

On television, teens saw the youth experience portrayed in a more continuous and structured way due to the infiltration of the medium into domestic life that Raymond Williams describes as "mobile privatization" (Raymond William 1974). Unlike cinema or the press, the television industry did not merely provide young consumers with discrete and confined media products. Going to the movies to watch a teen film remains a limited cinematic experience that confines the consumption of youth culture to a finite text and finite unit of time. On the contrary, already in its early years – despite being primarily family-oriented – television dedicated parts of its programming to teenagers, with weekly shows that promoted a televisual time and space where young viewers could feel represented.

Since its inception, although American broadcasting companies meticulously targeted programs with a generalist audience in mind, in which the American family was the core viewership, TV programming was not short of teen-oriented shows. In the 40s and 50s, programs dedicated to youth culture ranged from entertainment-oriented content, such as talent, quizzes, and music programs, to educational talk shows where real adolescents participated in conversations about teen issues (*The Encyclopedia of Television*, 2276-81).

Over the years, and as a result of the generic experimentations, the attention that television programming paid to teens became more sustained, with the arrival of various school comedies throughout the 1950s, such as *Mr. Peepers* (NBC 1952–55) and *Our Miss Brooks* (CBS 1952–56). In contrast to the family shows of origin, these school programs portrayed teenagers in non-domestic settings, emphasizing social activities, scenarios, and interactions that set teenagers apart from the adult world and eventually gave rise to a self-dependent teen representation on the screen.

In the gradual emancipation of teen stories from family situation comedies, *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis* (CBS 1959–63) deserves mentions as the first teen series to be televised in prime time. The focus of the show was Dobie Gillis, a quirky and endearing high school student who navigates escapades, friendships, and romance. Above all else, Dobie indulges in fantasies of wealth and achievement, sometimes leading him to get entangled in bizarre endeavors to achieve his goals. As Dobie's storyline is the most prominent, the interactions with his parents are usually limited in the plot and used to report the adult world's perspective, which remains peripheral and antithetical to what the protagonist wants to do and eventually does.

Despite its progressive establishment as a genre in its own right, teen series witnessed a significant cutback between the late 1960s and the 1970s, much like teen film saw less production and distribution during the 1970s. The decline in popularity of teen content in cinema and television may be attributed to the decrease in the number of young Americans, which resulted in the entertainment industry allocating little attention to the teen market, now deemed unprofitable.

The significance of the population changes in the spread of the teen media culture is confirmed by the impact that the 1990s American youth demographics shift had on the media teen culture production of that time. While the late 1960s and 1970s were characterized by the declining

population of adolescents in the USA, the teen population growth in the 1990s sparked a renewed interest in creating and promoting content targeted towards teenagers.

Valerie Wee argues that the 1990s marked the beginning of the teenage years for a sizeable percentage of US children. The kids of the original baby boomers generation turned, of course, into teenagers, growing considerably in numbers as their parents had done before them. Similar to how baby boomers between the 1950s and 1960s initiated the dawn of US teen culture, the 1990s demographic of new teenagers – called "echo-boom" or "Generation Y"[27] – has been accountable for the large (re)circulation of youth media culture values in the two last decades of the 20th century.

Along with the 1980s and 1990s growth of the teenage population in America, another reason behind the new teen-oriented programming was the transformation of the TV landscape. Within media offerings characterized by growing numbers of cable TV and thematic channels, networks understood that they could distinguish their branding from other competitors by devoting TV programming to a narrow target audience (Amanda Lotz 2018). A few media companies saw the teen market as an opportunity, making the teenage demographic the primary target audience of their TV scheduling. In this scenario, channels such as MTV, FOX, WB, the N, and the CW (born from the ashes of UPN and WB) started to organize their daily TV schedules primarily around teen viewers and teen-oriented programming (Mary Celeste Kearney 2007; Ross and Stein, 2008).

The impetus for channels to narrowcast toward youth spectators came not only from the significant number of potential viewers but also from the fact that Generation Y viewers, in contrast to their parents, possessed more financial resources. In his study on the purchasing power

[27] People born between the early 1980s and the early 2000s make up Generation Y, often referred to as Millennials.

of 1990s American teenagers, M. J. Alhabeeb shows that adolescent spending increased considerably during the 1980s and 1990s along with the growth of teenagers' disposable incomes (M.J. Alhabeeb, 1996). While in 1983 the average weekly earnings of an adolescent were roughly $50 (between allowance and revenues from part-time jobs), it rose to $85 in 1991. Accordingly, teen expenditure reached $82 billion in the same year, a 3.8% increase from the $79 billion spent in the previous year. Alhabeeb emphasizes that growth of this magnitude was even more noteworthy as the economy was receding at the time, and the teenage number in the population had declined by 300,000 in the biennium 1990-1991.

Alhabeeb's study also demonstrates that entertainment was the top category of adolescent spending, comprising media products such as movies and concert tickets as well as audio and video items such as tapes and CDs. When the media business discovered that financially independent young consumers were inclined to purchase goods based on their favorite programs, it began a process of extensive commercialization of TV shows via the founding of thematic channels for teenagers and merchandise. TV series' affiliated products, such as videocassettes (and then DVDs), comic books, clothing, gadgets, and general paraphernalia, became the way for the media industry to target 1990s youngsters and commodify their passion for TV shows.

Because of the textual (TV shows' aired episodes) and paratextual (TV show's related merchandise) components, American teen dramas in the 1990s started to develop their transmedia nature, grounded in *narrative complexity*, *intertextuality*, and *genre hybridization*. These elements – that I discuss more in detail below – become formulaic in 1990s teen dramas because of the spending power of their target, Generation Y, thus confirming that there were undoubtedly economic reasons to consider behind the 1990s renaissance of teen media culture.

Nonetheless, the increasingly transmedial nature of teen dramas has also been contingent upon a shift in the viewer. The younger demographic of the 1990s underwent a transformation characterized by heightened critical engagement with the text and media literacy, which has prompted the media industry to develop more structured, transmedial, and intricate television shows targeted at adolescents.

3.5 Teen Series' Complex Narratives: Hypertext, Intertextuality and Genre Hybridization

In his book *Convergence Culture*, Henry Jenkins defines "transmedia narrative" as the logic behind the creation of certain TV series as a consequence of media convergence (Henry Jenkins 2004). With the coming together of different media technologies and platforms that used to be separate – because of digitization and computer networking – televised stories started "falling out" of the screen and unfolding across multiple media platforms in order to entertain an increasingly mobile viewer. In TV shows that adopt the principle of transmedia narrative, the story of the main text (i.e., the on-screen episodes) gets amplified. It is no longer about the installments we watch on TV (not only at least) but also the content about the show we gather through other cumulative media products related to it.

As part of the immersive TV series that we consume in the era of convergence culture, the literature on transmedia narrative lists, for example, networks' officially produced merchandise (Will Brooker 2001, Jenkins 2004, Jason Mittell 2015). The promise behind buying products related to a TV show is to fill in the narrative gaps that the televised episodes might posit on purpose in order to hook viewers beyond the aired show.

The TV industry has, in fact, started creating transmedia narratives that are increasingly complex, i.e., characterized by story gaps that are not necessarily unraveled in the episodes. On

the contrary, they might find narrative resolution in the ancillary media products. Merchandise such as DVDs, spin-off novels, and programs-related paraphernalia are, in fact, goods that media professionals invented with commercial imperatives yet intended to enhance the shows' narrative world and cultivate spectators' engagement on more than one platform. Think, for example, of the extra content often included in DVD box sets: non-televised shooting like behind-the-scenes, cut scenes, DVD commentaries, and interviews with the cast are ancillary texts that layer up the story of the primary content (i.e., the episodes), sharing with the audience information that is not necessarily conveyed by the aired montage.

Working as the subnarratives of a transmedia story, each medium and secondary text used by TV series correspond to one ramification of what Jenkins calls a "hypertext." (Henry Jenkins 2006). Similarly, when investigating the group of collateral media products intertwined with the episodes, Mittel talks about "technologically enabled paratexts," emphasizing the value that new media, such as the Internet, have had on the construction of transmedia storytelling (Jason Mittell 2015, Location 245).

According to Mittell, paratexts are becoming more relevant in the convergent culture due to the emergence of TV programs with intricate and interconnected storylines. In analyzing the textual nature of these programs, indeed, Mittell coined the concept of *narrative complexity* (Jason Mittell 2013), which explains how some televised stories have progressively grown more cumulative. The reference is mainly to American quality television, whose shows are built on the writing of multiple stories that span beyond the single episodes and seasons, thus leading to narrative worlds animated by several characters, events, and twists that add complexity to the overall plot.

In the studies on transmedia narrative, the utilization of multiple media platforms for content creation is presented as a consequence of the commercial objectives of the television industry. The primary goal is to captivate viewers continuously across various platforms, thereby fostering their interaction with the hypertext. However, the consumption is not utterly commercial but also stems from viewers' interest in more complex TV shows, as the receiver of transmedia stories generally resists the pejorative association with "couch potato." In cultural convergence, in fact, viewers emerge as more active and participatory consumers able to partake in refined content more critically.

In media literature, the conception of slow-witted viewers that the TV industry would have molded for its own purposes has successively shifted into that of "meaning makers," capable of critically responding to a media text. That shift has been endorsed by the advancement of theories such as that of "semiotic democracy" introduced by media scholar John Fiske (1986, 2011). When interpreting a given message, Fiske argues that the television audience constructs meanings that change from subject to subject because "it is composed of a wide variety of groups and is not a homogeneous mass; and [...] these groups actively read television in order to produce from it meanings that connect with their social experience". (Fiske and Jenkins 2011, 84). Therefore, there exists what Fiske calls the "potential of meanings," whereby the message becomes "polysemic", i.e., it can be read differently as different are the viewers' interpretations. This way, spectators are finally recognized as capable of critical subjective reading, previously dismissed (Fiske and Jenkins 2011, 67).

In audience studies, Fiske's reflections have been essential in initiating a process of 'demassification' that made scholars start thinking of spectators as individuals with a distinctive social identity (age, class, and gender) and subjective analytical skills. Building upon Fiske's

theories, Jenkins furthermore claims that some spectators are drawn to transmedia narratives and prone to collect the pieces of information disseminated on more than one platform as active story commentators: "Younger consumers have become informational hunters and gatherers, taking pleasure in tracking down character backgrounds and plot points and making connections between different texts within the same franchise" (Henry Jenkins 2006, 133).

In his studies on media audiences, Jenkins' focuses on young spectators, which sheds light on the fact that in the teen genre formation, TV series become transmedia not only because of the economic interests of the TV industry but also in response to the nature of their target – the teen viewers, their critical curiosity, and media literacy. The propensity of teen spectators to navigate more than one media platform and product in order to relish the potentiality of transmedia has certainly been commodified by the TV industry via the production of TV series branded merchandise. Yet, as I discuss in the next section, through a few examples, of American teen dramas, the pleasure of gathering information and interpreting also brings viewers to engage with the text critically and creatively rather than passively consuming it.

In order to acknowledge the importance of teen spectators in the teen genre formation of the 1990s, it is helpful to look at another textual convention of the series from this decade that the literature on youth media culture generally identifies as *intertextuality* (Elana Levine and Lisa Parks 2007; Valerie Wee 2008).

Simply put, intertextuality is the way different literary or media texts reference one another directly or indirectly through writing techniques such as parody, pastiche, and quotation (Graham Allen 2000). When analyzing the intertextuality of teen dramas, the object of study is the primary text, i.e., the episodes. In fact, if paratexts are the transmedia extensions that multiply the story outside of the televised show (such as the official TV branded merchandise), intertextuality

operates within the primary text to complicate it by incorporating media pop culture references that viewers are called upon to identify.

Although other genres had played with intertextuality before the teen series, Wee claims that this practice became notable in 1900s teen shows, in which referencing other media texts was no longer sporadic but a writing pattern. Wee argues that 1990s teen television is marked by "the turn towards post-modern hyper-intertextuality, as evidenced by the collapsing boundaries between film, television, music, and music video texts as well as the intense intertextual referencing that occurs between these multimedia texts" (Valerie Wee 2002, 88).

She also suggested that teen dramas incorporated intertextuality because they were meant for the 1990s teen audience, i.e., millennials, historically characterized by "heightened media and cultural literacy" (Valerie Wee, 2002, 93). In line with Wee's idea, Anthony Cristiano and Ahmet Atay refute the reductionist and deterministic claim that digital technologies have rendered the younger generation intellectually 'dumber.' In their book *Millennials and Media Ecology*, they emphasize how in that claim, what is "not being accounted for [is] the amount of reading and/or decoding that occurs on and through new media, via mobile devices and Internet technologies." (Cristiano, Anthony, and Ahmet Atay 2021, 85). The widespread argument that millennials are unintelligent generally fails to consider the advantages of emerging literacy types and reading abilities in the digital world.

Only by looking at the teen audience as technologically and intellectually skilled enough to consume media messages more analytically can one counterbalance the assumption that the transmedia narrative has just been born as a commercial diktat, unilaterally assessed by the TV industry.

In the practice of story stratification within the text of teen dramas, which grows outwards through the developments of the *hypertext* and inwards through *intertextuality, genre hybridization* also plays a key role. As a matter of fact, the literature on Teen TV broadly discusses hybridization as one of the textual components of the series revolving around youth culture (Glyn Davis and Kay Dickinson, 2002; Ross and Stein, 2008; Faye Woods 2016; Stefania Marghitu, 2021).

Looking at the 1990s teen series on American TV, the list of genres that are mixed with the category of teen media culture is indeed quite long. Among the examples, one can include fantasy shows (*Buffy, The Vampire Slayer*), situation comedies (*The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*), dramas (*Dawson's Creek*), sci-fi programs (*Roswell*), detective stories (*Nancy Drew*), and soap operas (*Beverly Hills*). Towards the end of the 1980s, adolescent drama had also integrated the elements of musicals, as proved by the example of the cult show *Fame* (Syndication 1983 – 1987).

The tendency to hybridize genres in one text is certainly neither limited to teen series nor represents a recent phenomenon in media, as is evident in earlier genre mixing in literature and cinema. Nevertheless, the commercial nature of genre categories contributed to resisting the concept of hybridization because a genre-mixed product might have been hard to sell. Labeling media goods via simplified categories such as genres, in fact, facilitated their marketing and selling.

It follows that for their nature, genres "in both popular and critical discourses [are] an instrument for the regulation of diversity" (Jane Feuer in Robert Clyde Allen 1992, 144), which fail to consider the practice of genre hybridization and mixing. Discussing the limit of genre categories in acknowledging hybridization, Mittell claims that "genre analysis must be able to account for the common practice of mixing genres, or what is commonly termed "hybridity," to be broadly applicable to how genres operate in television today (Jason Mittell 2004, 153).

However, while pointing to the phenomenon of genre hybridity in television, Mittell restricts his analysis to programs other than teen shows, as exemplified by his examination of the 1970s CBS series MASH (1972-1983)[28]. For that reason, in what follows, I discuss two examples of teen dramas from American TV that detail *narrative complexity, intertextuality, and genre hybridization* of teen shows, *Dawson's Creek* and *Sabrina The Teenage Witch*.

3.6 Narrative complexity, intertextuality, and genre hybridization: Three Examples of American Teen Dramas

A certain fondness for transmedia narrative and hypertext is present in *Dawson's Creek* (Warner Bros, 1998-2004), one of the most mainstream American teen TV series of the last twenty years. *Dawson's Creek* (from now on *DC*) is an example of an archetypal youth-centered program that the literature on the teen genre often references to exemplify the formulaic conventions of teen series (Will Brooker 2001; Glyn Davis and Kay Dickinson 2002; Lori See Bindig 2008). The series takes place in the fictitious town of Capeside, Massachusetts, and focuses on a group of teenagers as they negotiate the difficulties and intricacies of adolescence. The story explores the love relationships and personal development of the main protagonists, who encounter many hurdles, including interpersonal conflicts and scholastic difficulties, first sexual experiences, and the intricacies of familial relationships.

Investigating the transmedia experience that the fans of *DC* (Warner Bros, 1998 -2004) were offered by WB, for example, William Brooker states: "While fans must return to [the] week's episode for reference, the show is apparently intended to serve as the starting point for further

[28] According to Mittell, MASH an example of how a program that began as a sitcom during the Vietnam War evolved quickly into a "proto-drama" that blends aspects of humor with "emotional realism." (Jason Mittell 2004, 156). MASH's transformation into a dramedy supports Mittell's claim that the production of genres is not only reliant on the text. Due to the war, MASH's production altered the script's comedy elements to adjust the text to the historical turmoil of that time.

activity rather than an isolated, self-contained cultural artifact" (William Brooker 2001, 461). In the study of *DC* as multimedia content, Brooker finds several instances of subnarratives that aim to link audience participation to a hypertext that goes beyond the television experience. He first points to the show's official website (dawsonscreek.com)[29], where the transmedia narrative of *DC* designs the experience of a fictional world for spectators that is built starting with the imaginary locale where the story takes place. The website presents Capeside (the fictional setting) as if it were a real location, with a map and even tips for the visit.

Second, Brooker points to a "slam book" where spectators can leave comments and learn personal tidbits about the characters, that is, what books the fictional protagonists read and what movies they watch – once again – as if *DC's* characters were real people.

As a third instance of *DC's* hypertext, the author discusses the e-commerce page linked to the official website where fans can buy program-related products. The clothing the characters wear on the show, songs played in the episodes, postcards of Capeside, and spin-off novels about the series are marketed as a part of the transmedia story.

In this list of content, the novels – and, to a certain extent, the slam book – have a particularly high transmedia value due to the fact that they convey additional storylines based on the characters not featured in the episodes. Through them, spectators learn things about the narrative that they might have never gotten to know by solely watching the show on TV. This way, it is as if spectators are able to immerse themselves in an augmented fictitious world, possibly expanded by interconnected supplementary stories intertwined with the televised text.

[29] Though still existent at the time of this writing, the website taken into consideration by Brooker presents itself as less structured. Missing pages and nonfunctioning links are likely a result of the show's termination.

However, the example of *DC* is also remarkable due to the active engagement of fans in interacting with the text. Dawson's Creek represents a compelling example of participatory culture, as theorized by Jenkins, since its fans have shown the ability to affect the writing, plot, and overall presentation of the show. One example is the number of fanfictions that a few viewers of DC wrote to "right" the wrong done to some characters. In the very last episode of the show, *Must Come to an End*, the televised montage cut off the sequence in which the character of Andie McPhee (Meredith Monroe) made her return to the series. After the decision to bring Andie back for the series' finale, executive producer Kevin Williamson eliminated the part in which the character reappears, meeting the criticism of those fans who were waiting for her return. Several posts in the blog, titled *Justice for Andie*[30], discuss the character's storyline throughout the show, lamenting how screenwriters ungraciously wrote it off. In addition, on the example of this blog, dozens of internet forums have fans adjusting Andie's plot by rewriting fanzines that offer alternative endings to the televised episodes.

Interestingly, the version of *DC* that was distributed – the one that still circulates (including on Netflix) – does not comprise the scene of contention, as does the final DVD edition released after the broadcast. Applying Jenkins' idea of viewers as enthusiastic "poachers" – i.e., always looking for new content related to their favorite series to discover and consume even illegally – it is reasonable to believe that WB might have decided to include the unaired sequence to encourage sales of the DVD set, based on the multimedia engagement of fans. Those fans who were dissatisfied with the series' conclusion could be ready to purchase the DVD set in order to see their hopes for the character Andie fulfilled.

[30] https://dawsonforever.com/2018/03/26/justice-for-andie-traducido-por-mike-guretxean/

Examining the decision to include the deleted scene post-broadcast from the audience's perspective, however, we must ask whether that inclusion was partly set in motion by fans' behavior. I want to suggest that the possibility of a link between the fans' dissatisfaction and the presence of the cut-off sequence in the DVD compendium encourages us to draw a causal relationship between the TV industry's creative decisions and audience participation. Drawing upon Jenkins' lesson, we can infer that the convergent audience, rather than simply consuming the ready-made media texts, can interfere with the creative process of media products. In other words, one is left to wonder whether Warner Bros would have released the cut scene if the audience had not manifested its discontent through blogs and fanfictions that discuss and revise Andie's storyline. As Jenkins argues, we might be here in the presence of the audience's "resistance" to patterns of engagement fixed by the TV industry.

In illustrating the second distinctive feature of teen dramas discussed above, (hyper)intertextuality, Wee explores another teen show from the 1990s, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (ABC, 1996 - 2003). Adapted from the Archie Comics series of the same name, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* chronicles the experiences of Sabrina Spellman, a teenage girl who becomes aware of having magic powers when she turns sixteen. Exploring the (hyper)intertextuality of the show, Wee discusses the series' episode featuring the worldwide famous pop singer Britney Spears.

More specifically, Wee highlights that Spears made a guest appearance in one of the show's episodes in which Sabrina (Melissa Joan Hart) dreams of attending the pop singer's concert. Spears' appearance on the show occurred just days after her last single at that time *You Drive Me Crazy* was released. The music video of *You Drive Me Crazy* by Spears also has Hart in it: the actress, in fact, appears repeatedly as one of the pop singer's girlfriends. Furthermore, in this praxis of intertextuality with cross-promotional intentions taken to the extremes, ABC aired the episode

featuring Spears at the time the new movie with Hart was distributed. Titled *Drive Me Crazy* – not accidentally, along the lines of Spears' song – the movie also incorporates the soundtrack of the pop singer.

This crossmedia work between music and television business, via the mutual intertextuality of *Sabrina The Teenage Witch* and pop star Britney Spear, i.e. – one quoting the other – points out how referencing media culture becomes common practice in teen TV series. The rationale behind this practice is unquestionably commercial: via TV series, the music business found a new channel to advertise and sell music. Spear's appearance on the show was contingent upon promoting her music via the series, yet also promoting the show through her song *You Drive Me Crazy*.

Although contingent upon commercial intent in the first place, music began to be an integral part of the writing process of the 1990s teen shows. In the case of Sabrina the Teenage Witch, consider how screenwriters had to develop the episode's plot based on the cameo of Spears and the integration of her song into the story. Through this experimentation, music became an integral part of the narrative, almost playing the role of an extra layer in the writing. As Mareike Jenner claims: "For teen drama, soundtrack is crucial as it operates as a guide to the particular time and offers relatively quick characterization" (Mareike Jenner 2021, 187). When there is no dialogue in a scene, the melody and lyrics of the song played can explain the characters and story's mood.

Finally, *Sabrina the Witch*'s example also offers evidence for genre hybridization in teen shows, as the series combines multiple genres: sitcom, dramedy (drama and comedy), and supernatural. The merger of science fiction, the supernatural, and teen drama is generally not isolated to this example, as proved by other teen series, such as *Smallville, Roswell,* and *Buffy*.

In the literature on genre hybridization in teen TV shows, scholars often point to the example of *Buffy, The Vampire Slayer* (Leonard, Kendra Preston, 2011; Marghitu, 2021) because of the episode *Once More with Feelings* (Season 6, Episode 7), which integrates musical numbers and dialogue[31]. However, the inclusion of the musical film in this episode merely serves to further the genre hybridization that is already characteristic of *Buffy*. The show revolves around a group of teenagers led by the heroine, Buffy, who battles the forces of evil. The teen drama genre here combines supernatural and science-fiction, occasionally experimenting with other genres such as the musical as in the episode *Once More with Feelings*[32].

Having established the conventional nature of genre categories and that genre mixing is a regular practice in television, I finally want to point out that the 1990s American teen series exhibit a greater degree of hybridization than other TV content. I identify three potential causes for the high genre hybridization of teen shows.

First, transmedia consumers who are technologically and culturally adept at using cross-media items may have appreciated genre experimentation to the point that they have encouraged the TV industry to hybridize teen shows more extensively. The familiarity with transmedia products, which convergent viewers access by moving across multiple media (from film to television, from music to video games), would explain why spectators might not have been put off by the merging of genres. In other words, a convergent audience will likely not think it odd that a superheroine like Buffy could smash demons, like in science fiction, while personifying the media stereotype of the puny blonde cheerleader, typical of media teen culture.

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[31] In the episode, the protagonists are compelled to sing instead of speaking due to a demon that uses music as a weapon to defeat its victims by leading them to self-destruction through songs.

[32] I will return to the genre hybridization typical of teen TV series when I analyze Zero in Chapter IV. Zero is a Netflix teen series that embodies well the genre hybridity discussed so far as it combines the elements of the coming-of-age narrative with those of the supernatural genre, repackaging it in a territorial key for the Italian market.

The second possible explanation is more quantitative in nature. Increasing the amount of time devoted to young media content on television schedules – as discussed above because of the burgeoning of thematic channels – is one of the factors that might have favored the genre hybridization in teen shows. With additional hours and content to fill, it is reasonable to believe that networks were encouraged to experiment with teen drama, mixing it and varying it as much as possible.

Lastly, unlike other shows, teen series would tend to be highly hybridized in genre because "teen television is mostly concerned with its targeted demographic" (Stefania Marghitu 2021, 3). The primary interest of those who produce series for adolescents is to create stories that include characters with whom viewers can relate. Although it might be claimed that teen shows are intended for audiences of all ages, it is, in fact, indisputable that the age closeness between the characters and the young audience allows this later to identify with the protagonists. That identification becomes the key to appealing to one of the most difficult audiences to retain (Enrique Guerrero Pérez, 2018). Audience research has indeed often identified young viewers as reluctant to create brand loyalty, which is detrimental to television because it prohibits media workers from identifying consumer trends[33] necessary for the commercial sponsorship of series.

Consequently, the media business decided to place young viewers at the center of the whole value chain of teen series, hoping to create a new consuming behavior in the adolescent audience. From the text that features youthful protagonists to the distributed product that is intended for consumption by a young consumer, teen series revolve around the target demographic completely, thus capitalizing on the narcissism of the target audience, i.e. the millennial generation, that

[33] Such as the frequency, time, and number of programs watched.

sociological studies indicate as “Generation Me” for the reason of being the most self-centered and self-absorbed among the recent generations (Ahmet Atay 2018, 26).

Although this redundant product personalization toward the teenage demographic may not appear remarkable, I point out that other television genres do not tailor their plots to their intended audience in the same way as teen series do. For example, soap operas, created initially to increase female audience consumption throughout the morning TV scheduling, do not depict the targeted social group on TV exclusively. Women are not the only social class inhabiting the imaginary world of soap operas, as shown by the recurring presence of attractive male characters whose purpose is to arouse the interest of female viewers. On the contrary, teenage characters are essential in the script to the point that screenwriters started to develop a cluster of possible recurring character types that slowly crystallized in the plots of teen series.

3.7 Chapter Conclusion

In Chapter IV, I examined the representation of teenagers in American media, particularly in US cinema and TV. I specifically explored how the teen genre has been developed and conceptualized. Building upon the prolific literature on the teen media culture in the USA, I discussed the teen genre conventions, such as narrative themes, stock characters, and visual styles of the teen drama, crystallized in the American media.

The image that emerged was of a very complex genre, with underlying economic reasons. An illustration of the commercial rationale behind teen dramas is the prominent usage of music, which eventually influenced the writing of shows itself. During the 1990s, music was used in teenage television series as a strategic instrument to support the ailing music industry. The commercial nature of teen drama is no surprise as the sociological category of teenagers itself had

an economic origin. Once American adolescents achieved a certain economic independence, they become an audience that the media industry could target with specific content.

Nevertheless, while rooted in commercial logic, the integration of music into the storyline became more intricate, leading to the development of television shows that were more intertextual and transmedia in nature. The complexity and refinement of the text correspond to the complexity and refinement of the audience, demonstrating the teen audience's capacity to understand and interact with a sophisticated piece of writing.

The teen genre conventions analyzed in Chapter III will provide the foundation for comprehending how Netflix taps into it while creating content for teen. Starting from the lesson of linear TV, I argue that Netflix revisits the teen genre via glocalization as demonstrated by the case studies of *Zero* (Chapter V) and *Baby* (Chapter VI).

CHAPTER IV

MAPPING ITALIAN TEEN MEDIA CULTURE: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

4.1 Italian Teen Cinema: An in-Fits and Starts Production Between the 1960s and 2000s

The scholarship on Italian teen movies is paltry compared to the large number of studies of other film genres that characterize Italian cinema. As Catherine O'Rawe points out "the teen film in Italy is […] less studied, mainly because Italian academia had lacked the cultural studies focus of the Anglo-American academy and has tended to work on and celebrate only Italy's great auteurist or neorealist film heritage." (Catherine O' Rawe, 2014, 24).

Building upon O'Rawe's idea that great auteurist and neorealist films might have moved the attention of critics from other genres, I point out that in his 2004 monograph on Italian cinema from the origins to the 2000s, distinguished Italy's film historian Gian Piero Brunetta (2001) never explicitly talks about youth film. Even when analyzing movies that other scholars in most recent studies on Italian youth media culture have framed as such, Brunetta does not define those teen films. A movie such as *Poveri Ma Belli* by Dino Risi (1956) is in fact placed under the heading of "commedia maggiorenne" ("of age" comedy), but the adjective "maggiorenne" is less about the fact that this picture has two young adults as protagonists – in order to show the changes that affected the young generation in the 1960s – than how the comedy genre was growing and becoming more self-conscious and less family oriented in its subject matter.

In contrast to Brunetta, Davide Boero (2009) lists *Poveri Ma Belli* among the movies in which we can recognize the dawn of youth cinema in Italy. Boero argues that this film is indeed representative of one of the two generic strands of Italian teen movies in the 1960s, i.e., the one portraying the daily life of young Italians following a comedic formula. *Poveri Ma Belli* tells the

story of Romolo (Maurizio Arena) and Salvatore (Renato Salvatori), two neighbors and friends in their early twenties, who fall in love with the same girl, Giovanna (Marisa Allasio). Following the classical love triangle topos, the plot the light-hearted protagonists' misadventures and rivalry, until Giovanna eventually reconciles with her previous boyfriend, leaving both protagonists behind.

A movie like *Poveri Ma Belli*, Boero furthermore argues, stands in stark contrast to the other generic strand youth film, in which movies maintain the dramatic tone of social realism. *Accattone* by Pierpaolo Pasolini (1961) is listed in the second subgroup of what Boero considers the primordial teen film examples from the 1960s in Italy. The story focuses on a disadvantaged young boy who spends his time in the slums outside of Rome together with his companions, without any hope or ambition to obtain an honest profession. Due to the documentary-style technique, natural acting, and location shooting that portray the harsh living of the protagonist, *Accattone* presents itself as a social commentary on the daily lives of the most marginalized social groups, youth included.

Although some scholars like Boero have recently started to theorize Italian teen cinema more attentively, they sometimes still take on a condescending tone toward this genre, proving O'Rawe's point. The terminology used by some Italian scholars who – convinced of the inconsequential nature of Italian youth cinema – use adjectives such as "giovanilista" (Emiliano Morreale 2009) and "giovanilistico" (Davide Boero, 2009) to identify youth-centered movies corroborates my argument. As the literal translation into the English "juvenile" emphasizes, these

words have a derogatory connotation and, in fact, are never used to describe movies centered on the life of adolescents in the Anglo-American scholarly discussion.[34]

Even when venturing outside the realm of Italian Studies in pursuit of international academic contributions with an emphasis on Italy, one's expectations are met with disappointment. Identifying a specific teen cinema movement and a corpus on which scholars agree, proves to be a complex task. *Youth Culture in Global Cinema* (Timothy Shary and Alexandra Seibel 2007) – a notable contribution to the limited body of scholarly literature on global teen movies that extends beyond the scope of the United States – does not, for example, include any chapter on Italian teen movies. Authors Timothy Shary and Alexandra Seibel limit themselves to including a brief list of Italian films in the appendix of global youth movies organized by country.

Nevertheless, Shary and Seibel's list comprises Italian films that explore the theme of Italian youth in a broader sense rather than only focusing on adolescence itself, as proved by films such as *Sciuscià* (*Shoeshine*, 1946) and *Nuovo Cinema Paradiso* (Cinema Paradiso, 1989). Although they present the narrative through the point of view of children rather than teenagers, these two movies are listed with other more teenage-oriented films, such as Paolo Virzi's *Ovosodo*[35] (1997) and *Caterina Goes to the City* (2003). In contrast with *Sciuscià* and *Nuovo*

[34] One may argue that the term JD (Juvenile Delinquency) was created to define the instances of violence among American youths in the 1950s and was later utilized in cinema criticism to depict rebellious characters like James Dean, which would contradict my argument. Nevertheless, the term "juvenile," which is, in fact, used to characterize a social and cultural phenomenon, is not utilized in American scholarship to belittle the genre aimed at teenagers, while it seems to be used that way in Italian scholarship.

[35] *Ovosodo,* for example, is a captivating coming-of-age story that distinguishes itself from the mainstream 90s adolescent media culture generated in the United States. Unlike the abundance of American films that center on middle-class teenage girls and their experiences - one of the reasons why the teen genre has often been mistakenly considered a genre for women (Paul Dan 2017, 1), *Ovosodo* tells the tale of Piero, a male adolescent from a working-class background who chronicles the events of his life. These include his experiences of growing up with his autistic brother, his mother's sudden death, and his father's detention. The author's personal dramas are narrated in a cut-and-dry fashion together with the generational rites of passage, such as falling in love, having sex for the first time, managing schoolwork, and navigating the challenges of obtaining employment in a society grappling with rising unemployment rates.

Cinema Paradiso, these former two focus primarily on identity formation, which results from psychological, social, and moral transformations experienced by adolescent individuals.

Based on Boero's monograph on the subject of Italian teen cinema, it also becomes apparent that not only has the scholarly debate shown little interest in this particular genre, but the media industry itself has not historically worked on a consistent production of films targeted toward teenagers. My inference is supported by the rapid transition that Boero makes in analyzing the teen Italian film, jumping from the 1960s to the 2000s, in which he mostly focuses his attention on recent teen movie hits in Italy, such as *Tre metri sopra il Cielo* (2004) – into which I delve into deeper below – and *Notte prima degli esami* (2006).

Additionally, when studying Italian teen cinema, one gets the impression that, although there exists a variety of teen films from different decades now categorized by scholars as such, there are no screenwriters and directors akin to Hughes and codified the norms and conventions of this genre in Italy. Presenting a contrasting viewpoint to my theory, Boero does establish a connection between Italian teen cinema and the work of directors such as the Vanzina brothers, noting that "il collegamento tra il filone adolescenziale degli anni Sessanta e quello contemporaneo, in particolare con *Sapore di mare* (Carlo Vanzina, 1983) hanno codificato una mitologia giovanile lavorando su elementi puramente cinematografici" (Davide Boero 2009)[36]. In contrast to Boero's assertion, however, I argue that although *Sapore di Mare* comes from the same time period as the teen movie genre fixed by Hughes' films, it exhibits a comparatively lower degree of adhesion to this canon, turning instead to elements of Italian-style comedy.

[36] "The Vanzina brothers serve as a crucial connection between the teen film genre of the 1960s and its contemporary counterpart. In particular, their film *Sapore di mare* (directed by Carlo Vanzina in 1983) played a significant role in establishing a youth mythology by working on purely cinematic elements." (My translation).

Released in 1983, *Sapore di Mare* is somewhere in between a music film and "beach movie," – as also emphasized by the cover used to promote the film (Figure 2) – thus drawing upon the two teen cinema sub-genres that originated in the United States in the 1960s (see Chapter III).

Figure 2 *Sapore di Mare*'s cover

Because of the soundtrack, the film almost comes out as a screen transposition of a jukebox browsing the greatest hits of the 1960s through sentimental memories of a bygone age. *Sapore di Mare* highlights its musical component starting with the film's title, which is inspired by the same name 1963 song composed by Gino Paolo (a famous singer from the 1960s). This song, which was

a hit in that decade, has been widely associated since then with summer vacations in Italy[37] and is played in the movie a few times. In the sequel, *Sapore di Mare 2*, Paoli even does a cameo, playing himself while performing the song.

On the other hand, the adhesion to the beach genre lies in the plot. As the name suggests, beach films are youthful stories set in beach environments, often with a minimalist screenplay (Timothy Shary 2006). Following the strand, *Sapore di Mare* takes place in Forte dei Marmi, a sea town in the region of Tuscany, during the 1960s, where a cohort of teenagers hailing from different parts of Italy spend their vacation.

The central emphasis of the narrative is on the characters' mischievous and playful exploration of sexual life, strongly gendered because of the significant contrast in the viewpoints of female and male characters towards this subject matter. Aligned with the nostalgic portrayal of the cultural milieu of 1960s Italy, the film depicts sexual intercourse as a rite of passage that male characters must swiftly achieve in order to progress into adulthood. In contrast, the portrayal of female characters in the narrative highlights the first sexual encounter as a moment of heightened importance, often symbolizing significant milestones in their sentimental lives. As it follows, the film's portrayal of adolescent sexual life and its treatment thereof is characterized by a notable degree of simplicity, as it refrains from diving further into the topic of youth and instead confines itself to a succession of clichéd representations.

Also, although Boero posits that the Vanzina brothers have notably influenced the development of Italian youth mythology in cinema by focusing purely on cinematic elements in

[37] The relationship between the song and the seaside setting is due to the lyrics, which depict a couple along the beach, with the man expressing his admiration for his beloved lady as she emerges from the ocean. The verses such as "Sapore di sale, sapore di mare che hai sulla pelle, che hai sulle labbra. Quando esci dall'acqua e ti vieni a sdraiare vicino a me vicino a me" translate into "Taste of salt, taste of the sea That you have on your skin, that you have on your lips. When you emerge from the water and come to lie next to, next to me."

their films, he never explicitly clarifies their nature. I believe that when talking about cinematic elements, Boero means how youth in *Sapore di Mare* is visually constructed on the screen via an incisive physicality. The characters' bodies, often in bathing suits – given the time of the narrative – repeatedly engage in physical gags, chases, altercations, and loving effusions that represent an idea of restless youth. Because it is frequently exaggerated, this physicality often elicits laughter from the audience, almost echoing the codes and norms of slapstick comedy.

Instead of portraying the lives of the Italian youth in the 1980s, the film succumbs to a nostalgic representation of Italian society from the past, which emerges especially in its regional differences. Italy in 1960, which is the film's setting, had just celebrated 100 years of Unification, but cultural, linguistic, and social differences were still apparent. The film showcases the diversity of Italy through its characters and their parochialism: Luca, hailing from Milan, Marina and Paolo, originating from Naples; Maurizio, representing Rome, and Gianni, a native of Genoa, serve as the representatives of a remarkably regionalist nation.

The cultural differences are also reflected in the story, as shown by the relationship between Luca and Marina. Luca hails from a Milanese business family, embodying the characteristic traits often attributed to the northern region of the country, which include industriousness as well as a tendency towards materialism. On the other hand, Marina is a naive young woman from a southern working-class family who stands out for her ingenuity and moral uprightness so much that she remains cautious about falling for Luca, until she finally sleeps with him. Afterwards, however, she finds out Luca deceived her as he is already engaged to another woman, which leaves her heartbroken.

The movie ultimately presents a collection of stock characters from the *Commedia dell'Arte*, the Italian theater from the 16th century almost as masks easily identifiable because of

their distinct traits, rather than a diverse range of youthful personas. The scatterbrained playboy from Milan, the morally upright young woman from Naples, the gullible foodie from Rome, and the studious intellectual hailing from Genoa. They fulfill a similar function to that of *Commedia dell'Arte* which, as Brunetta explains, persisted in the Italian cinema comedy genre for a considerable period of time (Gian Piero Brunetta 2001). In fact, as I will highlight below, they can also be observed in certain instances of television series aimed at young audiences.

In this chronicle of the Italian teen cinema made up of fits and starts, another film that a few scholars consider a momentous turning point in the recent youth media culture in Italy is *Tre Metri Sopra il Cielo* (2004, *Three Meters Above the Sky*) (Davide Boero 2009; Francesca Masoerzo 2012; Catherine O' Rawe 2014; Paul, Dan 2017). Francesca Masoerzo states that "nel 2004 […], *Tre metri sopra il cielo* come il romanzo da cui tratto [...] diventa in breve tempo un fenomeno di culto riportando così la produzione cinematografica italiana verso la exploitation del mondo dell'adolescenza (Francesca Masoerzo 2012, pp 39-40)."[38]

Tre Metri Sopra il Cielo is the epitome of the teenage picture, as this film adheres closely to the conventions of the genre discussed so far. The main character, Step (Riccardo Scamarcio), is a rebellious and unsettled adolescent whose wrath has generational as well as subjective roots. Step, like most teenagers, experiences emotional upheaval as he navigates the process of defining his own identity. However, his poor conduct is also attributed to the emptiness he experiences inside his home, which serves as a metaphor for a degraded bourgeois society that is incapable of providing the necessary foundation for adolescents' growth. As viewers find out later in the film,

[38] In 2004, […] thanks to the film adaptation of a successful novel written by Federico Moccia [...]*Three Meters Above Heaven* like the novel from which it was based [...] quickly became a cult phenomenon, thus bringing Italian film production back towards the exploitation of the world of adolescence" (My translation).

Step is convicted of aggression perpetrated against a man who is afterward revealed to be his mother's lover.

The plot, as the iconography of the movie, draws openly from the American teen picture. Like a Mediterranean dark-hair James Dean, Riccardo Scamarcio wears a leather jacket (Catherine O' Rawe 2014) that reminds spectators of the JD that the genre has culturally constructed, making no secret of the reference. In one scene, when the protagonist attempts to wear something else while preparing for a party, he is teased by his closest friend Pollo, who bluntly remarks that "he looks like shit". The uncomplimentary comment highlights that Step is not his usual self in a different attire.

Similar to *Rebel Without A Cause, Tre Metri Sopra il Cielo* also delves into the subject of racing, with a transliteration into motorbikes rather than cars. Like Jim, Step participates in bike races mainly for the thrill rather than for financial gain, since he hails from a wealthy family. Bearing another resemblance to the quintessential teen movie, Pollo tragically meets his death in a race, thus echoing the character of Buzz[39].

Film critics generally agree that the significance of *Tre Metri Sopra il Cielo* stems from its transmedia nature (Masoerzo, 2012). Prior to its cinematic adaptation, the movie originated as a book authored by Federico Moccia and published in 1994 by a tiny independent publishing house

[39] Regarding the characters, I contend that, compared to Rebel Without a Cause, the female protagonist of *Tre Metri Sopra il Cielo* exhibits some subtle dissimilarities. Babi, a diminutive of Fabrizia, has more dependability and fewer flaws than Judi, as she is an exemplary and diligent high school student who does not express any anger or generational discomfort. The name Babi, which sounds like the English word "baby" (as for child) also seems to underline her innocence. In this sense, one can notice a contiguity between Babi and the topos of a "woman-angel.", which is often seen in Christian religious art and Italian literature. 13th-century Italian writer Dante's portrayal of Beatrice in his works is an example. The "woman-angel" is a graceful and otherworldly entity capable of bestowing salvation on male characters; she communicates attributes of immaculateness, elegance, and rightness, often linked to religious narratives characters, such as angels and the Virgin Mary. Step's first contact with Babi may be indeed described as a visionary experience, as he catches sight of her when she is sitting in the back of a car, shown in a slow-motion scene. Embodying the woman angel, and thus impersonating a more locale literature topos, Babi works in the the plot as the agent capable of rescuing Step, yet eventually failing.

in Rome. The book did not achieve significant commercial success. Still, it rapidly gained popularity via word-of-mouth, with teenagers circulating photocopied copies of the book, thus inaugurating an exciting case of grassroots participation. After the success of the film adaptation in 2004, the manuscript, once reissued, sold 2.5 million copies, becoming also a literary success (Catherine O'Rawe 2014).

Along with the book and film, *Three Meters Above the Sky* has also been a musical (toured in 2007-2008), a CD (with the release of the film's soundtrack by Phantom in 2004), and a few fan-produced renditions that enhance the transmedia nature of this product. It is worth mentioning that with *Tre Metri Sopra il Cielo*, transmedia, hypertext, and participatory culture finally emerged in the youth culture in Italy. Nevertheless, I would argue that they appeared in Italy only in the early twentieth century, which is later than in the United States. Furthermore, as I shall examine in detail in the section dedicated to Teen Television, these elements infused with youth media culture are confined to a single instance, merely one movie, and in the domain of cinema. The movie extensively incorporates elements from the American adolescent genre, providing more evidence of the fragmented, unstable, and less developed parallel in Italy.

4.2 BN and AN: Snapshot of the Italian television landscape before and after Netflix

Prior to examining *Zero* and *Baby* I provide an overview of the Italian television landscape before the arrival of Netflix in order to elucidate how the streaming platform positioned itself in the Italian market. This part also serves as a preliminary discussion for the subsequent analysis of Italian Teen Television. Before delving into the representation of youth culture on the screen, it is necessary to understand Italian broadcasters.

One can summarize the history of television in Italy in three waves (Aldo Grasso 2011). From 1954 to 1975, Italian TV consisted mainly of the monopoly of the public service broadcasting

RAI. As a public service broadcaster, RAI followed in the British Broadcast Company's footsteps. In other words, like the BBC, its mission was to inform, educate, and entertain. Concrete proof of the educational purpose of public service RAI was, for example, the cultural phenomenon established in the 50s with the program *'Non è mai troppo tardi'* ('It is never too late'). Hosted by language teacher Alberto Manzi, *'Non è mai troppo tardi'* had the mission to educate a culturally fragmented audience to learn the national tongue, Italian, that intellectuals had come up with only after the country's Unification in 1861.

The period from 1975 and 1995 saw the emergence of commercial television, which was referred to as the second wave of Italian television. The second wave was characterized by media deregulation, i.e. the absence of any national regulations on frequency allocation. This allowed anybody to begin broadcasting by using existing free-to-air frequencies. The only restraint imposed by the law was, in fact, to broadcast locally: a loose limitation that TV companies soon worked around through the practice of broadcast syndication.

Among the moguls who took advantage of the syndication was former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi, who launched Mediaset Group in the 1980s by leasing the right to Mediasets' shows to multiple local TV stations. The launch of Mediaset marked the beginning of a new era in the Italian media landscape, ending the longstanding monopoly of RAI and introducing the American commercial TV model to Italy. This resulted in around-the-clock TV schedules with designated time slots and repeated programming, as well as, most notably, the flood of American TV shows such as *Dallas* in Italy.

The third wave of Italian television, spanning from 1995 to the 2000s, marks the emergence of Pay-TV and the beginning of the satellite TV era. Part of the multinational media conglomerate

SKY – put in place by tycoon Rupert Murdoch in 1988[40] – SKY Italia started in 2003. As Jean K. Chalaby argues: "[in the 1980s], satellite technology was being recognized as an exciting new medium that would provide an opportunity to disseminate the 'best' of European television to the 'widest possible' European audience." (Jean K. Chalaby 2005, 46). Fulfilling the mission of airing the 'best', SKY Italia – 20 years later – has dedicated itself to airing TV series with a more refined and sophisticated style: works based on the selection of darker, grittier, and more controversial issues, intricate characters, and rich storylines, overall made this Pay-TV stand out in the Italian television landscape (Massimo Scaglioni and Luca Barra 2013).

According to Dana Renga: "Unlike Rai's pedagogical programming and Mediaset's middlebrow model, Sky shows are, for the most part, in line with series dubbed as 'quality television'"[41] (Dana Renga 2019, 106). Renga's intention here is to convey that the RAI television series are historically known for their tendency to prioritize social dramas. Highly pedagogical and informative, RAI's TV shows have often been conceived as linear biographies focusing on the lives of historical and public figures who significantly impacted Italy's history, thus targeting mainly a local generalist audience. The subjects, as well as the structure of these shows, have a local cultural connotation since they consistently choose the miniseries format, which further restricts their exportability, given the prevailing desire in the TV market for long-running series.

On the other hand, Mediaset's shows suffered from an excessive emphasis on melodrama, resulting in storylines often imbued with soap opera conventions. The plots have indeed depended on uncomplicated storylines, where the focus is mostly on the characters' relationships, which

[40] And today in the UK, Austria, Germany, Ireland, Spain, and Switzerland.

[41] *Quality television*, as defined in Chapter I (pp. 30-31), is an analytical category created by American TV academics. It refers to a select group of TV shows broadcast by cable networks such as HBO, deemed noteworthy owing to their exceptional production quality and *narrative comple*xity.

usually include both romance and family. Sentimentality and action are thus prioritized above the growth and progression of the characters in Mediaset's TV series.

While RAI and Mediaset's shows have often been categorized as mainstream and middlebrow, which in most cases made them hard to go through international distribution, SKY's TV series proved to have a much global appeal. One example is the TV series *Gomorrah* (2014 – 2021), hailed by both media and scholars as an outstanding instance of that American "quality television" mentioned by Renga and discussed in Chapter II. The Los Angeles Times, for example, dubbed *Gomorrah* as 'Italy's most popular TV show ever' (Mary McNamara 2016); Variety defined it as "Italy's answer to *The Wire*" (Giovanni Vimercati 2014), and the *New York Times* placed it third in the rankings of the Best TV Shows of 2016 (James Poniewozik 2016).

Gomorrah is a crime drama pivoting on the illicit drug trafficking managed by the Neapolitan mob. The TV series is based on Roberto Saviano's 2006 bestseller, a non-fiction investigative work that exposes the lucrative illegal businesses controlled by the mafia-like crime syndicate, the Camorra, in southern Italy. The subject, which has sparked several debates about Italy's portrayal abroad, categorizes *Gomorrah* as part of the edgy and gritty American shows à la HBO. Barra and Scaglioni, in fact, argue that the show's ability to cater to the preferences of global audiences is achieved by incorporating elements from American cable series, such as narrative complexity, genre, and high-budget production values.

In order to frame Netflix within the Italian television landscape, it is crucial to comprehend the role and identity of SKY. Echoing Timothy Havens' idea of the similarities between HBO and Netflix discussed in Chapter II, I claim that one must look at SKY to understand Netflix's entry and works in Italy. Both SKY and Netflix position themselves as transnational broadcasters within the Italian TV landscape. They operate in both international and state realms, which might explain

why, despite their involvement in television programs that showcase Italian culture, they are dedicated to cultivating a distinct brand identity as exceptional television storytellers, apart from the domestic television landscape.

Mareike Jenner contends that for Netflix, "transnationalism […] is a complex network of practices of domestication and cultural exchange, of relationships audiences have with U.S. imports and existing national media systems, of the internet and television, the national and the transnational" (Mareike Jenner 2019, 192). By taking into account Jenner's view on Netflix's transnational nature and its effects on how the OTT related to Italian TV channels, one may comprehend the rationale for the initial agreement between SKY and Netflix concerning the rights to *Gomorrah*. Following its original airing on the American pay-tv channel, Sundance TV, in 2016, *Gomorrah* became available in a few of Netflix's national libraries.[42]

In addition, perhaps also influenced by the noteworthy response of Netflix transnational subscribers to *Gomorrah*[43], the online content provider decided to produce a crime drama as its first Italian original television series. After launching its streaming service in Italy in October 2015[44], Netflix released *Suburra* the year after.

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[42] In 2018, Netflix made *Gomorrah* available in several countries, including the United States. Even today, despite library changes due to distribution rights, spectators from Belgium and the Netherlands can access *Gomorrah* on Netflix

[43] According to Parrot Analytics, the 2018 most in-demand Italian TV shows abroad were *Medici - Masters of Florence* (RAI), followed by *Gomorrah* (SKY) and *The Young Pope* (SKY). *Winx Club* (produced by RAI, but available on Netflix), *Baby* (Netflix Original), *Rome* (HBO, BBC, and RAI Fiction), *Mia and Me* (Rai Rainbow S.p.a and Rai Fiction, present in Netflix's catalogs), *Skam Italia* (produced by TimVision and Netflix), *Montalbano* (RAI) and *1992* (Sky Italia) follow the list.

[44] The introduction of the OTT service in Italy coincided with Louis Brennan's idea of the third stage in Netflix's global expansion (Louis Brennan 2021). Initially, the internet content provider targeted nations that were easily accessible owing to their close geographical proximity. Canada and Latin America were among the first nations to see the debut of Netflix because the OTT's initial technological infrastructures (hardware supports, such as silicon chips, computers, fiber-optic cables, routers, servers, copper telephone wires, and satellite) allowed short cover. Subsequently, once it upgraded its network, Netflix moved to those national markets where the proximity was cultural. For *culture proximity*, one should understand Joseph D., Straubhaar's idea that TV shows travel more easily among countries that share cultural values. As a cultural value, language can facilitate the flow of TV content among geographical regions that share the same idiom. The nations where Netflix launched in the second stage, in fact, included the UK, Finland, Norway, and Sweden, without exception. Lastly, the third stage of Netflix's expansion

Suburra is a television crime drama that revolves around the illicit activities of local gangsters living in Rome. Similar to *Gomorrah*, the storyline of *Suburra* is based on actual events. In the case of the former, the story is drawn upon Roberto Saviano's 2006 journalistic investigation of the Neapolitan mob, and in the latter, the narrative is freely adapted from the political administration's corruption in Rome that surfaced publicly in 2014. The continuity in the choice of genre and topic between *Suburra* and *Gomorrah* underlines Netflix's strategic decision to engage in criminal dramas that include the cultural portrayals of the Mafia, recognizing their potential profitability. I contend that the genre's international popularity drove Netflix's consideration. The list of TV series with both realistic and fictional depictions of the Italian mob and mafia operations is long, in Italy and abroad. An illustrative example is *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999 - 2007), which is perhaps one of the most recent pop portrayals of the "global multinational of crime" that originated in rural western Sicily (Roberto Dainotto 2018, 22).

By generating international interest, a genre like this also captures national attention, thereby meeting Netflix's need to operate in both global and local contexts as a transnational television platform. As Dana Renga claims: "The Italian Mafia is an ongoing, deadly, and national problem that, as of yet, cannot be classified as a cultural trauma [...] because of its seemingly endless nature." (Dan Renga 2013, 24) The continued existence of the Mafia in Italy is a matter of great concern for the Italian populace since it is a persistent and significant problem at a national level. Netflix undoubtedly took into account the pervasiveness of such an issue in the Italian cultural milieu by producing a story that pivots around an endemic social plague in Italy as well

pertained to having more content in languages alongside the prevailing English, taking the content provider to countries such as Italy.

as abroad. As a matter of fact, the Mafia has been found operating also outside Italy, thus affecting more than one country.

However, the global reception of *Suburra* (2017 - 2020) was relatively tepid, as proved by its cancellation after only three seasons. Also, the TV show did not appear in the 2018 top ten in-demand series list of the study conducted by US-based data science company Parrot Analytics (see note 39). The modest success of *Suburra* might also shed light on why Netflix decided, after that, to focus on the teen drama genre, with series like *Baby* and *Zero*, that I will analyze in the following chapters. Netflix TV shows in the Italian language revolving around youth, such as *Baby* (2018 - 2020), *Skam Italia* (2019 -), *Zero* (2020), *Summertime* (2020 - 2022), and *La Vita Bugiarda Degli Adulti* (2022), are a few examples of Italian-language teen shows commissioned or purchased by Netflix since its inception in the country in 2015.

These Italian shows, furthermore, are part of a broader trend of teen series produced worldwide by this US-based streaming platform (Mareike Jenner 2018, 186) that has earned Netflix a reputation as a worldwide storyteller of youth content. In the last few years, this content provider has managed to brand itself to young audiences as the must-watch streaming platform when it comes to teen television. The online buzz over Netflix's teen series, with dozens of web magazines and discussion posts on social media in which critics and spectators discuss Netflix's latest teen titles, crowns Netflix[45] as the "king of teen content" (Sabrina Reed 2021).

[45]After the 2015 launch, Netflix has consistently grown in numbers and popularity in Italy, going from a subscription base of 800,000 users in 2017 to roughly 4,000,000 in 2021 and 8,900,000 in 2023. Although these numbers might seem unimportant, they should be compared to the relatively Italian small population of 60.000.000. Also, in the mediascape of non-free-to-air channels, despite representing one of the most critical pay-TVs operating in the country since 2009, the main satellite television Sky has less than five million subscribers. It is impossible to establish a direct relationship between the release of these teen shows and the expansion of Netflix in the country due to the lack of official data about the platform. However, it is my future intention to conduct additional research on both Italian and transnational audiences to get a deeper understanding of the influence that these Netflix teen shows might have had on the growth of the online streaming service in Italy (Alessandro Patella 2023).

4.3 The History of Teen Tv in Italy before Netflix: Two Examples of Teen Series

In the history of Italian television, the attention paid to the teenage demographic by the national broadcasters presents some fluctuations. Nevertheless, one can identify three crucial phases in which national programming seemed to be apparently more geared toward teens. In the following section, I examine these three stages to identify the local teen dramas produced by Italian Television and establish how they diverge from or conform to the idea of transmedia narrative, intertextuality and genre hybridization previously discussed. Keeping in mind that what follows is an oversimplification of a much more complex media setting, I identify these three instances of Teen Television in Italy with the dawn of broadcastings, commercial television's appearance, and the end of the 1990s, when US teen shows had the largest impact on Italian programming (Enrico Menduni 2004).

I base my categorization on the study of the Italian programming that Luca Barra conducts in his book *La Programmazione Televisiva* (2022). Building upon Raymond William's idea of flow, Barra reconstructs the history of Italian programming – from its origins to the present day – to highlight how the intertwining of shows in the TV schedules has been fundamental for the Italian networks to build solid and specific brand images that audiences could easily recognize and engage with.[46]

In that intertwining of programs, a moderate commitment to entertaining youth through targeted content certainly emerged over the years in Italian television. However, the spectrum of

[46] Brand image is the way customers perceive the brand based on their interactions and experiences with the company. Consumers' opinions stem from the usage or purchase of goods and services connected to the brand. However, they also build upon an idea of the brand constructed primarily by marketing campaigns, which does not necessarily build upon first-hand consumption. Thompson, Craig J., Aric Rindfleisch, and Zeynep Arsel. "Emotional Branding and the Strategic Value of the Doppelgänger Brand Image." *Journal of marketing* 70.1 (2006): 50–64. For broadcasters, brand images are as important as any other commercial company because they draw viewers based on the expectations that they create.

shows that fall into the category of Teen Television is not exclusive to teen dramas. Instead, drama series produced locally to cater to the young demographic are merely a part of a larger group of content – and not the most prominent. The televisual time and space dedicated to youth that Barra and other scholars pinpoint as *La TV dei ragazzi* (i.e., TV for Young Viewers) is, in fact, a jumble of various programs (Aldo Grasso 2011; Luca Barra, 2022). For the most part cartoons, quizzes, music contests, and entertaining shows for kids historically blend with a few examples of teen dramas (to which I will return below) that emerge only later in the history of Italian television. TV critics and scholars generally group all these programs in the same category of Teen Television almost indistinctively on account of the way Italian national channels cultivated the audience of Teen TV. For broadcasters, indeed, the teenage demographic presented itself almost as an amorphous social category in which kids – and not teenagers – were the prioritized target of programming.

At least in the first instance of Teen Television, identifiable with the beginning of public service RAI in 1954, broadcasters arranged their schedules to cater to children rather than teenagers because Italy's post-war youth market – in contrast to the USA and UK – had a different socio-economic history. As discussed in Chapter III, the teenage market was thriving in both the United States and Britain throughout the 1950s and 1960s, as young people had more money to spend. The increased earnings of this demographic served as the driving force behind the youth expenditure on certain products that came to define this socioeconomic group. The acquisition of records and record players, bicycles, and motorbikes developed into a typical consumption pattern among teenagers.

Unlike their American and British counterparts, post-war Italy did not see the period between preadolescence and maturity as a distinct socio-economic group with its own purchasing

power. Compared to the USA and UK countries, where the socioeconomic formation of teenage demand was becoming prominent, Italy had not yet discovered the market potential of teens after World War II, despite the country's economic growth. The reasons why Italy downplayed the youth market were to be found in the way teenagers were sociologically either pushed back to childhood or, most likely, advanced to adulthood by society. In a condition of overall economic welfare ignited by the "reconstruction program"[47], the increase in average disposable salary for young people paradoxically caused a contraction in the time of adolescence, fast-forwarding the entering of young people into adulthood.

The variation in the timing (and idea) of adolescence in the UK, USA, and Italy may be attributed to the fact that youth "is less the result of transformations in human physiology than changes in lifestyles, social practices and economic conditions" (Elana Levine and Lisa Parks 2007, 23). Described as the time in a person's life when they have reached complete physical and mental development, adulthood is, in fact, a relative concept subject to socio-economic and cultural determinants. What defines the entering into adulthood by young people is generally the departure from the family of origin associated with life steps such as becoming employed, having economic stability, and starting a new household.

As a result of the increased economic prosperity of the 1950s, a larger percentage of Italians were classified as adults compared to the decades before and after. ISTAT, the Italian National

[47] At the dawn of public television RAI, Italy was finally starting to harvest the fruits of the "reconstruction program," a four-year postbellum agreement among the winning countries, whose scope was to rebuild towns, industries, and infrastructure that were severely devastated during the war. After World War II, in the form of food, fuel, and funds, the Marshall Plan assisted Italy in establishing the secondary sector, which expanded Italian industrial activities while boosting the trade between European countries and the United States. By shifting from the pre-war prominence of the agricultural sector to manufacturing and engineering, Italy wholeheartedly started exporting locally produced goods, such as fashionable clothing, art-designed furniture, and daily appliances. Those exports would lay the foundation of the *Italian economic miracle*, which during the boom years of 1958–1963 made Italy register yearly industrial growth rates topping 8% (Martin Clark, John Foot, Britannica).

Institute of Statistics, established in 1926 as a public research organization focused on gathering data about the country's population, reports that individuals from the 1940s and 1950s in Italy reached adulthood at an earlier age in contrast to previous and subsequent generations. This was evident in their tendency to marry and have their first child at a younger age (ISTAT, 16). During the 1950s, in fact, women typically got married and had their first child at about the age of 24-25, according to ISTAT (118-120).

While American and British teens were beginning to form a unique social group with distinctive shopping habits, Italian youth appeared to utilize their early economic power to emancipate themselves from their families and become adults. Because of Italy's catholic culture, marriage was considered a crucial threshold to maturity, which may explain why the 1950s generation viewed adulthood as a life achievement they should prioritize. "Rushing" into adulthood through marriage at a young age was also the only way for many to free themselves from a widespread family system that disparaged prenuptial sex – especially for women. Only by looking at how young Italians hurried into adulthood can one contextualize Italian television's limited interest in youth at its dawn. Unlike the USA or UK, where the increase in teenage spending was much more spectacular and justified the production of TV shows such as *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis* in the 50s, in Italy, being a teenager was still socially indefinite and certainly associated with a weak market.

In the initial debut of Italian Teen Television, RAI targeted the younger demographic with a minimal distinction between children, preteens, and young adults, but nevertheless pointing primarily at the former social group. On the very first day of broadcasting, January 3rd, 1954, RAI devoted a time slot to youngsters named "La tv dei ragazzi" (TV for Young Viewers). In a daily broadcasting that did not begin until 5:30 p.m., the roughly first hour of weekday programming

aired documentaries, cartoons, and foreign television series meant for the little ones. As the TV listing outlined by Barra indicates (Table 2), content for kids such as cartoons and short films dominated the time slot TV for Young Viewers where – though in much smaller numbers – one can also find programs such as *The Range Rider* (CBS 1951 - 1953) and *Ragazzi in gamba* (*Smart Kids*). If the first is a CBS's western TV show, the second is a locally produced docuseries that is less a teen series than a reportage about the sociological profile of the 1950s Italian youth.

In constrast to early kid-oriented programming, *I Diari di Giulietta* (*Giulietta's Diaries*) stands out as an odd exception worthy of further investigation. Based on the teen novel series of the same name written by Giana Anguissola, this 21-episode TV show revolves around the sixteen-year-old girl Giulietta and the typical tribulations of a teenager. Giulietta plays the Italian bourgeois adolescent who is often at odds with her family's beliefs, in a never-ending generational conflict. She argues with her father that people are valuable regardless of their family's name, disagreeing with the norms of the elitist society in which she lives. She battles for greater independence from her family, falls in love with boys – which raises concern among her male family members – and feels terrible for earning a bad grade: all aspects of the teenage self-actualization process.

La settimana dal 3 al 9 gennaio 1954

Domenica 3 gennaio	Lunedì 4 gennaio	Martedì 5 gennaio	Mercoledì 6 gennaio	Giovedì 7 gennaio	Venerdì 8 gennaio	Sabato 9 gennaio
11. Telecronache dirette delle cerimonie di inaugurazione degli studi di Milano e dei trasmettitori di Torino e Roma 14.30. *Arrivi e partenze* 14.45. Cortometraggio 15. *Orchestra delle quindici* 15.30. Cortometraggio 15.45. *Pomeriggio sportivo* 17.30. Film: *Le miserie del signor Travet* 19. *Le avventure dell'arte* 20.45. Telegiornale 21.15. *Teledub* 21.45. Commedia: *L'osteria della posta* 22.45. *Settenote* 23.15. *La domenica sportiva*	17.30. Documentario per le ragazze: *Il diario di Giulietta* 20.45. *Telesport* 21. Concerto vocale strumentale 21.30. Film: *Passione ardente*	17.30. Documentario per i ragazzi: *Le avventure di Rex Raider* Cartone animato: *I fratelli Dinamite* 20.45. Teledramma: *Operazione Monna Lisa* 21. Musica leggera: *I Love You, Je t'aime, io t'amo* 21.30. Parte della rivista *Baracca e burattini* 22. Teledramma 22.30. Dibattito: *Il problema degli affitti* 23. Replica telegiornale	17.30. Documentario per ragazzi: *Ragazzi in gamba*. Cartone animato 19. *Strapaese* 20.45. Telegiornale 21. Film: *È l'amor che mi rovina* 22.30. Replica telegiornale	17.30 Cortometraggio per bambini 18. Film: *I promessi sposi* 20.45. Telegiornale 21. *Una risposta per voi* 21.15. *Antologia del buonumore* 22. *Il prossimo tuo* 22.30. Replica telegiornale	17.30 Cortometraggio per bambini: *Arlecchino presenta Il paese dei giocattoli* 20.45. Telegiornale 21. *Candida* 22.30. Replica telegiornale	17.30. *Riservato alle signore* 18. Presentazione di nuovi film 18.10. *Il mondo è piccolo. Viaggio in Islanda* 20.45. Gli avvenimenti della settimana 21. Notiziario sportivo 21.05. *Sette giorni di tv* 21.20. Quiz: *Attenti al fiasco* 22.05. Teledramma: *La dama del ritratto*

Table 2. TV programming, Week One of RAI's broadcasting

I Diari di Giulietta aside, kid-oriented content outweighed the scripted shows (TV series and movies) meant for teenagers in the initial iteration of Teen Television, suggesting that Italian broadcasters conceived this time slot for youngsters as a mix of formats and genres that indulge kids' interests more than that of young adults. Teen Television's dedication to producing educational and fun-filled programs for children rather than teenagers also prevailed in the following decades. As an example of RAI's productive effort aimed to entertain young children, one may look at the massive hit that *Topo Gigio* became in Italian mainstream culture. Conceived in 1958 by artist Maria Perego as a dreamy-eyed, childlike foam mouse, *Topo Gigio* debuted on

RAI in 1959 and soon became the example of a prolific local TV franchise able to spawn several derivative works. After its launch, a seemingly countless number of animated cartoons, puppet shows, comics, and movies featured this character on Italian Teen Television (Aldo Grasso 2019).[48]

In order to comprehend why public service paid less attention to teenage audiences in Italy than in the United States, it is necessary to consider the Italian television system and national culture more broadly. The origin of Italian television was dominated by locally produced dramas, known as *sceneggiati*, which were predominantly adaptations of popular and historical literature (both Italian and European). Between 1954 and 1960, RAI aired 26 *sceneggiati*, a large number that Milly Buonanno attributes to the effort of "nation-building" pursued by the public service (Milly Buonanno 2012). In the 1950s, *sceneggiati* aimed to teach a largely illiterate, culturally diverse populace about a common past and a feeling of national identity via the recreation of key historical events drawn from the novelistic tradition.

Elisa Giomi emphasizes how "TV dramas are like a document that offers a truthful portrayal not of a society and its culture in a given historical period, but of the ways in which this society and culture make sense of the dominant fears, desires, anxieties, and ideological tensions of that period by articulating them in the form of a common language" (Elisa Giomi 2007, 80). A *sceneggiato* such as *I Promessi Sposi* (The Betrothed), adapted by RAI in 1967 from the eighteenth-century novel by Alessandro Manzoni, is, for instance, indicative of a desire to speak to a culturally fragmented audience in order to establish a cultural and language liaison with different local populations. This programming reflected how, one hundred years after Unification,

[48] Interestingly, after his appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in the US in 1963, *Topo Gigio*'s fame extended beyond Italy: from Latin America to Japan, from Western Europe to the former Yugoslavia, the Italy-based character of *Topo Gigio* mesmerized kids worldwide (Neil Genzlinger 2021).

Italy's multiculturalism and regional variety remained strong, opposing the construction of a national identity. About a century earlier than RAI, Manzoni had tried to do the same by writing a book that, by investigating the historical causes of Italian backwardness, hoped to convince the progressive bourgeoisie to take over the establishment of an Italian nation.[49] Aiming at Italy's political, cultural, and language unification, Manzoni also used a variant of Italian that he hoped could have unifying effects on the readers.

The spread of *sceneggiati* and national television's commitment to telling a 'Story' that could be considered common and shared by the Italian population are two essential elements, I argue, for comprehending how the codes, styles, and aesthetics of social dramas easily took root in the Italian television landscape.

Social dramas generally consist of stories based on events and characters of historic and public interest of one (or more than one) community, such as wars, celebrations, political scandals, and national heroes (Milly Buonanno 2012). By recounting the history of the society, locations, characters, and narratives of national relevance, social dramas strive to foster a feeling of collective identity (Dudková, 2015). The mediated realism of social dramas, which stems from narrativizing actual events about a community, turns into a social commentary on the past that becomes relevant to the community represented on the screen. Only by acknowledging the impetus to construct a common identity through the narration of the past, and the commitment of public media to fulfilling that need, can one understand the popularity of social dramas in the Italian media landscape over the years (Barra and Scaglioni 2015).

Given this particular focus in programming, Italian public television limited the airing of youth-oriented content, even after the birth of RAI's second and third channels in 1961 and 1979.

[49] For this reason, critics consider Manzoni's book the first modern novel of Italian literature.

Barra reports that the only significant change was the recurrence of TV for Young Viewers, which increased to more than one slot, including the morning and weekends – also as a consequence of the daily transmissions being gradually extended to 24 hours.

In addition, RAI started gradually diversifying kid-oriented programs from content meant for adolescents, especially in the morning with cultural and educational programming meant for older kids. Nevertheless, no mention of scripted series dedicated to teenagers emerges from *TV for Young Viewers* in this period, suggesting that it continued to be a block programming aimed at a more general young audience, with younger children remaining the key target.

I would argue that RAI's attention toward the little ones may be even more plausible, considering that the increased birthrates in 1963, 1964, and 1965 years meant a growing demographic of "baby viewers" by the 1970s (ISTAT, 37). When faced with the decision of targeting either children or teenagers, RAI decided to prioritize children. As a public broadcasting corporation with the goal of reaching a wide audience, RAI was in fact aware that programming designed for kids, such as cartoons, may equally appeal to adults (Kodi Maier 2019).

The idea of speaking to a young audience primarily through kid-oriented content persevered with the advent of commercial television. Nevertheless, *Mediaset* Group, launched by former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi in 1975, differentiated its TV scheduling from RAI by increasingly using block programming and thematizing time slots and channels modeled after American TV. The result was that Italian commercial television organized its networks and hours around specific genres, putting into practice the strategy of niche marketing, and thus meeting the needs of specific demographics that national television might have neglected.

As a consequence, Mediaset characterized its three channels based on the reference demographics, which meant that while the flagship network, Canale 5, broadened its appeal to the

widest possible audience, the other two company channels worked on narrowcasting their offerings. Focusing on specific segments of audiences, commercial television started devoting its attention to a younger audience, primarily male, with the creation of Italia 1 in 1982. With a much more youthful and dynamic brand image, Italia 1 leaned toward “una programmazione popolare in senso ‘basso’ e giovanile ("a more popular and teen-oriented programming", my translation) (Luca Barra 2022, 114) that imported largely the globalized American TV series (Enrico Menduni 2006; Amanda Lotz 2018). Over the years, the high ratings achieved by TV programs like Sabrina The Teenage Witch, Buffy, and Dawson's Creek on Italia 1 demonstrate the long-lasting affection of younger Italian viewers for American TV shows (and most specifically teen content).

In an effort to engage with younger spectators, Italia 1 also embarked on a local production of teen content, producing a scripted show that is the closest example to the teen genre from those years, *I ragazzi della 3 C* (*The 11th Grade Students from section C*) dwells on the ludicrous and clichéd events of a group of high school students based in Rome. The story and characters are superficial, as revealed by the first episode, which centers on the juvenile rivalry between two school sections that the protagonists decide to “solve” by organizing a boxing match. The impression of physical comedy, exaggerated actions, visual vulgarity, and the one-dimensional characters that recur into *I ragazzi della 3 C* hold on the codes of the slapstick genre, whose origins can be found in the *Commedia dell'Arte*, the Italian theatrical form that thrived throughout Europe between the 16th and 18th centuries (Louise Peacock 2019).

According to Aldo Grasso, the one-dimensional element of the characters in *I ragazzi della 3 C* stems come from the teen photo romances (or photo novels), the genre of illustrated love stories born as a byproduct of Italian cinema after World War II. Conceived initially as snapshots from movies organized in a comic strip format that summarized the plots, photo novels turned into

original illustrated stories that editors published in women's periodicals all over the world. In the 1970s and 1980s, photo romances became a media phenomenon beyond Italy, circulating in France, French-speaking nations, Latin America, and South Africa (Miguel Raquel de Barros Pinto 2021). One of the apparent connections of *I ragazzi della 3 C* to photo novels lies in the shows' opening credits. Here, moving images freeze suddenly to introduce the characters through a sort of still photography shot that evokes the snapshots used in photo romances.

Following the characterization process examined by Mosley, in *I ragazzi della terza C*, the protagonists' physical appearance becomes almost the primary marker of distinction that establishes the kaleidoscope of the cliched Italian school tropes populating the story. The charming womanizer who repeatedly fails school, the gullible overweight boy who eats his feelings, the shallow popular girl, and the know-it-all student are a few of the stock characters in the story. The show reproduces culturally hegemonic stereotypes about Italian youth while superficially investigating social issues regarding this demographic.

Throughout the 1990's, Italian broadcast schedules included a decisive numbers of American teen series, further confirmation of the dominance of youth programming from the US market (Enrico Menduni 2006; Massimo Scaglioni 2007). In spite of the ample presence of US teen content on Italian channels – or by virtue of that – the production of teen programming by the local TV industry remained negligible. The predominance of viewers from older adult generations, in tandem with national broadcasting companies' focus on reaching a general TV audience, meant that making teen dramas remained of little interest to the Italian media market. As a result, even locally produced TV series targeting youth culture and marketed as teen television were adjusted according to the conventions of family comedy, thus including stories and characters that aimed at much more transgenerational spectators.

As an example of the transgenerational audience toward which Italian teen television leaned, I propose the analysis of *Compagni di Scuola* (*Schoolmates)*, a 2001 teen-oriented series broadcast by Rai 2, RAI's second channel. By the time *Compagni di Scuola* aired, this network had already attempted to cater to a younger demographic, as proved by its programming of American teen dramas, such as *Popular* (1999 - 2001) and *Roswell* (1999 - 2002)

*Compagni di Scuol*a is a youth-focused series created by RAI, based on the Spanish format *Compañero*s (Antena 3 from 1998 to 2002). The top-down multimedia component of the Spanish franchise, i.e., text and paratexts arranged by the television business, allows us to speak of an early example of transmedia narrative. In examining the transmedia nature of *Compañero*s, Francesc Mayor Mayor reports that the series franchise consisted of televised episodes, a film, and a few novels released over five seasons (Francesc Mayor Mayor 2014).

On the other hand, Mayor Mayor describes the audience's grassroots response to the show as unimportant, since user-created content and user cooperation on the internet were limited at the time because of the still-emerging Web 2.0. Spectators had fewer chances to create and spread paratexts of the series on their own.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the Spanish version of Compañeros and the Italian adaption are from the same years as the U.S. series *Dawson's Creek*. In Chapter III, I explored how the transmedia story of this American program, which was originally created by the television industry for commercial purposes, successfully elicited a suitable creative reaction from fans. The inadequate fan reaction to *Compagni di Scuola* deserves more examination to understand if it is a result of heightened audience passivity in the Spanish and Italian contexts, or whether it is attributable to the initial conception of the project. Here, in this context when I am unable to offer more data about the audience, I am more inclined to the second hypothesis.

Compared to the Spanish original, the Italian version of *Compañeros* had no transmedia elements, but merely the televised episodes. Also, there was no DVD collection released, nor even an official website. *Compagni di Scuola* failed to generate any transmedia engagement from fans since RAI designed the program only for a television audience, targeting a broad population with little appeal to teenagers. Despite the name and a few conventions from the American teen stories in the text, *Compagni di Scuola* does not represent an actual example of a teen show.

The plot revolves around the lives of a few high school teachers and students based in Rome. So, as the school is undoubtedly the primary setting where the events unfold, the location would suggest the teen genre as the primary textual reference. Nevertheless, in regard with the setting, there is little hint of the teenage bedroom in *Compagni di Scuola*, replaced almost entirely by the house of the two main characters, i.e., the two brothers and both teachers, Felice and Giovanni. Here, the connoisseurs of the teen series can already detect that one of the conventions of the genre is missing, as the bedroom of teenagers is the main recurring story setting. By not having the teen bedroom, *Compagni di Scuola* overlooks some of the quintessential experiences of adolescence portrayed in American teen media, such as phone conversations with pals, online chats, and journal writing. All of these situations, however typical, serve as narrative instances when we get insight into the character's personality, desires, ambitions, concerns, and worries.

In *Compagni di Scuola*, the lack of the teenager's bedroom indicates on a deeper level the prevailing dominance of adults in the narrative. The focus switches to the grown-ups' work challenges, conflicts, and love pangs. The component of the soap opera is present both in the teachers' storylines since vice principal Felice is secretly in love with a colleague, and in the young students' life, with a love triangle among students Ettore, Anna, and Pietro. However, the genre-mixing discussed for the American teen series here remains limited, as the narrative universe

eventually dwells primarily in the realm of "family comedy", relegating the teenage characters to an ancillary function in the plot.

The family comedy, which has a rich legacy in Italy, focuses on the adventures of multigenerational characters, including both adults and young individuals, capable of captivating audiences of all ages. As evidence of the family comedy component in *Compagni di Scuola*, I point to the limited generational conflict between teenagers and adults typical of the teen genre. In *Compagni di Scuola*, one of the few examples of that conflict occurs in the third episode in which the students confront the chauvinist English literature professor who gives girls worse grades than boys. After yet another sexist comment, the students plot to frame the teacher by documenting via video camera his sexual advances on a student. Ultimately, the instructor is fired, leading to the restoration of the initial balance and harmony that had been disrupted by unforeseen circumstances, (as typical of comedy).

This episode remains one of the few instances of adults who work as antagonists of adolescents in the show. In fact, the series portrays generally teachers as moralizing guides able to help students distinguish between right and wrong. And students often turn to teachers for advice, thereby reinforcing the notion that the school can perform its pedagogical function. In episode five, *Sull'orlo del burrone* (On the Edge of the Ravine), for instance, Felice, the vice principal, comes to the aid of a group of students who have arranged a dangerous road race. The episode, which highlights the mediated realism of social dramas inherent in Italian television – since the topic of the car race relates to the rise in youth vehicular deaths at the end of the 1990s (Micol Lavina Lundari Perini 2023) – ends with the professor successfully settling the issue.

In the end, *Compagnia di Scuola* appears to be a lukewarm attempt by Italian television to produce a teen drama. This is due to the fact that the show does not have a transmedia nature,

which means that it does not present an engagement with the audience beyond the television episodes. Additionally, deviating from the established norms of the genre, the show foregrounds the adult world which eventually plays a central role in the story.

4.4 Chapter Conclusion

In Chapter IV, I discussed that the history of teen films and series in Italy is fragmented and limited. This is due to the lack of investment by the film and TV industry in this genre, as well as the indifference of film and TV critics towards analyzing the few existing examples of teen content.

When it comes to the representation of teenagers on TV, Italian national television proves that it has not historically worked on locally produced teen dramas. Only a small number of Italian teen series have been created, beginning in the 1990s. Examples include *I ragazzi della 3 C* and *Compagni di Scuola*, which, because of a stereotypical portrayal of teenagers' stories and the main focus on the family comedy genre, remain instances of a primal teen drama.

Historically, Italian major television networks have shown little concern for teenage viewers and content, often casting adolescents in supporting roles in dramas. Relegating teens to an ancillary position in the narrative is based on the fact that both RAI and Mediaset target a broad audience as national generalist broadcasters.

Despite the limited number of domestically produced teenage television series, Italian audiences have historically shown interest in this genre. The remarkable popularity of American teen dramas such as *Beverly Hills, 1990 - 2000*, and Dawson's Creek, 1998 - 2004, on Italian TV schedules, confirms the Italian audience's fondness of this type of content.

I argue that Netflix's choice to spend significantly on the teen genre within the context of Italy as proved by the several TV series it has been producing may be attributed to the gap between

market demand and supply in teen dramas in the Italian mediascape. As a matter of fact, this online content provider is experienced in the process of "recovering" local genres and titles in the national markets where it operates. According to Don Holdaway, Cecilia Penati, and Anna Sfardini, Netflix often seeks popular but no longer available shows in order to revive them by producing new seasons. An instance of this phenomenon is the Spanish television series *La casa de papel - Money Heist* (2017 - 2021), which gained worldwide acclaim after being acquired by Netflix, right after its cancellation on the Spanish broadcast Antena 3.

Similarly, Mayka Castellano and Meina Meimaridis describe the way Netflix allures its spectators as an “Audience Recall”, which consists of the "awakening of a certain audience" that is not being historically engaged by local broadcasters. “Audience Recall is used here to analyze Netflix’s strategy of reviving canceled series, a phenomenon that began in 2013 when the company produced a new season of *Arrested Development*, a comedy that despite having an active fan community had been canceled by Fox in 2006" (Mayka Castellano and Meina Meimaridis 2021, 174).

The teen content that Netflix has been focusing on in the last few years when it comes to the Italian market is the same that national television overlooked for decades. As I will discuss in Chapters Four and Five, producing teen content for Netflix means tapping into the teen drama genre globalized by American media, resorting to its textual conventions (narrative, stock characters, visual styles). However, in order to create a glocal product, able to connect with the local audience, Netflix negotiates the global teen drama genre with the Italian cultural and media milieu of Italy.

CHAPTER V

GLOCALIZING TEEN DRAMAS: THE CASE STUDY OF ZERO

5.1 Introducing Zero: a Netflix Glocalized Teen Show

In April 2021, the US online streaming service Netflix released *Zero* (2018), a TV series in Italian, praised by the New York Times as "Italy's first TV show with a majority Black cast." (Elisabetta Provoledo 2021). In the story, Omar is a second-generation Italian in his twenties who discovers he can become invisible. Throughout the eight episodes that comprise the first and only season, the protagonist must learn how to master his power in order to save the Senegalese community that lives in the suburb of Milan. Local criminals have, in fact, planned to gentrify the neighborhood to make a profit over the beautification of the area, intimidating through violence the long-lasting residents to leave their homes.

The self-actualization of the young-adult hero makes *Zero* potentially a coming-of-age story, i.e., a long-lived literary genre that developed widely in mass media culture as teen drama (Glyn Davis and Kay Dickinson, 2004; Ross and Stein, 2008; Marghitu 2021). Although Omar is in his early twenties, somewhat beyond the teenage range, he still needs to undergo the rites of passage typical of the teen show's protagonist, such as leaving the family nest. Omar continues to live with his father and little sister because of economic independence challenges that postpone his transition into adulthood[50]. Nevertheless, for him, the rite of passage into adulthood is somehow twofold, as he must not only learn how to behave like a grownup but also navigate his new life as a superhero to ensure the safety of the Afro-Italian community in Milan.

[50] Omar's complicated self-realization echoes that of contemporary young Italians for whom turning into adults has become more challenging than in other parts of Europe because of the country's economic decrease and population aging. (Maria Luisa Parmigiani 2023).

Pivoting around the life of a newbie superhero with extraordinary abilities, the series is not only a teen drama, but it also establishes itself as a fantasy. As shown in Chapter III, genre hybridity is not uncommon in the teen drama genre. On the contrary, mixing genres is part of the trial-and-error that American teen series went through in the 1990s because of the burgeoning of thematic channels whose brand identity was built around teens. The expanded airtime dedicated to youth-oriented shows on television inevitably resulted in a trend of experimentation that led to genre hybridization in teen series.

As a teen drama produced and distributed by Netflix, *Zero* places itself in the realm of teen series, for which this OTT has shown particular fixation. As largely discussed in the previous chapters, scholars have theorized a 'wave' of Netflix teen shows on a global scale, which can also be noticed in the Italian TV market.

This online streaming service has, in fact, amassed a number of teen dramas in its Italian repertoires, which is significant, especially when considering the minimal teen content in the history of Italian TV (as demonstrated in Chapter IV). *Baby* (2018 - 2020), *Skam Italia* (2019 -), *Summertime* (2020), *Zero* (2021), *La Vita Bugiarda Degli Adulti* (2022), and *DI4RIES* (2022 -) are Italian-language teen shows available on Netflix that, together with *Chilling Adventure of Sabrina* (USA, 2018 - 2020), *Sex Education* (the UK, 2019 -), *Elite* (Spain, 2018), *Sintonia* (Brazil, 2019 -), and *Blood and Water* (South Africa, 2020 -) map the transnational obsession of Netflix for teen products.

Although these teen shows may suggest a certain cultural specificity of their country of origin – as they are, for instance, in the language of the national market for which Netflix produced them or bought the rights, scholar Mareike Jenner argues that they adhere more or less extensively

to the conventions of the American teen series to the point of "de-emphasising the local" in the text (Mareike Jenner 2021, 192).

Jenner specifically argues that in some Netflix teen series, the setting of the story is downplayed to such an extent that viewers find it difficult to associate the narrative with a specific location. Among the examples analyzed, Jenner focuses her attention on the aforementioned show, *Sex Education*. This worldwide Netflix teen content washes away any explicit reference to specific locations so much that a standard British accent becomes the only indicator for viewers to locate the story somewhere in the United Kingdom. “A significant feature here [Sex Education] is the de-nationalisation of texts by removing the local. For *Sex Education*, this means removing the regionality of accents and minority language (Welsh) (Mareike Jenner 2021, 196). Jenner furthermore argues that Netflix deliberately minimized the British cultural imprinting in order to create a teen show that is not tied to any one specific culture, with the goal of maximizing its global appeal.

Contrary to Jenner's idea of de-emphasis on the local and de-nationalization of Netflix teen shows, I argue that in the case of *Zero*, Netflix negotiated the genre conventions of American teen series by accentuating in the text elements that speak of Italian culture. On the one hand, a show like *Zero* complies with the American teen drama for several of the formal components typifying this genre, such as character traits, narrative topics, and the role of popular music in teen TV storytelling.

On the other hand, however, the need to adapt the American teen drama genre to the historical social-cultural milieu of Italy – because of Netflix’s nature as a transnational media player – brings into focus in this TV show a pedagogical and documentarist treatment of local matters. The topics of the gentrification of Milan – concealing illicit operations by the Italian Mafia

– and the escalation of racism towards the Black community in the country flagrantly echo the pattern of social drama, an enormously popular TV genre in the history of Italian public television (see Chapter IV).

It follows that *Zero* is what I define as a *glocal teen drama*. In other words, the tendency of *Zero* to adapt the American teen genre to the social-cultural milieu of Italy and its established TV trends is part of that *glocalization* described by sociologist Roland Robertson as "the process in which phenomena that spread, flow, or are diffused, from one 'place' to another, have to be, and indeed are, adapted to the new locality at which they arrive." (Roland Robertson 2014, 21).

As Robertson explains in his studies on adaptation, *glocalization* is the English word of the Japanese *dochakuka*, and it stands for 'to indigenize.' (1997; 2014 and Joseph Straubhaar 2007). Robertson claims that the phenomenon of glocalization can be understood as "a self-limiting aspect of globalization," (2014, 18) useful to bear in mind in order to question the globalized-homogenized equation. Once that equation is challenged, one can acknowledge that adapting or adjusting an idea to a place – as in the example of a TV show – implies a process of indigenization whereby the local elements of a culture do not necessarily get lost but find a way to counterbalance the components of globalized products.

To demonstrate how glocal *Zero* is, I first situate the show within the teen male melodrama genre, building upon the studies of Miranda J Banks of two American teen shows from the 1990s and 2000s, *Roswell* (1999 - 2002) and *Smallville* (2001 - 2011)[51]. In the same way as its American

[51] I should clarify that my comparison between Zero, featuring a Black male teenager as the main character, and the TV series Smallville and Roswell, which have white protagonists, is not a shortcoming of color blindness (Herman Gray 2013). Put simply, my methodology does not align with the neoliberal post-racial approach that transcends the concept of race, particularly when media portrayal is heavily influenced by racial categorization. I could have provided a different contextual framework for Zero by comparing it to television shows featuring black protagonists in the USA. However, it should be noted that there seems to be a scarcity of Black teen superheroes in the 1990s and 2000s (the

counterparts, *Zero* presents itself as a teen male melodrama because of how the show centers the figure of the male protagonist, Omar (Giuseppe Dave Seke), in the story. As a Black Italian who struggles to integrate into Italian society, as a young adult who finds it difficult to conform to the established norms set by adults, and as a hero who carries on his shoulders the burden of saving others, Omar embodies the self-sacrificing and heroic protagonist of teen male melodrama (Miranda J Banks 2004).

Highlighting the contiguity between *Zero, Roswell, and Smallville* allows us to categorize Netflix's TV series as an American teen show, thus confirming the part of *glocalization* that is to assimilate and replicate global trends. Conforming to the conventions of the American teen genre is also the role of popular music in *Zero*. The soundtrack of *Zero* has a distinct influence from American youth drama, particularly in the way pop music is seamlessly integrated into the visuals, according to logic established by the music cable channel MTV and later merged with the formation of the teen genre.

At the same time, however, *Zero* displays a layered hybridization by systematically ingraining a few formal elements of the American teen drama genre with social, political and cultural matters that are of interest to Italy. A vivid example of that hybridization is the meta-

two decades when the teen drama genre reached its peak). During the 1990s, there were a few black superheroes featured in movies rather than TV shows, such as The Meteor Man (1993) and Blank Man (1994). However, the main characters are not adolescents and their plots are not coming-of-age stories. It is also worth mentioning that the television programs that were imported from the USA to Italy throughout the 1990s and 2000s mostly featured white main characters. An exception to this trend was The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air (1990 - 1996), which achieved considerable popularity on national TV, as demonstrated by the many rerunning. However, it should also be noted that this show does not fall into the category of supernatural teen drama, and it is therefore not the ideal show to which one should compare Zero. The lack of adequate portrayal of Black characters on Italian television is further corroborated by Antonio Dikele Disteano, Zero's creator. In an interview with the show's lead actor Giuseppe Dave Seke, Distefano expresses his disappointment as a black kid growing up in Italy with the dearth of Black media representation on national TV. As a joke, Distefano also remarked that, during the France vs. Italy soccer match in the 2006 World Cup, he was supporting the French squad because of the presence of black players on the French team. Ultimately, the choice to use the television series Smallville and Roswell as a theoretical framework in the analysis of Zero is primarily influenced by the central theme of my research, which centers on the exploration of the teen genre. Setting aside discussions about race, the three programs are remarkably similar because of the way they tap into the teen male drama. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dE1eVoInjAs

diegetic meaning of the soundtrack, which, by employing both the public persona of pop singer Mahmood and his music, points to the country's recent inclusivity issues and discrimination encountered by second-generation Italians.

Topics such as racism and the difficulties encountered by multi-ethnic groups in integrating into Italian society because of the absence of legislation regulating second-generation Italians have periodically galvanized the attention of the country via politics and music in recent years. Moving away from the teen genre conventions – for which the cultural background of the story setting should not matter – *Zero* functions as a social commentary, providing a critical perspective on Italy's public political and social discourse. Adapting the show to content and matters that are relevant to the Italian public discourse is contingent upon that part of the *glocalization* phenomenon that pushes for resisting and hybridizing global trends such as the teen drama genre.

While being a teen TV series, *Zero* also places itself in the realm of social drama, a genre that has gained large popularity over the decades on Italian national television. Being concentrated on narratives of significant historical and public events within a particular cultural framework, social drama found fertile ground on a mass medium historically public and free to air like Italian television. As mentioned in Chapter IV, when television emerged in the 1950s, Italy had a highly divided cultural identity due to its recent unification (in 1861). Television, in its function as mass media, addressed the issue of fragmentation by choosing to produce shows that could contribute to the formation of a shared identity and collective memory of the nation. This decision comes from the role of national television as a state company that is asked to portray and communicate with the imagined community of Italians. In this context, I am making a reference to Anderson's notion that was covered in Chapter II. According to Anderson's concept of imagined community, being Italian involves acknowledging and accepting a variety of culturally created symbols that

have become deeply embedded in the shared awareness of people living in Italy. The sentiment of affiliation or deep familiarity with the concept of Italy can be effectively communicated on screen through various methods, including the use of language, filming in authentic locations, narrating historically significant events that are widely recognized by the local population, and even casting nationally renowned actors.

5.2 The Teen Male Melodrama: Omar like Clark and Max

In her analysis of the TV series *Roswell* and *Smallville*, Miranda J Banks argues that the novelty of these two American 1990s shows lies in having revised some genre conventions of melodrama (Miranda J Banks 2004).

Historically, in film and television, melodrama draws upon the bourgeois domestic drama in which the nuclear family is the focal point of the narration. One of the stylistic marks of melodrama is the over-dramatization of events, in a way, foreseen already by the etymology of the word itself. Derived from the Ancient Greek term *melos*, meaning music, melodramas use melody as a background to the events occurring on stage or in front of the camera to enhance the spectacle and sensationalism of the action. I will return to the music and its role within *Zero* as a teen melodrama later in the chapter. For now, I focus on another key element of melodrama, i.e., the main character traits.

Banks argues that "Melodrama is typically female-oriented – that is, women are generally the protagonist of the narrative, and virtually always the primary audience of the genre" (Miranda J Banks 2004, 19). In melodrama, the female character holds the tumultuous events that unfold throughout the narrative, as the story conflicts and its emotional resolution usually depend on her moral conduct. The primacy of the character in melodramatic narratives leads to the expectation that 'melodramatic women' would do the ultimate heroic deed of self-sacrifice. This often involves

renouncing personal desires, such as pleasing family over real love or prioritizing motherhood over personal achievements. In certain cases, this self-sacrifice may even extend to the extreme act of suicide.

As part of the genre hybridization typical of the 1990s American teen series, for which teenage stories started to be explored in any possible narrative scenario, *Roswell* and *Smallville* play with the conventions of melodrama by revisiting its character traits. The self-sacrificing female protagonist is now substituted with the male young adult who assumes the challenging role of both hero and martyr.

Roswell delves into the lives of three extraterrestrial-human hybrids who landed on Earth in 1947 in close proximity to the town of *Roswell*, New Mexico. The male protagonist, Max Evans, is secretly raised by a human family, but he must conceal his identity to protect his alien community. Drama sets in motion when he resuscitates a high school female friend, Liz. Rescuing Liz and falling in love with her initiates a sequence of unfortunate events that jeopardize his safety and that of his extraterrestrial friends.

Smallville, on the other hand, is the prequel to Superman in the Superman franchise. It focuses on Clark Kent's early life before his transformation into the well-known superhero we are familiar with. Set in the fictitious town of Smallville, Kansas, Clark confronts the trials and tribulations often experienced by a regular high school student, including academic pursuits and the complexities of adolescent infatuations. All that, while his exceptional abilities get in his way[52].

[52] In episode 3 of the first season, "Hothead," Clark expresses interest in joining the football team but discovers that his extraordinary powers prevent him from doing so. His inclusion on the squad would not only pose an ethical dilemma due to his nonhuman abilities, but it would also jeopardize the safety of the other players. Tackling him in the field, for example, would be risky for any opponent as Clark does not yet know how to control his strength.

According to Banks, due to their alien nature, both characters live lives that are often overdramatized by the constant risk of being detected and persecuted by humans. The overdramatization of their life also comes from being disruptive elements that generate chaos in the equilibrium of their living environment. The spaceship's crash that brought Kent to Earth has, for example, inadvertently introduced radioactive waste materials on the planet, affecting anybody who comes into touch with them. Those who intercept the extraterrestrial waste develop powers that usually turn them into evil beings that Clark eventually feels he must defeat because of guilt. On the other hand, by rescuing Liz from a life-threatening situation, Max alters the natural course of events, leaving behind traces of supernatural that make the human population start suspecting an extraterrestrial presence among them. As a direct result of this, a witch hunt is initiated, which puts the well-being of both humans and extraterrestrials in jeopardy.

Although Clark and Max's disruption into other people's lives is certainly unintentional and does not mean harm, they cannot help but feel responsible and remorseful. Their culpability is what leads them constantly to strive to make up for the disorder they caused unintentionally by doing what is morally correct. "Unlike the typical melodramatic male whose struggles emanate from his position within an Oedipal triangle, Max Evan and Clark Kent exemplify a new television hero who is motivated to action by enlightened dreams for an equal partner, emotionally fulfilling relationships and a sense of duty to his community" (Miranda J Banks 2004, 18).

As a result of their inner conflict, these two heroes dwell in a deeply conflicted state, torn between their inherent natures, which cannot be denied and revealed, and their need to experience humanity through their love for their human family and friends. Their struggle is the melodrama character's struggle, who is blameless but compelled to endure a negative destiny up to the point of self-sacrifice.

Like Clark and Max, Omar – *Zero's* male protagonist – must deal with the burden of discovering and dealing with extraordinary powers that constantly require him to make morally upright choices. In the first episode, as a delivery pizza boy, Omar meets, for the first time, Anna, a white Italian girl with whom he will develop a sentimental connection. Due to a sequence of fortunate circumstances, he accidentally gets stuck at Anna's house once the pizza is delivered. A chemistry immediately arises, leading Omar and Anna to a meaningful philosophical conversation about life. In their exchange, Anna shares with Omar her "teoria dei vetri rotti" (the "theory of broken glass"), according to which if we resist fixing something once it gets broken, we run the risk of getting used to broken things.

As the story unfolds, the "broken glass theory" chases Omar like an inner voice that questions his moral conduct, a talking cricket to which the melodramatic hero must always listen in order to do the right thing. Later in the episode, mindful of Anna's words, Omar decides to take action when he encounters yet another burning motorcycle. The episode's plot, in fact, revolves around a series of mysteriously ignited motorbikes that – as we will find out later in the story – are the signatures of criminals who are plotting to make the neighborhood as unhabitable as possible to force people to leave[53].

Observing the motorcycle engulfed in flames, Omar first feels like continuing on his path without stopping. In spite of this, he is able to bring himself to a stop by uttering the words "Dannata teoria dei vetri rotti!" (which translates to "Damn broken glass theory!") to himself in a stream of consciousness that can be heard thanks to the voiceover. Serving as a reminder to always

[53] The locals' forced departure is part of a malicious plan concocted by the mob to gentrify the area so that they can raise real estate prices.

behave morally, regardless of the circumstances, Anna's theory eventually compels Omar to take action and attempt to put out the fire.

In trying to extinguish the fire, though, he is misunderstood as the author behind the criminal arsons by Shariff, who happens to be there, too. Thinking he has found the responsible for the attacks on the neighborhood, Shariff starts chasing Omar, who, by trying to lose his tracks, gets terrified and disappears for the first time. His fear, in fact, triggers his powers and turns him invisible in the presence of Shariff, who ultimately discovers Omar's secret.

The dramatic hero's trials, therefore, commence: Omar must face the fear of the invisibility power he cannot control and the peril of being unmasked and having his true identity revealed. If Sharif first threatens to share his secret, he eventually offers to refrain from doing so on the condition that Omar assists him in investigating the case of the incinerated motorbikes. To the fear of the new power to master and of being exposed, moral blackmail is also added: Omar starts dealing with the hero's dilemma, who is compelled to make a selfless sacrifice for the sake of his community (the Italian Senegalese residing in the neighborhood) while renouncing to his human life.

Omar's use of his powers is not easy but resurfaces past trauma, as each instance of him becoming invisible triggers a powerful emotional response that often recalls distressing memories from his past about his mother. Among other subplots, the season also focuses on the mysterious vanishing of the protagonist's mother, who allegedly abandoned him[54].

Throughout the show, Omar occasionally experiences the resurgence of memories of the maternal figure through flashbacks. These are generally sepia-color sequences edited with

[54] It is only revealed at the end that his mother also possessed the same power, but due to the show's cancellation, further information about why she vanished was not disclosed.

melodramatic piano music in which Omar relives the forced separation from her. In one scene that repeats throughout the series, we specifically see little Omar forcibly separated from his mother by some policemen in the presence of his father, supposedly the instigator of the separation. Increasing the emotional depth of these sequences by giving warmth and softness to the images is the sepia color which, together with the accompanying piano music, evokes sentiments of nostalgia, sorrow, and tenderness in line with the tones of melodrama.

The presence, or rather the absence, of Omar's mother is a significant element in the story, contributing to the show's melodramatic tone. As Banks's analysis suggests, the mother figure in male teen melodramas is often irrelevant to the narrative, with the focus on the teen male as the suffering martyr. In *Zero*, however, the absence of the mother becomes a poignant presence, heightening the protagonist's drama. The brief flashbacks and Omar's reminiscences about his mom in his off-screen monologues serve as a catalyst for the dramatic quest for the identity of the orphaned boy (another trope of melodrama). In order to discover his true self and place in the world, Omar must confront the internal conflict arising from the pressure to become an adult imposed by society and the need to dwell in his past enough to cope with the emotional distress caused by the parent's loss.

It follows that Omar is the embodiment of the teen male melodrama theorized by Banks. On the one hand, his challenges as a motherless boy are compounded by those experienced by the teenager who navigates the complexities of this rite of passage. Freeing himself from his father's influence, both emotionally and financially, overcoming the lingering impact of his mother's vanishing, and leaving his family home in order to follow his aspiration of becoming a cartoonist are the melodramatic narrative topics of this teen series.

On the other, there is also the dramatic extraterrestrial creature endowed with superpowers that make Omar different from the rest of humanity. Omar's diversity, though, extends beyond his condition as alien, as being such for him also signifies his being Black in a mostly White society that alienates him by treating him differently. In the next session in which I discuss how Zero taps into the social drama genre, I focus specifically on Omar's status as an alien. My focus will be not so much on the term as expression of being superhuman but in the political sense of not being recognized as a nation's citizen.

5.3 The Social Drama Footprint to Glocalize the Teen Drama in Zero

In the genre hybridization process that *Zero* actualizes as a teen drama, thus following the lesson of the American teen shows, there is an additional level of hybridity to consider, which allows me to bring into the discussion the phenomenon of *glocalization*. If, as discussed thus far, one can classify *Zero* as a teen melodrama modeled after the American *Roswell* and *Smallville*, there is also a further genre variation within the text that nods at the Italian media landscape. By incorporating the conventions of social drama, historically rooted in Italian media (Chapter IV), *Zero* attempts to emphasize the cultural setting in which the story takes place, pushing the text toward the localness required of a *glocal* product.

In the example of *Zero*, remarking on the Italian context via the references to the recent history, politics, and music of the country is not merely the effect of having conceived, produced, and shot the show in loco. The production of *Zero* is a collaboration between two Italian firms, Fabula Pictures and Red Joint Film, operating respectively in Rome and Milan (Italy). These production companies are based locally, as it is Eleven, the British production studio responsible for creating *Sex Education*. If the geographical proximity of the production houses were really the

primary factor for the noticeable focus on localness in *Zero*, it would be hard then to reason the idea of "de-emphasis on the local" that Jenner noticed in the Netflix series *Sex Education.*

On the contrary, I argue that accentuating the Italianness in *Zero* emerges as the effect of a series of production decisions aimed at remarking the local culture. For starters, the show is loosely based on Antonio Dikele Distefano's 2016 Italian novel *Io non ho mai avuto la mia età* (*I was never my age*). Set in northern Italy, Ravenna, the narrative revolves around the life of a second-generation teenager named Zero, who, as a black child, must experience the challenges of growing up in a highly immigrant-populated area. The book, which is an autobiographical account of Dikele's experiences, also one of the screenwriters of the Netflix TV series *Zero*, is replete with allusions to the political and cultural climate of discrimination toward immigrants in Italy[55].

Building the series on an autobiographical story[56] that resonates with audiences because it reflects the social and cultural realities of the time in which it is set is an indication of *Zero's* intention to offer insights into Italy's contemporary issues, as typical of social drama. As a genre,

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[55] "Avrei voluto per tutta la mia adolescenza che a fotografare i neri fossero stati occhi neri, perché la società continuava a dire di noi che eravamo criminali, invasori, sporchi senza che nessuno potesse ribattere. Qualcuno moriva in mare, qualcuno leggendo un giornale, andando a scuola, tra la gente, tra gli insulti. Avremmo voluto andarcene subito da quei ristoranti, da quelle discoteche, dai camerini di quei negozi dove i commessi ci guardavano attenti appena voltavamo le spalle. "Avrei voluto andare via dall'Italia, via da questa strana casa dove sono nato e cresciuto e che mi ha sempre chiesto dove vivessi e da dove fossi venuto".

"I wished throughout my teenage years that it had been black eyes who photographed black people, because society kept saying about us that we were criminals, invaders, dirty without anyone being able to retort. Someone died at sea, someone reading a newspaper, going to school, among people, among insults. We would have liked to leave right away from those restaurants, from those discos, from the dressing rooms of those stores where the salesclerks looked at us attentively as soon as we turned our backs. I would have liked to leave Italy, away from this strange home where I was born and raised and that always asked me where I lived and where I came from." (Antonio Dikele Distefano 2016, 25).

[56] Further analysis is required about the role of Distefano in promoting the transmedia nature of *Zero*. According to Shellen Green, Distefano "has built a multimedia profile" (Shelleen Green 2022, 528). In addition to being a writer of young adult novels, he has also pursued a career as a rap/hip hop artist with the stage name Nashy, created a clothing line, edited an online music journal, and has a notable presence on social media. On YouTube, for instance, Distefano hosts Basement Café, an interview show series that specifically focuses on the Italian hip-hop music scene. As I will show in the next section, *Zero* lays significant emphasis on the soundtrack by carefully selecting a diverse range of glocal music. The presence of music in the text highlights the multimedia character of the show, following the example of the 1990s American transmedia teen programs discussed in Chapter III.

social drama aims to depict events that, although fictionalized, are based on real-life stories. The narrated facts aim to point to matters of public importance, presenting narratives that might capture the country's attention because of their relevance to the audience. It is precisely the adherence to social drama – I contend – that heightens the localness in *Zero*.

In continuation of the lesson of social dramas, which narrates the recent past of a nation that is relevant to collectivity (Italian audience), *Zero* documents the drama endured by the second generation of Italians. Omar is an Afro-Italian born to Senegalese parents in Italy. Due to his condition, Omar and his friends are considered 'second rank' citizens by the government, given the absence of a national law that grants them Italian citizenship. The integration of immigrants' children into Italian society is, in fact, biased by the lack of "Ius soli," the legal principle of acquiring citizenship based on the place of birth. On the contrary, Italy's law falls into the "Ius sanguinis" (right of blood) system, whereby citizenship status is generally defined by the citizenship of one's parents. This means that those who are born in Italy to immigrant parents are not eligible to acquire Italian citizenship by merely being born in Italian territory.

In one scene from episode 2, Inno (Madior Fall), a seasoned soccer player, goes to the police station to get an identity document that he is then denied by police officials. Emphasizing his frustration at having his application not approved for the umpteenth time because of his social status as alien, Inno burst out: "Ma sono nato a Milano" ("But I was born in Milan!"). In claiming his right to be recognized as Italian based on the place where he was born and raised, Inno sheds light on the drama of many in the country like him. Because of a legislation that the Italian government is hesitant to update, Inno, Omar, and the other characters of *Zero* live in the shadows, doomed to remain unseen by Italian society and institutions.

Invisibility, which in the world of teenage superheroes should represent a magical power able to grant supernatural ability, in the show becomes the metaphor for the state of second-generation Italians overlooked by the national law.[57] Omar, with his magical power to make himself invisible, reflects the way the Italian Constitution relegates him to a state of nonexistence due to his social standing.

The invisibility of the immigrants' children born in Italy that *Zero* depicts is certainly rooted in the institutional framework, due to the lack of a law that protects them, but it also has a societal cause: it is determined by the prejudice and racism of Italians who happen to overlook or stereotype people like Omar according to biased conventions.

In episode 1, Anna asks Omar to go to her birthday party. When he arrives at the door, one of the people attending the event opens it for him. Upon their first encounter, based on Omar's black skin, the boy hastily assumes that he must be the drug dealer and enthusiastically announces: "Gente, è arrivata la bamba" ("People, bamba has arrived," where the word bamba is slang for drug). Omar remains impassive and does not display any emotion in response to the boy's comment, almost underscoring his familiarity with such derogatory remarks.

After passing by the guy met at the door, Omar lets loose another stream of consciousness, with his voiceover reciting the following words: "Lo spacciatore, il vu'cumprà, il ladro, quello che ti serve da bere, cosa è meglio? Essere scambiato per quello che non sei o non essere visto affatto?" ("The drug dealer, the vu'cumprà[58], the thief, the one who serves you drinks. What's better? Being

[57] The complexity of Italian legislation is also evident in the process of awarding citizenship. According to the existing legislation, an individual who is born in Italy to immigrant parents has a time frame of 12 months after reaching the age of 18 (the legal age in Italy), to submit an application for citizenship. Among the requirements, furthermore, is to have resided in Italy for a minimum of 10 years and not to have been absent from the country for more than three months consecutively. "Movimento Italiani Senza Cittadinanza." *Italiani Senza Cittadinanza - Per Migliorare La Legge Sulla Cittadinanza Italiana*, www.italianisenzacittadinanza.org/. Accessed 14 Apr. 2024.

mistaken for what you are not or not being seen at all?"). Even when Omar is "seen" by others, he then runs the risk of eliciting in them what Stuart Hall defined as "a form of racialized knowledge of the Other" (Stuart Hall 1997, 260).

In the same party scene, approached by a girl who looks at him with ecstatic admiration, Omar is told: "Tu sei una divinità. Tu secondo me sei un Orisha". "You are a deity. I think you are an Orisha" (a deity originally from Nigeria). In parading the many possible ways of stereotyping Omar, the show here produces an effect of the African culture as mysterious, exotic, and significantly sexualized because of the girl's comment.

The social commentary on discrimination and racism is an element present in the text that reflects the long-standing and recognized history of Anti-Black prejudice and hate in Italy. "While the Italian constitution condemns hate (of which disgust is a part), there is little objective evidence that the state is aggressively sponsoring initiatives to combat episodes of racism […] (Graziella Parati 2017, 10).

The perpetuation of racial discrimination against Black people in the nation has persisted throughout time, but a notably violent episode in recent history has sent shockwaves throughout the country. In September 2020 Willy Monteiro, a twenty-one-year-old black man was brutally beaten to death in Rome by two local white criminals (Nicole Winfield 2020). The Bianchi brothers, supporters of the right-nationalist party, were convicted of hate crime for the assassination of Monteiro. The killing of the young black man reignited attention on the plague of racism in the country, highlighting the failure of institutions to address this unresolved issue.

[58] The expression originates from aping the query "Do you want to buy" that many street sellers of African heritage have learned mechanically to engage their consumers. The expression has acquired a negative connotation regarding all African street vendors residing in Italy.

Preceding the release of *Zero* by one year, Monteiro's murder was addressed in an interview with Antonio Dikele Distefano, the mastermind of the show (Veronica Tosetti 2020). Distefano emphasized the significance of tackling the issue of prejudice and racism in the Italian public discourse in response to Monteiro's killing. Distefano also mentions how the tragic news motivated him to proceed with the TV series project of *Zero* he was working on, intending to promote a significant change via media representation[59].

The impact of Monteiro's killing on the country and media discourse on racism has also resonated internationally. Presumably because in March of the same year, the United States was profoundly troubled by a comparable hate crime. The murder of Monteiro deeply unsettled Italy, much as the killing of African American George Floyd by a white police officer caused great dismay in the USA (Evan Hill 2020). Given that this section aims to examine how the text of *Zero* has cultivated a sense of local identity to create a glocal effect, my primary focus is to highlight the potential relevance of the subject of racism for the Italian audience, particularly in light of recent developments in the country. However, it is indisputable that the same issue may be examined from a transnational viewpoint, i.e., considering a compelling topic able to capture also the attention of the American audience. This is due to the country's extensive history of segregation and racism.

In conclusion, similarly to Max and Clark, who come from different planets, Omar shares their condition as aliens. However, via the practice of glocalization, being alien becomes in *Zero* the

[59] In Zero, the invisibility of Omar not only becomes the metaphor for the non-white-skinned Italians who are denied citizenship rights. His invisibility also serves as a metatextual comment on the lack of Afro-Italian actors in Italian cinema and television. In his 2016 documentary Blackploitation: One Hundred Years of Blackness in Italian Cinema (2016): Italian-Ghanian director Fred Kuwornu highlights "how racist configuration of blackness have persisted for decades and excluded blacks from being considered as regular members of Italian society" (Marie Orton 2018, 181).

reference to the real condition of individuals of African descent living in Italy. In the show, Omar is constantly reminded of 'being different' in the country because of the color of his skin, and so denied the right to be a citizen. While the racial aspect is not significant in the American series, being Max and Clark white aliens, it becomes prominent in Zero and serves as a crucial social commentary on the racism in the country. The social commentary on racism remains in Zero a piece of evidence in the text that confirms the series' adherence to social drama, a genre on which Zero draws by proposing a real-like treatment of matters of public interest, to produce a glocal effect.

5.4 The Use of Pop Music in Zero: A Glocal Outcome

The way contemporary pop songs intertwine with the visuals in *Zero* is mindful of the lesson of the American teen drama of the 1980s and 1990s and its commodification of music. Nevertheless, "the tense relation of global and local" textual conventions (Khansa Salsabila 2021, 17) in *Zero* does not come with an easy resolution, as a tangible engagement with the Italian music scene is correspondingly pursued. As my analysis of the soundtrack of *Zero* aims to demonstrate, the series' screenwriters created a fascinating example of glocal teen drama that negotiates both American and Black Italian cultures as a consequence of the transnational nature of Netflix.

As Rachel Moseley contends: "Popular music is a critical formal element of teen television inherited from the teen film and is used as an expression of adolescent identity […] in classic melodramatic fashion to accompany narrative events and direct the viewers' emotional response and as a more commercial draw" (Rachel Moseley 2008, 104). The interweaving of music and teen dramas finds a place in the narrative via the portrayal of young people on the screen obsessively listening to their favorite singers. There are numerous instances of the main characters in

adolescent dramas playing music loudly in their bedrooms or in their headphones. In teen shows, music assumes a textual function as part of the narrative that adds meaning to the story. Sometimes, the soundtrack becomes another way for teenagers to express their inner world, often compensating for the absence of dialogue.

However, there is also a commercial reason behind the massive use of pop music in teen series that goes beyond the narrative function (analyzed in Chapter III). In order to stem the decline in CD sales as well as the loss of income that downloads and piracy had generated in the 1990s, the American media industry planned to use the teen series as a form of musical window shopping, hoping to create new music trends for viewers to consume.

According to Ben Aslinger, from the music shows of the origins to "contemporary MTV and the use of music in narrative programs, television, popular music, and teen culture have been linked." (Ross and Stein 2008, 80). The literature on how pop music began to play a more active role in the narrative construction of televised stories in the 1980s[60] underscores the influence of the cable music channel MTV, so much so that scholars metonymically speak of visual style "à la MTV". MTV's aesthetics means, among other things, the use of unconventional shooting techniques such as close-ups, wide angles, tracking shots, and handheld cameras that methodically

[60] To know more about the significance of music in cinema and TV series and its changing purpose over time, see Claudia Gorbman's book "Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music" (1987) and Hilary Lapedis' article "Popping the Question: The Function and Effect of Popular Music in Cinema (1999). Claudia Gorban's examination of the role of music in classic Hollywood films, for example, highlights the "cohesive" (89) nature of soundtracks. Soundtracks provide a sense of continuity to sequences that are edited together through montage that results in temporal ellipses and cuts. Music enhances the flow of a scene by smoothing narrative gaps that might otherwise be visually apparent as a result of editing. When examining the music's contribution to the visuals, a history that encompasses both cinema and television, one finds out that scholars generally agree that the NBC police drama Miami Vice represents a significant turning point. In this show from the 1980s, music began to play a much more active role with the pop songs almost dictating the styles of editing, following the example of MTV's music video clips. Taking into account the lesson of the music videos, in Miami Vice, the soundtrack is utilized as a narrative device, able to add meaning to the story not visible on the screen. They do so, for instance, by depicting characters' moods or emotions. Using particular melodies to accompany a character's entrance might effectively communicate their personality or role in the plot. Likewise, alternating repetitive musical patterns might allude to specific topics or character progressions throughout the series.

match the movement and dynamics of the musicians' performance. The visual style à la MTV also comprises editing that is determined by the song's rhythm, with quick cuts and creative transitions aiming to heighten the visual effect and the emotional experience.

In his book, *MTV's Quest to Control the Music*, Jack Banks argues that what favored the spread of MTVs' visual style was the predicament of the music industry in the 1980s. Because the record business was in crisis, MTV could make excellent deals and exclusive contracts with record companies to air music videos, which then began to saturate the channel's scheduling while helping to build MTV's identity as a trending network among youth. MTV's success among youth provided the music industry a new way of self-promotion through TV series. As a result, record companies began to make agreements with television networks to nurture emerging singers. Music became so an increasingly integral part of TV series, in particular teen dramas, given the positive response of young audiences to MTV content.

The running of the soundtrack in teen dramas for commercial draw was eventually cemented in the 1990s with American Warner Bros Television Network. As Ben Aslinger reminds us, the rise of Warner Brothers in the 1990s represented a watershed moment in the history of how music was licensed on television. WB started to use the ending credits of some in-house shows to play 15 seconds of pop music songs, with the aim of selling both tracks and artists played on the screen. This strategy was functional in obtaining licensing discounts from record companies as these were willing to reduce license fees in exchange for TV runs. Thereafter, supported by profitable agreements with the record companies, screenwriters worked on incorporating more pop songs into the text of teen series, creating a solid narrative liaison between the scenes and the tracks played.

As a result, pop songs started to carry a message in the story that could be complemented or contrasted with what the images displayed. As Hilary Lapedis argues, the messages created by music demand an analytic approach that "foregrounds the importance of the musical soundtrack: one that positions it as parallel to the visual and as having a discrete and intrinsic meaning in addition to its function within or beyond the diegesis (Hilary Lapedis 1999, 368). In the examination of a scene from *Zero* conducted below, I illustrate how certain songs in the series serve to highlight the topic of racism in the country, diegetically treated by the narrative itself. At the same time, however, the songs performed by the artist Mahmood in the show produce meanings that go beyond the diegesis. These meanings are precisely metadiegetic, i.e. they allude to the instances of prejudice and discrimination that Mahmood personally experienced. Well-known in the country because of his public persona, these references – intrinsically ingrained in the songs played – point to the relation that the series aims to maintain with the imagined community of Italians as a result of *glocalization*.

Mindful of the 1990s American teen drama's lesson, *Zero* employs several popular songs within the story, with much of them serving to weave together narrative and soundscape so as to emphasize the tracks while integrating them into the visuals. The soundtrack of the first episode of *Zero*, which lasts roughly 24 minutes, counts 8 non-diegetic pop songs, i.e., none of the tracks are played in the narrative world nor are heard by the characters.

The genre of these songs is primarily Italian rap and trap, both sub-genres of hip-hop music[61]. In the list of songs, one can also find indie, jazz, and blues sounds from around the world, as suggested by the song “Fast Food Senegal” by Amadou and Mariam featuring Manu Chao. Due to the diverse geographical origins of the pop songs featured in the text and their equal distribution

[61] With trap slightly different from rap because of a more aggressive electronic beat.

in the first episode, the overall impression when watching *Zero* is that we are 'listening' to a playlist of glocal tracks that, in certain cases, may be enjoyed even more than the visuals.

The connotation of a playlist embedded in the visuals is also indicated by the subtitles on Netflix, which display the song's title and singer's name played, no matter in what language the show is watched[62].

Figure 3. *Zero*, episode 1. On the screen, we see the title and singer of the song played.

In the era of media convergence, where content is cross-media, i.e., must travel through more than one platform, products are ready to be consumed within the reach of a scroll. Because the subtitles advertise the songs on the screen, *Zero*'s soundtrack becomes easier to search for on other digital music platforms by the viewers. Following the cross-media principle, the online streaming service even posted the Official Playlist of *Zero* on Spotify and YouTube through its official account[63].

[63] https://open.spotify.com/playlist/6mnlirlMZmY27la6JlttEf

The marketing role of the soundtrack of *Zero* is made clear in an interview with Marco De Angelis, the music supervisor of the series, who describes the partnership with the musician Mahmood as strategic to the promotion of the show (Alessia Assasselli 2021). For *Zero*, the singer wrote an original song used in the trailer and show and also worked as music supervisor for the final episode. The song written by Mahmood, titled *Zero*, is part of the artist's album, *Ghettolimpo*, released in 2021, so both Mahmood and *Zero* benefitted from cross-promotion.

On the one hand, Mahmood actively promotes *Zero* on a transnational scale, since his international fame has significantly grown by 2021. Having won the 2019 Sanremo Italian Music Festival, he earned the opportunity to compete in the 2019 Eurovision Contest with his song "Soldi" (Money), ultimately securing the second position. Following his involvement in the much-acclaimed European content, Mahmood's popularity has progressively extended across national borders. This is seen, for example, in The New York Times story about his second appearance in Eurovision in 2022 (Elisabetta Provoledo 2022).

On the other hand, by consistently including Mahmood's work throughout the narrative, the series effectively serves as a promotional platform to foster the singer's music. Undoubtedly, the TV series and music feed off each other's via cross-media references that aim at the promotion of both products.

In a particular sequence in the first episode, a song by Mahmood called *Il Barrio* is played in a manner that supports and reinforces the significance of the scene. *Il Barrio*'s music and lyrics serve as an additional layer of meaning in the tale, capable of expressing without the use of dialogues the social gap between the world of Anna and Omar. This example fulfills the dual purpose of cross-promotion between music and TV series – as previously explained – and it

highlights the significance of music in the teen genre. Both these purposes derive from the widespread impact of American teen drama.

In the sequence, the sound and lyrics of *Il Barrio* function almost as another voice of the story able to verbalize the events and Omar's inner world. Omar is getting dressed to meet Anna, the female protagonist with whom he is falling in love, while Mahmood's song is edited to accompany the images, going from the foreground to the background of the soundscape.

While from minute 15 and 44 seconds to minute 16 and 04 seconds, *Il Barrio* plays the role of *figure*, in other words, what Ilaria Moschini calls "the focus of interest", from minutes 16 and 37 seconds to minute 16 and 52 seconds, the song is pushed back as a part of the *sound field* (Ilaria Moschini 2021, 195). Even so, however, one can distinguish the lyrics reciting: "Casa mia mi sembra bella Dici "Non fa per te" Però vieni nel quartiere Per ballare con me. Tanto suona sempre il barrio", which might translate as "My house looks good to me. You say: "It's not for you" But you come to the neighborhood to dance with me. The barrio always plays anyway".

I contend that these song's verses have both a diegetic and meta-diegetic function, i.e., they have an intrinsic meaning that unfolds within and beyond the diegesis. The diegetic meaning of the song – parallel to the visual and the general storyline of the show – is about the social divergence between the worlds of Omar and Anna in the story, which, on a broader level, is understood as a separation between White and Black Italians.

Of Senegalese descent, Omar lives in the fictional neighborhood of Milan called Il Barrio[64], after Mahmood's song. Il Barrio, whose Spanish word means neighborhood, is also one of the most

[64] As discussed before, in Omar's story, helping the community in his neighborhood has an additional symbolic meaning as it refers to the subaltern condition of African descent people in the city of Milan. The neighborhood where the story takes place is called the Barrio. The word Barrio is a clear reference to those areas in American mega-cities, where ethnic communities (mostly Latin American people), have not yet integrated, or rather have not yet been integrated by the rest of the population. The name "Barrio" originated from the Arabic word "Barri," which translates

active youth gathering centers in Milan's neighborhood, la Barona, where the TV series was filmed (Figure 4). When reciting the words "My house looks good to me. You say: "It's not for you", the lyrics call attention to Anna and her social world that we glimpse at the end of the sequence. While Mahmood's song keeps playing, the editing eventually cuts to the neighborhood where Anna lives, that is Porta Nuova district (Figure 5), one of the wealthiest areas of the city where Italy's largest bank by assets is located[65]

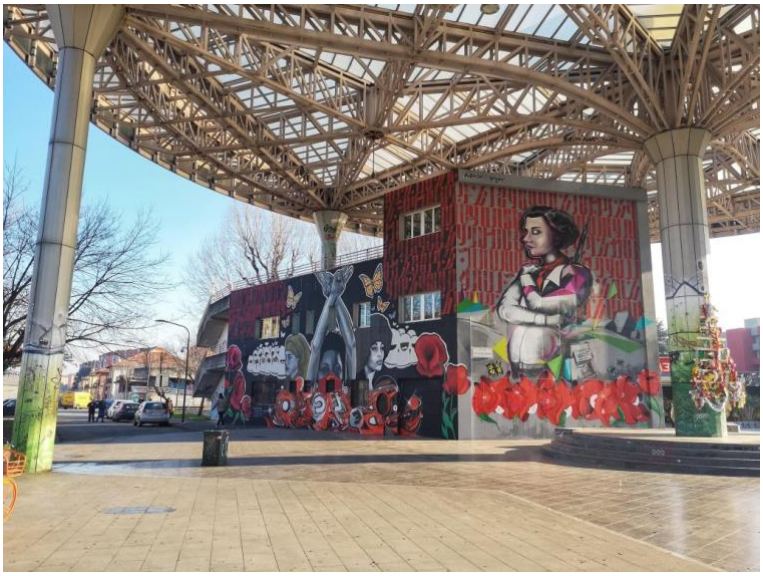

Figure 4 La Barona (Milan)

Figure 5 Porta Nuova (Milan)

On the other hand, the meta-diegetic meaning of the song (Il Barrio) unfolds beyond the narrative of Zero and ties in with Mahmood's public persona and his struggle to be considered Italian because of his Egyptian heritage. Despite being born in Italy, Mahmood discussed publicly

in fact with the expression "on the outside", pointing to areas located beyond the city walls. The Barrio deserves further exploration in Zero as the camera dwells on this neighborhood extensively over the show, via a few in-location filming. The attachment of the show to the localness of the Barrio is another piece of evidence - I contend - of the glocalization process that aims to narrate an “Italian story”.

[65] The photo on the left represents Anna's opulent neighborhood, while the one on the right is the Barrio where much of the story is set.

a few times the discrimination he has faced from White Italians who considered him not Italian enough.

One of the most well-known episodes pointing to the bias perpetrated against him goes back to the 2018 Sanremo Music Festival when the then prime minister of internal affairs, Matteo Salvini, publicly showed his disapproval of Mahmood's victory, considering him and the song (Soldi) not representative of the Italian music culture. “Mahmood …mah…the most beautiful Italian song? I would have chosen #Ultimo [White Italian singer],” tweeted Matteo Salvini, the deputy prime minister and leader of the far-right League party. He later added that judging from the public’s reaction to the victory, “90% of people are perplexed”. (Angela Giuffrida 2019).
The song “Soldi,” which contains an Arabic verse, became an object of contention because deemed out of the canon of musica leggera italiana (Italian pop music). Here, in the scene, I claim that the diegetic and meta-diegetic meaning overlays when the music plays the role of the figure. Because the disembodied voice of the singer overlaps with Omar portrayed on the screen while he is dressing, Italian spectators who remember what happened to Mahmood may easily associate Omar's story with the singer's.

5.5 Chapter Conclusion

In conclusion, as I demonstrated via the example of *Zero* the adaptation of the teen drama genre in the Italian scenario does not resolve easily with the de-emphasis of the local. On the contrary, adapting the American teen genre to *Zero* means constructs in the story places of friction and resistance to the globalizing representation of the American teenage world. On the one hand, *Zero* adheres to the teen genre because of the character traits. Omar embodies the melodramatic male teen in the example of the American teen series from the 1990s. Following the conventions

of the genre is also the way the soundtrack in *Zero* intertwines with the visuals, mindful of the style à la MTV and music video clips in general.

Nevertheless, the necessity of Netflix to create content that aims to speak to a more deterritorialized audience, i.e. spectators who are not necessarily identifiable with one national culture, brings into the text much more local-oriented elements. An illustrative instance of *Zero's* focus on the localness of the story is the meta-diegetic significance of the soundtrack, which employs both the public persona of pop singer Mahmood and his songs to highlight the contemporary problems of racism and prejudice faced by second-generation Italians in the country.

The representation of African descendant people living in Italy makes *Zero* an intriguing social commentary on public Italian matters. The glocal element of *Zero* that deserves further investigation builds upon the necessity that Netflix has to strike the right balance between what spectators might perceive as global and local within the text. That balance is crucial, especially if one considers the relevance of cultural proximity, according to which viewers still favor their own local or national products because of the attractiveness and familiarity with domestic stars, domestic settings, nationally shared knowledge, and the ethnicity of the individuals portrayed in the media (Joseph Straubhaar 2002). Adapting the program to issues that are important to the Italian public debate is an effect of the glocalization phenomenon that encourages local cultural resistance in order to be able to speak to a local spectator.

CHAPTER VI

GLOCALIZING TEEN DRAMAS: THE CASE STUDY OF BABY

6.1 Introducing Baby: a Netflix Glocalized Teen Show

Chapter VI explores the impact that *glocalization* has on the writing of Netflix teen dramas through an additional example of an Italian teen show, *Baby*. *Glocalization* must be understood as the reciprocal interaction between global and local media products, whereby incorporating global trends into local culture and markets undergoes alterations, adjustments, and hybridization of both sides (Roland Robertson 1997; 2014; Joseph Straubhaar 2007). As I demonstrate, *glocalization* in *Baby* occurs by hybridizing a global media genre, such as teen drama and its formal components, with the local cultural milieu of Italy, where the production trends of the national television landscape equally come into play.

Because of *glocalization*, *Baby* is recognizable as a teen drama since it relies on a narrative about coming-of-age adolescent protagonists and channels the aesthetics reminiscent of the genre popularized globally by American media (as analyzed in Chapter III). At the same time, however, *glocalization* ensures that the components of Italian culture are not reduced to a mere marginal backdrop of the narrative and allows *Baby* – regardless of its genre – to tell a story that speaks to an Italian audience because of its cultural references in the text.

In order to explore the tug-of-war between global and local forces that characterize the *glocalization* in *Baby*, in the first section of Chapter VI, I focus on the show's adherence to the teen drama genre, examining why one can consider this series a teen TV show. I determine that adherence by not exclusively focusing on the text. In fact, prior to delving into the textual analysis of *Baby*, I first discuss how Netflix categorizes the show on the platform via tags and altgenres, placing it in the realm of teen content. Confirming the teen content of the series are also the two

Baby's covers[66] that I examine after the discussion of the tags. Finally, by investigating the production phase of *Baby*, I dig into the creative process of the show via the interviews with the screenwriters to better understand the rationale behind Netflix's decision to market this series as teen content.

As discussed in Chapter I, I look at several elements of the shows analyzed – both textual and paratextual – because of the post-structuralist genre idea on which my project is based (Feuer, 1992; Mittell, 2004). According to this approach, one should examine *Baby* not only through its textual features but also as a dynamic, contingent, and culturally constructed media product in which the historical context and technological novelties carried by Netflix must be duly acknowledged.

After discussing both the textual and paratextual elements that make *Baby* a teen series, in the latter part of Chapter VI, I look at the effects of *glocalization* in the series from the perspective of the local culture and market for which *Baby* was initially meant. In this part, I point out how this series accentuates in the text the Italianness of the content by playing with the setting of the city of Rome and by enacting casting choices that put into practice the principle of *glocalization*.

The city in the show often goes beyond being a mere setting for the narrative and instead acts as a distinct visual brand of locality, which may evoke a sense of affinity from Italian viewers. Packaging a program with a distinctly Italian aesthetic may – in other words – function to attract and motivate Italian viewers to subscribe.

At the same time, however, by becoming so visually marked, the city also capitalizes on the touristic gaze (Amy Corbin 2014), with the aim of attracting a transnational audience. By idealizing or romanticizing certain locales, highlighting scenic vistas, famous monuments, and

[66] By covers I mean the pictures used to promote the show on the Netflix website and the Internet.

cultural clichés to inspire a feeling of wonder and curiosity, *Baby* depicts its narrative world in a manner that aligns with the expectations and fantasies of the transnational spectator audience, therefore reflecting the tourist perspective.

Aligning with the intent to accentuate and mark the locality on the screen as a part of *glocalization* is also the casting of Italian actresses associated with the teen drama genre in Italy prior to the arrival of Netflix. In *Baby*, the casting of Isabella Ferrari and Claudia Pandolfi, whom I mentioned in Chapter IV when examining the genealogy of teen drama in Italy, serves to evoke nostalgia among viewers in a way that scholars have seen as tactical for Netflix's growth (Kathryn Pallister 2019).

Netflix is actively embracing nostalgia as a strategy to attract users, particularly those from Generation X and Baby Boomers, via cult as well as original shows, whose stories and characters – being set in the past – speak to generations who lived that time. An example of a Netflix show with a nostalgic feel is *Stranger Things*, since the series takes place in the 1980s, and features actresses such as Winona Ryder, who is notoriously linked with the teen genre because of the cult movie *Heathers* (1988). The casting of the actress Rider is, in fact, what Matthias Stephan defines as "a paratextual marker to provide totemic attachment to the 1980s" (2021, 31) that scholars see as Netflix's means to create transgenerational content, i.e., able to resonate with multiple demographics.

In the case of *Baby*, the feeling of nostalgia is also glocalized, as the show draws on the political discourse and social and cultural practices of the Italian community, as demonstrated by the real-life news event, the teenage prostitution scandal of 2015, on which the show is based. Building upon a nationally well-known event allows *Baby* to tap into and activate the collective

memory of the target audience, Italians, which becomes crucial for Netflix to cultivate viewership. The latter are known, in fact, to love stories that tell their history.[67]

6.2 *Baby*: Conception and Marketing of a Teen Drama

From a genre standpoint, Netflix classifies *Baby* as a teen drama, and the OTT lists the show under the voices 'teen' and 'drama.' In fact, by simply searching for these keywords in the platform's search engine, *Baby* shows up among the other teenage-oriented content present on Netflix.[68]

The tags used by Netflix for this show include 'TV Dramas,' 'Italian,' and 'Teen TV Shows.' As discussed in Chapter I, using tags or alt-genres plays a crucial role in the Netflix ecosystem as it enables effective categorization of content, facilitating its discoverability on the site and increasing viewer retention on the platform. In order to optimize the recommendation system, Netflix labels each product with the most effective and catchy tags that summarize the show and can convince spectators to watch. In the case of *Baby*, in the synopsis section, along with 'TV Dramas,' 'Italian,' and 'Teen TV Shows,' there are, in fact, also the tags 'Intimate' and 'Emotional.' (Figure 6).

[67] Joseph Straubhaar (2007) found a steady desire for locally produced TV content in national programming, supporting my idea that Italian audience might still prefer programs that are in the national language and reflect the national culture. For more about this, refer to page 23, where I highlighted a typical day of national programming at prime time to underscore the prominence of locally produced content.

[68] I looked up *Baby* on Netflix in Italy and the United States, and both research results indicated that the show has the same tags or alt-genres in the two different television markets. In fact, Netflix seems to maintain consistent categorization across national libraries.

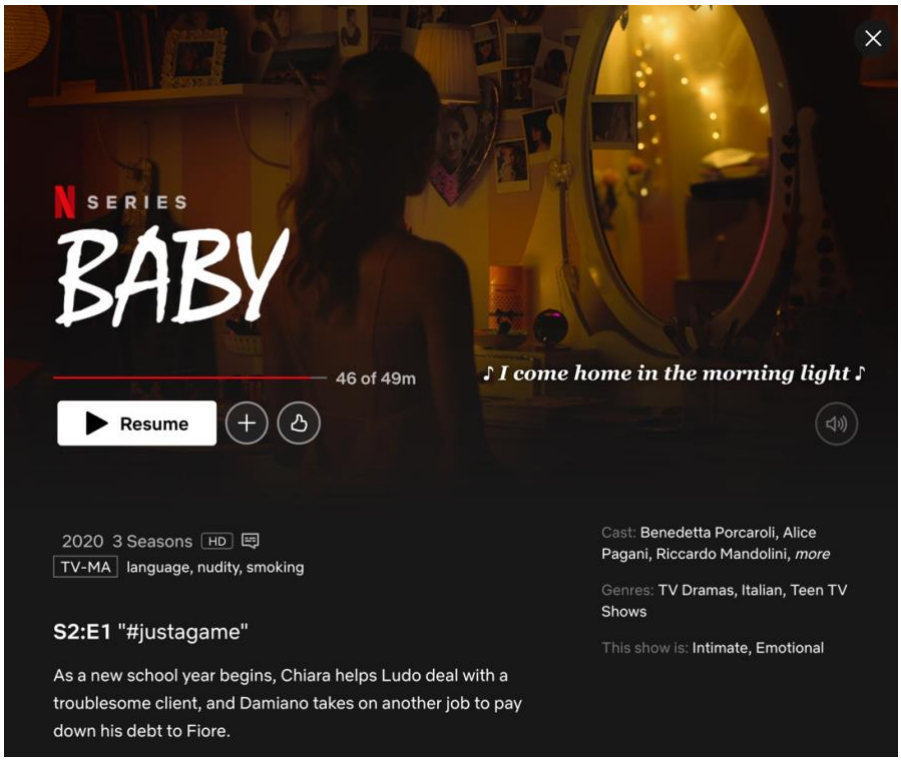

Figure 6

In a recent article in *The New York Times*, titled *A Few Words About Netflix's Success: Lively. Snappy. Tag*, John Koblin (2024) delves into the efficacy of tags or *altgenres*. Koblin refers to statements by Allan Donald, director of products at Netflix, who stated that when the firm temporarily dropped tags as a test, viewer engagement declined significantly. According to Donald, in fact, "People would take a lot longer to choose" without the help of tags; "they would abandon a title because they didn't like it too much or because they didn't know what they were going to get." (John Koblin 2024).

Furthermore, Koblin explains that the American database company Parrot Analytics also confirms the tags' effectiveness. Underlying the complexities and nuances of tags at play, Director of Strategy Julia Alexander argues that "[w]hen we see the term 'gritty,' or we see the term

'cerebral,' [i.e., as potential spectators] we intrinsically understand what that means," to the point that we are led to watching (John Koblin 2024).

Following the arguments of Koblin, Donald, and Alexander, the tags assigned to *Baby*, such as 'Italian,' 'Teen,' 'Intimate,' 'Emotional,' and 'Dramas,' are used to provide some value and aesthetic framework to the show, with the goal of influencing the viewer's decision-making process. These tags might have, for instance, influenced my viewing choice since they clearly signal the type of content I would be likely to watch and that matches my viewing habits. As a fan and researcher of the teen drama genre, I watched enough several youth-oriented series that I have probably been classified by Netflix as a devotee of the genre. And tags, such as those assigned to *Baby* that appear in the series synopsis on my Netflix account, are determined by my browsing history, according to Koblin's contribution.

In contrast to Koblin's claims, I have personally observed that the aforementioned tags repeatedly appear without any alterations across different Netflix accounts. I observed this uniformity by conducting a search for *13 Reasons Why* across a few different Netflix profiles. As a user with a Netflix family membership – which permits subscription owners to acquire extra slots and invite viewers from outside their household – I was able to access the remaining three profiles that are part of my group subscription.

The three users exhibited less enthusiasm for teenage-oriented entertainment compared to me, as confirmed by the recommendations that I noticed on their Netflix homepages. Given that suggestions are generated from an individual's viewing history, and upon checking, the recommendations from the three users did not include a very large amount of teenage content, it follows that these three accounts had likely viewed fewer programs targeted towards adolescents compared to my own viewing habits at the time of checking.

Despite the differences in our viewing habits, upon examining the synopsis of *13 Reason Why* searched for on the three users' accounts, I observed that the tags displayed were identical to those that appeared on mine. In the note, I provide the screenshot of the synopsis and tags from one of my membership group profiles on the left, while on the right are those that appeared on my own profile. The tags aligned perfectly.[69]

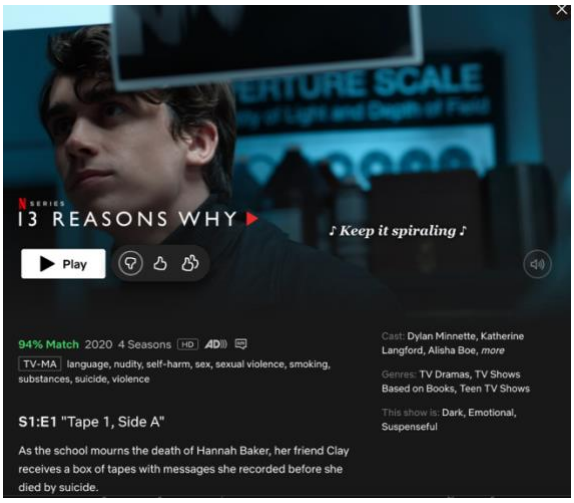

Figure 7

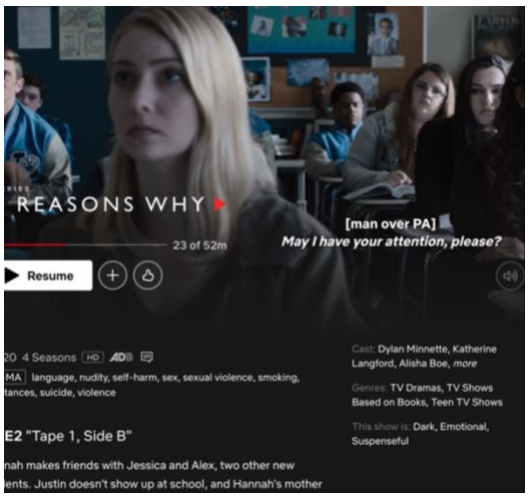

Figure 8

Regardless of the tags in *Baby's* synopsis that remain the same among different Netflix users with the same 'family plan' – contrary to Koblin's argument – it is crucial to observe that the tags associated with this show are similar to those that appear in the synopsis of another Netflix teen TV series, *13 Reasons Why*. As for *Baby*, *13 Reasons Why* is labeled as 'Teen TV shows,'' 'Emotional,' with the addition of 'Suspenseful' and 'Dark.'[70] Labeling these shows through slightly similar tags helps improve Netflix recommendation algorithms, providing personalized content suggestions to individual users. As a matter of fact, once I finished watching *Baby*, Netflix

[70] Compared to *Baby* (Figure 6), the tag "suspenseful" is the only one extra tag probably because of the plot of the main character's suicide, Hannah, and the after-the-fact reconstruction of the story. Episode by episode, in fact, *13 Reasons Why* reveals the culprits whose bullying led to the protagonist's death.

automatically started to play the trailer of *13 Reasons Why*, which suggests that its recommendation system anticipated that another teen show would catch my interest.

As a matter of fact, the connection with *13 Reasons Why* goes beyond simple conjecture, since even *Baby*'s creators acknowledged the parallels. In an interview with GRAMS, the writers' collective behind *Baby*, journalist Mattia Carzaniga asked the young screenwriters (all in their 20s) about the show's genesis and why they landed on the teen drama genre. Eleonora Trucchi, one the collective's members, claims that "Tredici è stato un grosso riferimento per *Baby* (i.e. Thirteen was a big reference for *Baby*.)" (Mattia Carzaniga 2018). The author's explicit acknowledgment of taking inspiration from another Netflix teen series provides insight into the genre that influenced the conception of *Baby* and might serve as more evidence that Netflix's approval was granted due to its close connection to a genre on which the platform has focused.

In addition to Trucchi's comment, another GRAMS' member, Giacomo Mazzariol, states: "We wanted to tell that world (i.e., the teenage universe) truthfully. We were fascinated by the news story (the scandal of underage prostitutes that came out in Italy in 2014), but it was just a starting point; we expanded the range to all teenagers. Then, of course, to get to Netflix, the teen was a key hook."[71]

In Mazzariol's statement, I believe the use of the word 'hook' is telling for substantiating the argument that Netflix wanted *Baby* to be a teen drama in the first place. The word choice here suggests that the OTT found teen dramas so captivating that it would have green-lighted a show like *Baby* as long as the series adhered to the conventions of the teen genre. Although it is

[71] "Volevamo provare a raccontare quel mondo in modo veritiero. Ci affascinava il caso di cronaca, ma è stato solo un punto di partenza, abbiamo ampliato il raggio a tutti gli adolescenti. Poi, certo, per arrivare a Netflix il teen è stato un gancio fondamentale."

impossible to determine the motives behind the remark, Mazzariol's account aligns with the trend of transnational teen dramas led by the OTT that I have previously addressed.

As I discussed in Chapter I based on Mareike Jenner's contributions, there has been a notable increase in teenage-oriented content on Netflix after *13 Reasons Why*. Hence, it is logical to infer that while the platform allowed GRAMS some creative liberty in the writing process, it had a particular genre, lexicon, and content in mind that it aimed to promote in Italy, and a likely target audience, probably a teenage one.

Some paratextual elements that I believe help us categorize the show as a teen drama include the two promotional covers used to advertise the series. The two covers I take into consideration are ones that I recovered on the Netflix (Figure 9) and IMDb (Internet Movies Database) (Figure 10) websites[72]. In recovering the first cover, I accessed Netflix without logging into my personal account in order to prevent the OTT from displaying a personalized show's thumbnail on my profile. Indeed, it has been noted that Netflix incorporates a recommendation system that also customizes the cover shoot thumbnails of the series on the users' homepages. This customization involves selecting an image from the show that aligns most closely with the viewer's preferences and viewing habits. In my case, considering I had watched several teen-oriented shows on the platform for this project, I had concerns that Netflix would present an emblematic image related to the category of teenage drama, such as the portrayal of two high school students.

[72] IMDb is an internet-based repository that provides extensive details about movies, TV shows, performers, filmmakers, producers, and other content relevant to the entertainment industry.

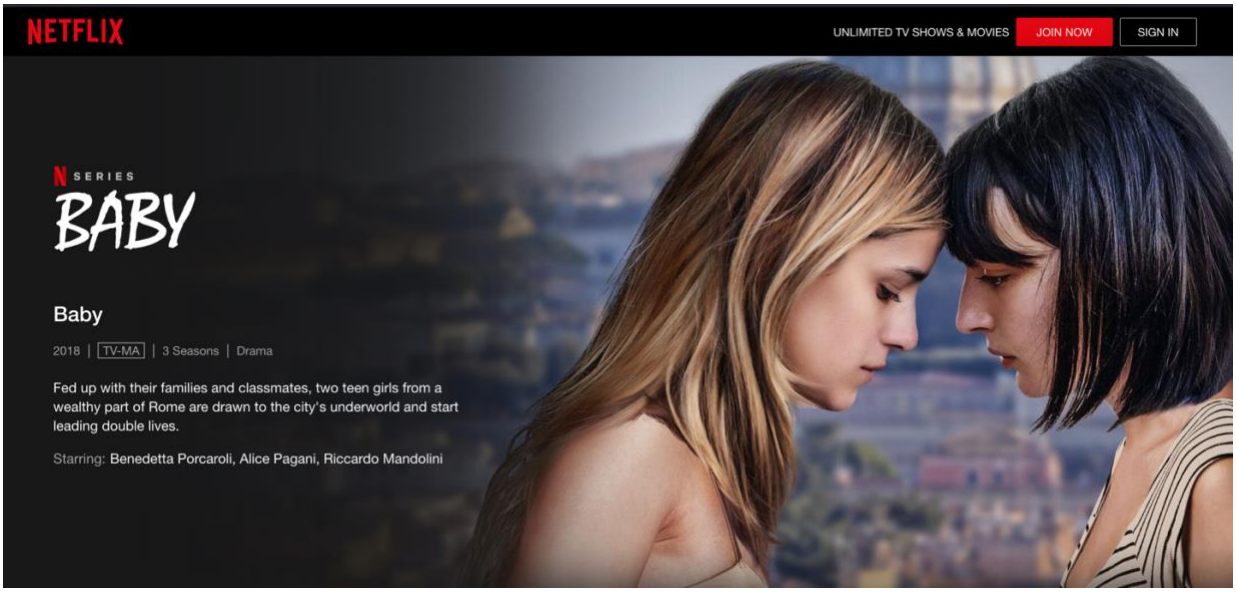

Figure 9 *Baby*'s cover from the Netflix website.

Although I browsed the cover anonymously, the advertising material suggests the series dwells in the teenage/young adult world. The cover portrays two young women of indeterminate age, yet their stance and unadorned appearance (they lack heavy makeup or sophisticated attire) indicate they are relatively youthful.

Also suggesting the tender age of the girls, I argue, is their pose: by reclining their heads and resting them on each other's, the two protagonists evoke an almost vulnerable and intimate feel of innocence, which is emphasized by the title *Baby*. Because of the letters' rounded shapes and simple strokes, the title has a soft and friendly look, almost reflecting the early stage of handwriting development found in children as they learn to write.

The two girls on the cover are Chiara and Ludovica, students in an exclusive private high school in Rome. Their teenage escapades, typical of the coming-of-age story but also peculiar to this twisted teen drama, begin when they decide to become escorts. The show's plot is what connects this series to real-life news events of national interest, as it builds upon the prostitution racket of high school students uncovered by police investigations in 2014. In that year, the news

of two girls becoming escorts to finance their purchases of fancy clothes and electronic goods came to the fore, going down in history as the *Parioli Baby Prostitutes*. The name comes from the affluent neighborhood of Rome, Parioli, where the two teenagers lived. There, together with twelve other young girls, the two adolescents managed the apartment where the sexual encounters occurred.

In the show's revisitation of real-life events, Chiara and Ludovica are both from comparable backgrounds, being from very rich families residing in the exclusive neighborhood of Parioli. However, the familial dramas that consume them vary. Chiara experiences the turmoil of a household where her father is unfaithful to his wife, who in turn seems not to care and exhibits a sort of catatonic behavior. Ludovica, on the other hand, is the daughter of divorced parents, raised by a childish mother who prioritizes her own bygone youth and acts more like a friend than a parent figure to Ludovica[73].

While the display of adolescence in the first cover is less intuitive and would require the viewer more analysis to understand that the show is about teenagers, it is more apparent in the second example. The IMBD cover (Figure 10) portrays Chiara and Ludovica standing in front of a mirror. The mirror reflects the image of the two girls facing forward, both wearing school uniforms. Thus, the cover clearly indicates that the series focuses on the life of two students, effectively establishing the narrative realm of the teenage drama from the outset.

[73] The characters' choice to become escorts is affected by their individual pasts and particular family backgrounds. Chiara opts to engage in prostitution as a means of expressing her deep-seated anxiety and a need to defy the artificiality of her existence, whilst Ludovica does so out of a practical necessity to pay for school tuition.

The two young girls' tender age – which is conveyed by the pose in the first cover and the school uniform in the second – is, however, also put into question in the latter example. In the IMBD cover, we also see an image Chiara and Ludovica from behind, dressed in sophisticated and sexy attire that leaves their backs exposed. Unveiling the double life conducted by the two girls is the claim of the cover, "Can you keep a secret?" which evokes the thrill and darkness of the series. The trope of school uniforms in *Baby* deviates from the customary school outfit familiar to Italian viewers and serves as another element in the show that confirms its adherence to the globalized teen genre. One can argue that uniforms are not common in Italy, often associated with the past, particularly the fascist dictatorship, which mandated their use during the 1920s and 1930s. Following World War II, the relevance of school uniforms significantly diminished to the point that they are now typically only mandatory in private institutions.

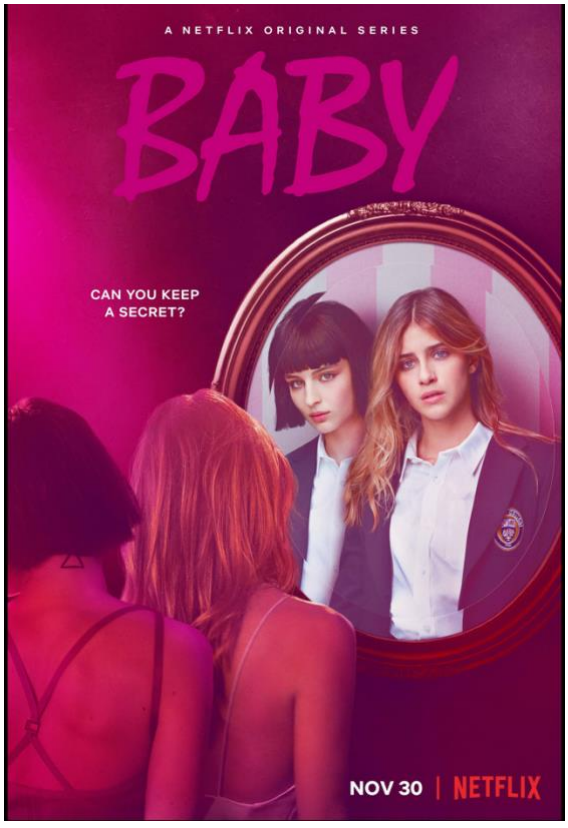

Figure 10. The IMBD cover of *Baby*

While *Baby*'s plot the usage of school uniforms is logical, given its setting in a private school, they evoke a narrative world that transcends the dominant media representation of school on national television. In fact, on Italian TV, school uniforms frequently appear mostly in American TV series, ingraining the image of American students wearing identical attire in the collective imagination of worldwide spectators.

While familiar in the United States, where they are more common (David L Brunsma 2006), school uniforms do not symbolically represent the cultural milieu of Italy to the extent that Italian viewers may find them oddly unrealistic. Unrealistic or not for the Italian viewer, though, they return in a few Netflix non-English teen dramas. A famous teen show on this streaming service in which we find the trope of school uniforms is the Spanish *Elite* (Figure 11), which I have referenced earlier as a constituent of the current trend of teenage content on Netflix. *Élite*, a Spanish series, is set in a private school and revolves around the vicissitudes of affluent, always-glamorous students whose lives are not those of typical teenagers. As with the prostitution theme in Baby, the murders, violence, and blackmail in *Élite* are recurring but not typical subjects of the pre-Netflix coming-of-age canon. Another example of Netflix teen drama proposing the school uniform is also the Korean *All of Us Are Dead* (2022) (Figure 12), whose plot revolves around the misadventures of high school students who have been turned over to zombies as a result of an epidemic.

Figure 11

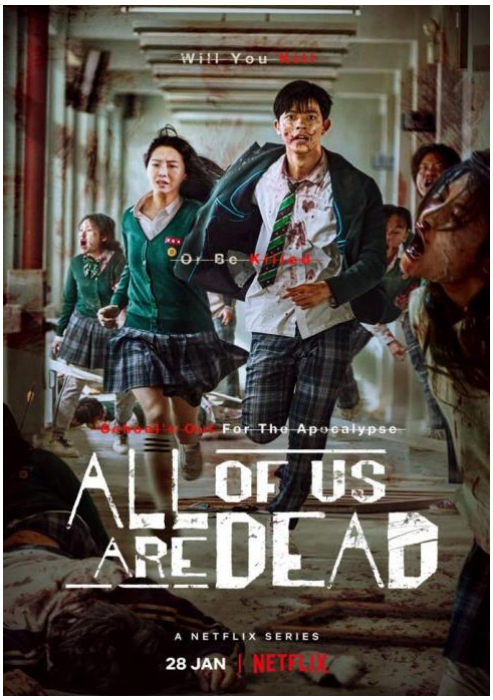

Figure 12

6.3 Baby: The School Setting and The "Anthropology Shot" as Footprints of Teen Dramas

One of the formal elements in *Baby's* text that indicates the show's adherence to the teen drama genre is the recurrence of school as one of the main settings of the story. In Chapter III, I discussed school as a repeated motif throughout the genre, as examined by scholars such as Catherine Driscoll (2011) and Rachel Moseley (2008).

In teen movies and TV series, the school is the most reiterated place of the narrative – together with the teenage protagonists' bedroom – and serves as a metaphor for several elements. As discussed by Driscoll, the school, for example, represents the social infrastructure that supports adolescents' education, usually perceived by teenagers as a form of confinement and restriction. In fact, the way the teen drama genre crystallized school and teacher types usually comprised the portrayal of educators as opponents and antagonists of the teenage characters.

The idea of school as a pivotal place for the protagonists' stories is evident in *Baby,* which establishes the school setting as the focal point of action where the characters' stories converge. The first minutes of the series, which uses cross-cutting[74], serve as supporting evidence for my argument. In the sequence that alternates between Chiara and Damiano's actions (the soon-to-be lovers), we see the two characters getting ready to go out, presumably at the same time, each one at her or his respective house. Soon, we find out they are heading to school, where the other main characters are introduced to the spectators.

As we see the different protagonists arrive at school, the place's representation as a system of confinement and unpleasantness theorized by Driscoll gradually becomes apparent. One example is when Chiara and Ludovica meet for the first time, in the restroom. Chiara is intent on

[74] I.e., the technique in cinema that edits "different sets of action [...] occurring simultaneously" (Susan Hayward 2000, 95),

forging parental signatures to lie to the school about her acceptance to a study program abroad in New York when she overhears Ludovica crying in a bathroom stall. Because she is unprepared for a math exam, Ludovica pretends she is ill as a means of avoiding it. Through Ludovica's behavior, we see the school as a complex system of regulations that students must adhere to amidst feelings of insecurity and anxiety.

Yet students resist school authority by resorting to tricks and deception. Chiara's worries halt Ludovica from rehearsing the staging of her illness when she knocks on the bathroom door to check on her. In response to Chiara's apprehension, Ludovica decides to assist Chiara in forging her parents' signature. By teaming up in what might look like the typical teenage shenanigan, the two female protagonists lay the foundation of their twisted relationship, which will then lead them to participate in illegal activities.

Together with the unease and urge for rebellion expressed by the students' behavior, there is another – more visual – element that highlights the heaviness of the school setting: the school architecture. The narrative of *Baby* is set in a brutalist school building.[75] In their analysis of Brutalism, Elena, and Samira Imani point out that this architectural style, which originated in England after World War II and later gained popularity in the United States, is mostly used in institutional settings, particularly in newer universities and community colleges. One factor that contributed to the spread of this design in institutional buildings is its emphasis on functionality. The use of concrete in Brutalism facilitates the construction of expansive spaces that are suitable for accommodating large crowds, such as students and professors. Brutalist structures, in fact,

[75] "Brutalist style is characterized by large, monumental forms and combined in a whole with heavy, often asymmetrical proportions with natural-colored beige concrete. Large geometric blocks are arranged to simultaneously maximize the efficiency of the interior and achieve an external sculptural form." (Elena Imani and Samira Imani 2021, 5).

prioritize practicality over ornamental features, both inside and outside, which could potentially diminish the available space (for example, arches or columns).

In *Baby's* school, the Brutalist style of the building becomes a metaphor for an institution that seeks to foster order, homogenize, and discipline through the austerity of the visual, to the detriment of individuality and distinctiveness. The result is a heavy, cold, and severe environment, particularly in the interior, due to the prevailing gray color of the concrete and the absence of any distracting and cheerful ornaments (Figure 13).

Figure 13. The indoor of the school in *Baby*.

Adding to the overall seriousness of the location are the school uniforms, which make kids comply, almost blend in with the gray hue of the building and walls. The architectural design and attire included in Baby contribute to the portrayal of a school environment that embodies the idea of an organized system ruled by rigid rules and a well-defined social order, thus aligning with one of the cliches often seen in adolescent drama genre.

However, the school also serves as a metaphor for society, being a precursor to the grown-up world. After all, in school, students must deal with the similar societal dynamics, interactions, and expectations imposed on the members of the adult community. Even the stratification of race and class in society, resulting in the differentiation between black and white individuals, as well as between the poor, rich, and middle class, perpetuates itself in high schools via these same categories. Additionally, the student body is further classified into other membership groups, including nerds, popular students, and outsiders.

Discussing the taxonomizing of students in teen media content, Rachel Moseley claims:"[…] the school hallway, lockers, and classroom are sites of confrontation, humiliation, and desire; the space of the cafeteria is organized in relation to the various high-school cliques and the gym enables the performance and elaboration of key character types and behaviors (jocks and bitchy cheerleaders)" (2018, 56). Building upon how teen media products taxonomize adolescents into tribes on the screen, Roz Kaveney coined the concept of 'the anthropology shot' (Roz Kaveney 2011, 56) to describe how the camera usually operates as a function of that taxonomy. For Kaveney, the 'anthropology shot' consists of using panning movements, which in film language refer to the rotation or pivoting of the camera either left or right along a horizontal arc.

In film, this movement is often used to track a moving subject, with the camera smoothly following its motion. In fact, pans generally simulate the movement that an observer might make by turning their head from right to left in order to view something in its entirety. Kaveney describes the camera as the personification of an observer or anthropologist (hence the name the ‘anthropology shot’), who twists their head to scrutinize the school setting in which they are dwelling, with the result of highlighting its student population and stratification. "[Anthropology] shots establish a number of social groups among high school students and pan between them to

demonstrate social divisions" (Roz Kaveney 2011, 56). Following Kaveney's idea, for instance, by first shooting the group of popular teenagers laughing and having fun during lunchtime and then panning to a group of geeky students working on their chemistry project, the camera would signal to spectators the social separation between these two subgroups**.**

In *Baby*, there is no cafeteria, and the school setting diverges slightly from the ones seen in the American teen series. For example, in the Netflix show, there are no hallway lockers, fundamental elements in teen series from the US. In the school corridors, students usually socialize and interact the most (after cafeterias and bedrooms). In front of their lockers during passing period, they engage in a wide range of social interactions, sharing their secrets, gossiping, and getting caught in the oddest arguments.

The corridors turn thus into literal runways where many archetypal teenage drama characters strut, including the transfer student, the outsider, and the popular kids. Typically, American adolescent dramas portray the popular ones on strutting confidently down the corridors in a tracking shot. Moving with them, the camera focuses on their proud walking, while the other students look on with admiration or jealousy. This scene is sometimes accompanied by upbeat pop music playing in the background reminding of music video clips[76].

Differences in the school setting aside, the hallway remains a key recurring motif in *Baby*, especially in displaying the social division of the student population via the anthropology shot discussed by Kaveney. One instance is in the first episode when Damiano, one of the main characters, enters Parioli's high school for the first time. Damiano has recently relocated from the *quarticciolo*, a much less affluent neighborhood in Rome, to Parioli. After his mother died, his

[76] An iconic example of how the school corridor serves as an anthropological runway location is the music video of "Baby, One More Time" by Britney Spears. The video portrays the artist choreographing her song inside the confines of a school corridor.

father, a Lebanese ambassador to Italy, adopted Damiano, who moved with his new family to the rich and wealthy neighborhood.

As a transfer student coming from a poor neighborhood, and with mixed ancestry, including Italian and Lebanese cultures, Damiano plays the role of the *Other* on several levels in *Baby*. Through the anthropology shot that I analyze more in deep in the next section, the student population emerges as divided into two groups, the self (the "old" students) and the object (Damiano), which becomes the *Other*[77] due to his status as a new student, his Middle Eastern heritage, and his disadvantaged background from a disadvantaged area.

From the standpoint of the school's longstanding students, Damiano is the 'new kid' who has not been labeled yet by the remaining school population[78]. He has, in fact, not been associated with any school subgroup, and for this reason, is regarded with mistrust. For instance, his classmates remind him that he is the latest arrival when he takes a seat in the classroom on his first day of school. Some students call him out for attempting to take their place, so Damiano remains standing in the classroom, waiting for a vacant seat. Echoing the classmates' controlling behavior is also that of the professor, who calls on Damiano to sit in front. The professor's request is the metaphor for a school system that must monitor the new student to ensure he is not going to be a problem and will soon fall in line with the rest of his classmates.

Another instance in which Damiano is marked as the Other from the student body is when he becomes a prospective competitor in the illicit drug trade occurring inside the school. Being blackmailed by a drug dealer from his former neighborhood, Damiano is compelled to engage in the sale of marijuana in order to repay his debt. By doing so, he angers the well-established

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[77] For more on the media representation of the "self" and the "Other", see the studies of Stuart Hall (Stuart Hall 1997).

[78] In the genre conventions of teen drama, he is the new kid trope.

underground drug network inside the school. The rich white kids who managed the drug business before Damiano's arrival use intimidation and harass him by resorting to disparaging language. In a few instances, ‘outcasting’ Damiano consists of racial discrimination, as in episode 2, where the white kids inscribe on Damiano's desk the derogatory term "arabo di merda" (i.e., Arab sh*t).

Emphasizing on the screen how the student body marks Damiano as the Other is also the anthropology shot, which highlights the social and racial divide between him and the remaining students. In the first episode, Damiano arrives at the new school for his first day. While strolling in the corridor to get to his class, the camera alternates the points of view shots from both Damiano and the other students' perspective. The use of a Point of View (POV) shot generally forces spectators to relate to the characters. As the POVs are used for Damiano as well as the other kids, viewers not only notice the separation that exists between the various school groupings, but they also get a glimpse of the students’ personalities.

As Damiano progresses down the corridor, the camera introduces us to several characters we see through his gaze. Initially, our attention is drawn to the group of posh girls led by Virginia (Federica Lucaferri). Their attire underneath the uniform highlights the characters' glamour, along with what is portrayed as a malicious nature. They look at 'us, [the camera, i.e., Damiano's POV]', giggle, and then look at each other, starting to gossip about the new student. What suggests that they might comment on Damiano, and his physical appearance is the camera that switches from Damiano's POV to that of the girls. From the girls’ POV, in fact, we get a glimpse of Damiano displaying a clear unease, as shown by his act of lowering his gaze.

The spectators have little knowledge about Virginia and the female friends' true nature and their function in the plot. However, they may see their mischievous behavior via the anthropology

shot that classifies them as mean girls. The same group later in the episode will slut-shame Ludovica by playing the revenge porn video that shows her in sexual intercourse[79].

During his stroll in the hallway, Damiano also encounters another anthropological cluster, typical of the student body represented in teen media content, i.e., the bad lads, in which the figure of Niccolò (Lorenzo Zurzolo) stands out. Niccolò's appearance is that of a contemporary James Dean, with angelic facial features, thick blond hair, and light-colored eyes. But his portrayal of a good, rich, white guy coming from a good family conceals his bad boy personality, which shows up over the episodes.

The anthropology shot – once again – predicts that: via Damiano's point of view, Niccolò is shown with a confident but confrontational demeanor towards the newcomer. This is evidenced by the look of suspicion directed at Damiano. As the camera work depicts Niccolò with an air of superiority while studying Damiano's passing, it casts over the character a feeling of untrust over his personality (and righteously!).

At the beginning of the story, Niccolò is introduced as Chiara's secret lover. The opening scene of *Baby* displays him in Chiara's bedroom where he had snuck in to spend the night, unbeknownst to their parents. Although he is presented as Chiara's partner, we soon find out that Niccolò is in a supposedly 'monogamous' relationship with his girlfriend Virginia. Progressively debunking the good guy image that the first shot might suggest is also the criminal behavior of Niccolò in the story's unfolding. In trying to frame the newcomer and get him expelled, Niccolò impersonates Damiano and destroys the principal's office[80] in episode 3.

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[79] Brando (Mirko Trovato), the boy Ludovica has been with, posts a video on the Internet in which the two are having sex. Because of the revenge porn video, the schoolmates nicknamed Ludovica "secchiello" which literally means bucket. In the dialect of Rome, this expression is used to refer to an easy girl.

Niccolò's conduct is motivated by a sense of jealously towards Damiano. The burgeoning affection between Chiara and Damiano over the episodes is the cause for Niccolò's jealousy, laying the foundation for the love triangle in the show. In the sequence analyzed, the anthropology shot displays the two male rivals, anticipating their competition by placing them in an antithetical position. The suspicious glances that Damiano and Niccolò exchange in this sequence serve as a foreshadowing of the animosity that would develop between the two characters[81].

The placement of Chiara at the end of the sequence built via the anthropology shot is in fact not a coincidence, being her the 'object' of contention between the two boys. The point of view from Damiano allows us to see the interaction between Chiara and himself, capturing the first look they exchange. Out of all the students, Chiara is the only one who does not look at Damiano with suspicious or inquisitorial stare but rather filled with tender curiosity, and hinting at a smile. Shifting to Chiara's perspective, we also see Damiano's reaction to her gaze: he too grins, hinting at the future connection and chemistry between them.

In Damiano's sequence, therefore, playing by book the anthropological shot from the teen media culture theorized by Kaveney, *Baby* provides viewers with a preliminary but vivid understanding of the individuals' personalities and their future actions. The series of stock characters shown in this sequence – the rebellious boys, the mean girls, and the social misfits – acquaint us with the anthropological world of high school students, as per the conventions of the teen genre. In addition to the paratextual aspects examined earlier, the series' covers and the way

[80] Niccolò assumes the identity of Damiano by wearing Damiano's hoodie. Niccolò will be misidentified as Damiano in the footage of the office's destruction recorded by the security camera, leading to Damiano being falsely accused.

[81] The rivalry will extend beyond Chiara's 'conquest', as it will also have territorial reasons. Since Niccolò, together with Brando, manages the drug business in the school, he will eventually compete with Damiano when the latter embarks on a drug dealing project on his own.

Netflix promotes the show via tags on the platform, provide more evidence that *Baby* was originally intended as a teen drama.

6.4 Glocalizing Baby Through the Casting Choice and the Focus on Rome

After discussing the textual elements, such as the school setting and anthropology shot, as well as the paratextual components, such as the tags or altgenres, the covers, and interviews with the screenwriters, which allow us to frame *Baby* as a global teen drama, I now focus on the factors that glocalize the show.

Going back to the two covers discussed above, I first want to emphasize that, while they identify the teenage universe of the show that Netflix intended to conjure and promote, they also provide an opportunity to explore the concept of *glocalization*, even before examining *Baby's* text.

In the cover found on Netflix, the background of the city of Rome, against which the figures of the two girls are silhouetted, is recognizable. The dome of St. Peter's Basilica of Vatican City, situated in Rome, is rather familiar to an Italian or someone who is acquainted with Italian culture, despite being somewhat obscured by the protagonists.

The show's synopsis also foreground Rome: "[…] two teen girls from a wealthy part of Rome are drawn to the city's underworld and start leading double lives". Mentioning the city where the events take place confirms that Netflix is signaling the importance of Rome as part of the show's appeal. This strategy stands in stark contrast to other American TV series on the OTT, such as *13 Reasons Why*, which omits the setting in the synopsis (Figure 14).

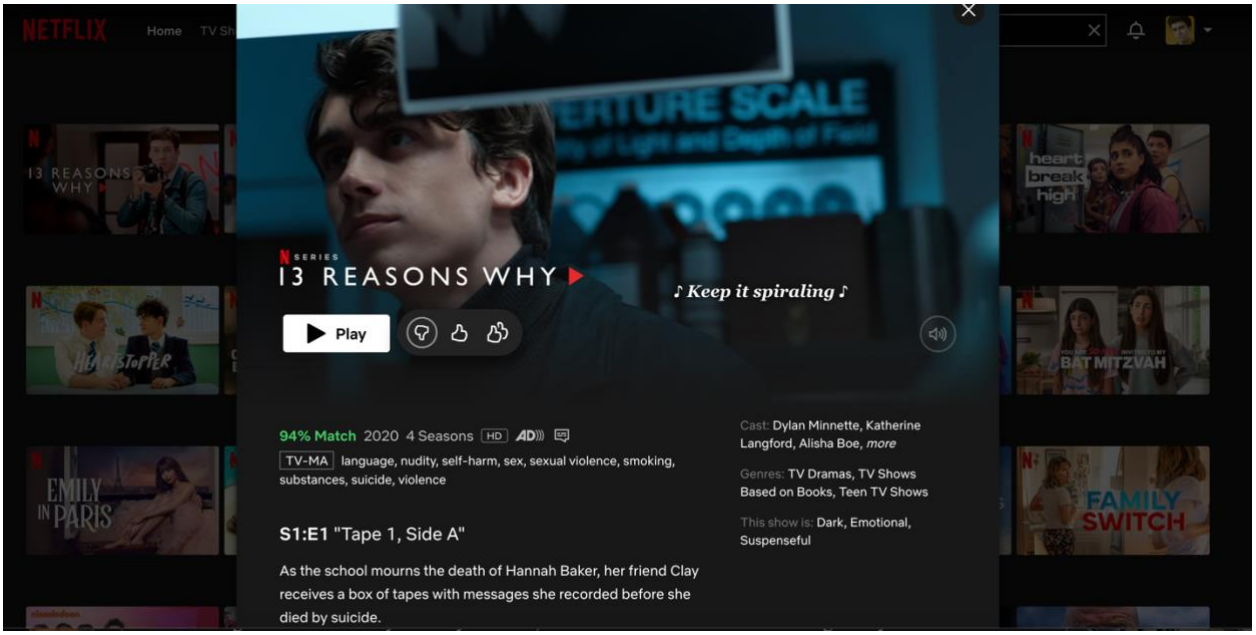

Figure 14. As a matter of fact, in *13 Reasons Why*, the events take place in an American city that is never made apparent in the show nor the synopsis.

Because of the overt impact of glocalization, it is evident from both the picture and the description that *Baby*'s making was greatly affected by the purpose of emphasizing the place of the story. The show, being the second Italian TV series produced by Netflix, was designed to cater to the local Italian audience with the aim of enhancing the company's growth in the country. To achieve this, *Baby* had to incorporate and highlight cultural aspects that were familiar and identifiable to the local viewer. The city of Rome, as I will further illustrate in the analysis of the series' text, consistently appears as a motif and becomes more than just a backdrop for the events.

The emphasis on *Baby's* territoriality does not stop with the Netflix cover – via the semiotic element of Italianness played by the background of the city – but also emerges within the context of the tags. Looking for the two words *Rome* and *Parioli* (the city and neighborhood in which the story is set) in Netflix's search engine will result in the show appearing on the list. It is improbable to assume that the Parioli tag was intended for research on the OTT conducted by non-Italians

spectators. On the contrary, given its highly niche and territorial nature, it would be reasonable to assume that Netflix tags experts designed it for a local audience.

It follows that, on the one hand, Netflix categorized *Baby* as 'Teen,' 'Drama,' 'Emotional', and 'Intimate,' the tags previously discussed, which place the series in a more transnational genre categorization. 'Teen,' 'Drama,' 'Emotional,' and 'Intimate' tags are also found in other teen shows such as *13 Reasons Why*, and thus might serve to expose the viewer to the transnational teen wave of TV dramas promoted by Netflix. On the other hand, however, the OTT also labeled *Baby* with tags or altgenres that are more niche and local, and thus likely intended to be intercepted by specific viewers. People from Parioli, Rome, and Italy who had read and watched the news about the prostitution racket might have easily found the show by searching for those words.

Since altgenres are both non-traditional and genres that the OTT created according to its own lexicon and a large amount of data – as explained in Chapter I – I want to point out that altgenres such as *Rome*, and more specifically, the very niche-oriented *Parioli*, demonstrate how Netflix might have meaningfully revised the idea itself of the genre so far theorized. In the realm of Netflix, hitherto overlooked textual characteristics, such as the setting, can now play a significant role in classifying and discovering media products.

When illustrating the relative nature of genre categories in the US context, Mittell claims that "[w]e do not generally differentiate between shows that take place in Boston and those that take place in Chicago, but we do differentiate between programs set in a hospital and those set in a police station." (Jason Mittell 2004, 8). Hospitals, rather than police stations or courts, influence the kind of stories, characters, and languages used in medical and crime dramas in order to meet the culturally established genre criteria. Setting a show in a hospital, for instance, would mean telling stories of illness, healing, and death and using strictly medical language. Meeting these

criteria means satisfying the viewer's expectations that the medical drama genre had set before. Meeting or defying the genre expectations may, in turn, impact viewers' appreciation and TV series loyalty, which eventually influence the longevity of a show.

Despite Mittell's claim, in *Baby*, the city serves as a distinctive feature to be emphasized in the text, almost as if to promote it for the sake of product selling. That is hardly surprising considering the commercial nature of genres used as strategic tools for the commercialization of media products.

Genres facilitate the division of audience in the media business by categorizing individuals based on their specific tastes in watching content. Creating specialized audience groups, such as those interested in medical drama or crime, simplifies the process of positioning media products. By understanding the preferences of different demographics, media businesses may determine how to effectively provide the desired product to their target audience.

If before the rise of Netflix, cities and locations were not determinant in defining genre conventions (i.e., they did not impact how a TV show was conceived), the degree of localness within *Baby*, because of the emphasis on the Italian setting, seems to suggest now otherwise. Portraying a "generic" Italian town in the same manner as it is done on US programs appears to be quite challenging in *Baby*. As discussed so far, a particular emphasis has been placed on Rome and Parioli, as proved by the example of the cover and the discourse about the show's altgenres. That emphasis does not stop at the paratextual elements of the shows but it also emerges from the text.

In *Baby*, the camera repeatedly dwells on Rome to the point that the city plays not so much the role of the setting of the story but that of the landscape. By pointing out the difference between landscape and setting in *Baby*, I draw on Martin Lefebvre's study of landscape in cinema, according

to which, in some films, the role played by some locations is not simply functional to contextualize the narrative. When examining the origin of the word 'landscape,' Lefebvre highlights that the ancient Greeks did not have a concept or name for it. In Aristotle's *Poetics*, the term "setting" is the only one found, and it is used to refer to the area where the events take place. The setting is consistently defined in relation to the action, plot, facts, and characters without being able to be disjointed from the story.

The first documents where the words setting and landscape begin to be used differently date from nineteenth-century European painting. In treatises, critics and artists of the time began distinguishing the word *parergon* – "landscape as a spatial accessory to a painted scene [...] or as a simple element accompanying a larger ensemble" – from *ergon* – "landscape as the primary and independent subject matter of a work (scenery as the main focus of the work)." (Martin Lefebvre 2016, 23). Differentiating the setting, which becomes the location that serves the tale's purpose, and the landscape, which refers to an autonomous and central subject, was contingent upon the change of gaze. In other words, when painters, critics, and spectators shifted the object of contemplation of their gaze from the story narrated – usually foregrounded in the painting – to the scenery, this later became no longer an ancillary element of the narration but a subject in its own right. Lefebvre argues furthermore that the effects of the shift in the observer's gaze have also influenced filmmaking. When the environment surrounding a story transcends its role as a simple narrative element on the screen, it starts being visually dominant, overwhelming the rest and monopolizing the viewer's attention (Martin Lefebvre 2016).

The first episode of *Baby* starts with an establishing shot of the Parioli with the camera moving upward. It is an aerial shot that, because of the wide angle that covers a broad field of view, shows spectators the district from above. In filmmaking, an establishing shot is commonly

used as the first shot of a scene to communicate the context of the forthcoming action to viewers, portraying the location and the approximate time period (i.e., day or night) in which a story takes place (Christopher Bowen 2024).

Being frequently used in cinematography at the beginning of a sequence, this aerial shot would not seem to say much about *Baby's* emphasis on territoriality, save for the fact that the voiceover accompanying the images introduces the place and tells the viewer what they are looking at. Chiara recites: “Se hai sedici anni e vivi nel quartiere più bello di Roma sei fortunato, il nostro è il migliore dei mondi possibili. Siamo immersi in questo acquario bellissimo ma sogniamo il mare.”[82] Chiara's voiceover promptly emphasizes the significance of territoriality in *Baby*, prompting the spectator to concentrate on the place as a crucial visual element. In other words, Chiara's statement seems to guide the spectators' perspective, asking for the contemplative gaze described by Lefebvre. This gaze allows for a shift from looking at the place as a mere setting (*'perargon'*) to landscape (*'argon'*). Because of that shift, the location itself becomes the focal point of our watching.

As the series unfolds, it becomes difficult to keep track of the many instances when Rome and its surrounding area take on the role of landscape. These are usually aerial shots used to mark the transition from one scene to another. But, because they are long, high-angle shots, and repeat themselves over and over, they seem to indulge a viewing that foregrounds the *tourist gaze*. As Amy Corbin argues, tourists look for the city's view as the primary souvenir in the new place they are visiting. “The primary product that the tourist purchases is the ‘view’ (occasionally made into commercial objects like postcards or souvenir shop kitsch, but most persistently one’s own gazes

[82] "If you are sixteen years old and live in the most beautiful neighborhood in Rome you are lucky, ours is the best of all possible worlds. We are immersed in this beautiful aquarium, but we dream of the sea."

and personal photographs)"(Amy Corbin 2014, 316). The one's own gaze described by Corbin dwells on the object, the view of the city, which becomes the center of attention. No gaze is more contemplative than that of tourists because they pause to behold the spectacle in front of them not for the stories or characters of what they might encounter (e.g., a father strolling with his son or a loving couple kissing on the bench) but for the landscape itself. In the tourist gaze, the location shifts from mere setting to landscape, from parergon to argon, and becomes the focal point of our viewing.

In the enactment of the tourist gaze that the series aims to construct, the culminating moment is in the scene where the two girls take a road trip. Their trip ends with Chiara and Ludovica on top of a little mountain. The place is Piazzale Socrate, which is an area located in the north of the Vatican. From Piazzale Socrate, panorama lovers may enjoy the iconic skyline of the city because of the presence of the dome of St. Peter's in the background.

Because of the dialogue between the two girls, the scene does not merely show the location of the event. On the contrary, it once again asks the viewer to focus on it as the main element of the story. The camera dwells on Chiara looking at the city's skyline. Then Chiara exclaims romantically: 'è bellissimo qui ("It is gorgeous here") while the editing cuts to the following shot. Now we see what they are seeing[83], the breathtaking vista from Piazzale Socrate. While caught up int the beauty of the scenery, we hear Ludovica asking Chiara "Ci vieni mai qui?" ("Do you ever come here?). Chiara replies: "'No!'".

In this conversation, the protagonists' words do not intend to advance the narration since no development in the unfolding of the story takes place in their dialogue. On the contrary, their

[83] The low-quality image, found on the Internet, is from the scene in question, and it was the only one I could find. For copyright reasons, Netflix prohibits screenshots during the screening of its content.

words are merely contemplative, i.e., they aim to direct the viewer's gaze on the landscape, on Rome (Figure 15), which emerges as the protagonist.

Figure 15. Landscape of the city of Rome.

It is worthwhile to report the example of a conversation on *Baby* generated by a post on the website Reddit (a forum for users to discuss a wide range of matters). In the post in question, a user inquired about the locations from Rome that are shown in the series. The user's request and its replies, which aim at making a detailed list of areas of Rome that appear in *Baby*, endorse the idea that spectators may have experienced the charm of the landscape because of the way the series foregrounded it.[84]

The last element in the show that emphasizes the local, as a practice of the glocalization process, is the casting of the two actresses Claudia Pandolfi and Isabella Ferrari. While the casting of these two Italian actresses does not say much to an international audience, in the sense that they

[84] https://www.reddit.com/r/babynetflix/comments/vbvcfz/filming_locations/

are not recognized abroad, for a local spectator, they are paratextual assets, highly evoking of televisual memories from the past.

On the one hand, Pandolfi is notoriously known to Italian audience for her roles in the national television series *Un medico in famiglia* (*A Family Doctor*, 1998 - 2008) and *I liceali* (*High School Students*, 2008). The first is a family-oriented TV show, akin to RAI's content (the national TV on which the series was broadcast). Pandolfi, then, 24 years old, plays the main role of a young woman who falls in love with her brother-in-law after her sister dies. Whilst *Un medico in famiglia* is more in the style of the family-washed soap opera of RAI, *I Liceali* draws upon the teen genre a little more, especially because of the significant cast of teenagers in the series. *I Liceali* revolves around the lives of teachers and students at a Roman high school, where Pandolfi plays the role of a disillusioned art instructor who has lost her enthusiasm for education. The intertextuality between *I Liceali* and *Baby* becomes apparent when considering that in the Netflix show, Pandolfi always portrays the character of a teacher. This time, a darker and more conflicted one since in the story she has a covert relationship with one of the students (Niccolò) after becoming dissatisfied with her marriage.

On the other hand, Ferrari, is a prominent character in the film *Sapore di Mare* analyzed in Chapter IV when discussing the teen genre in Italy. Ferrari, who was 19 years old when the movie was released in 1983 became in the 1980s an icon of the teen film, given the commercial success of *Sapore di Mare* brand (there was a sequel to the first movie as well). As a consequence of her featuring in *Sapore di Mare*, despite the years, Ferrari is still largely associated with the "beach movie" genre that – as I discussed earlier in my work – has been one of the few examples of teenage media culture in Italian cinema.

I argue that both Pandolfi and Ferrari's presence in *Baby* taps into that feeling of nostalgia that a few scholars have described as a determinant of Netflix's success. According to the authors of the book *Netflix Nostalgia: Streaming the Past on Demand*, Netflix leverages the sentimental longing for the past inherent in human beings, and commodifiable. For example, via the reruns of popular TV shows from the past decades (such as Friends 1994 - 2004), Netflix becomes an online repository of cultural, historical and televisual recollections (Giulia Taurino 2019) almost unreplaceable for the lovers of cult content.

Operating according to a wistful affection for the gone by time are also remakes, such as Scream - the TV series (2015 - 2018), which by drawing upon the blockbuster film franchise *Scream (1996 -),* proves Netflix's marketing and branding strategy of feeding the audience's nostalgia (Kesha Mcclantoc 2019).

Netflix perpetuates a pervasive back to the omnipresent past by not just featuring reruns and remakes but also by creating original programs that idealize and romanticize previous eras. As Giulia Taurino claims, "Stranger Things (Netflix, 2016 -) offers many textual clues for the audience to relate to a nostalgic view of the 1980s, not least the historical setting, as well as a certain visual aesthetic typical of U.S.-made, Spielbergian coming-of-age- movies such as The Goonies (1985) or Stand By Me (1986)". (Giulia Taurino 2019, 11).

The casting of Pandolfi and Ferrari in *Baby* builds upon a "totemic nostalgia" between fan and the fan's object (the actresses) that may have appealed to nostalgic viewers, prompting them to watch it. It is conceivable that those who had an affinity for the content in which Pandolfi and Ferrari appeared, by all means the Italian teen genre, may have more willingly chosen to watch *Baby*. The nostalgia being referred to here is specifically speaking to the Italian spectator, on which

Netflix capitalizes by creating a product that is *glocal* in nature, i.e. increasingly emphasizing in the show the localness to which the audience is more familiar with.

6.5 Chapter Conclusion

Baby is an all-local, Italian production of a teen drama à la Netflix, in which the conventions of the established teen genre in the U.S. are adapted to the Italian market through an emphasis on the localness of the story.

On the one hand, *Baby* hankers back to the teen genre for both its paratextual and textual elements. Netflix's promotional materials of the show, such as the series covers, indicate that the product is targeted as a teenage program. Additionally, the Netflix tags or altgenres, used to categorize the show and make it easily findable on the platform, place *Baby* in the realm of teen content. Some textual elements of the series also hint at the teen genre, such as the school setting, which provides the primary backdrop for the plot. The teenagers in the story are portrayed as characters that conform to the predefined archetypes of the genre, such as the rebellious guy, the popular but cruel girl, and the social outcast.

On the other hand, despite constructing and marketing *Baby* as a teen drama, Netflix also ensures that the program is easily recognizable as a product originating from – and most likely destined for – the Italian market. Netflix does this by highlighting the local aspects in the show, primarily by extensively showcasing the city of Rome via the camera's focus. In *Baby*, Rome becomes the central focus rather than just a backdrop of the story, switching from setting to landscape. In addition to the cinematography, the selection of renowned Italian actresses and the incorporation of Netflix altgenres such as 'Rome' and 'Parioli' (indicating the story's setting) demonstrate the show's dedication and focus on the local aspect. Consequently, *Baby* becomes an

intriguing *glocal* teen drama that can resonate with a transnational audience, which may potentially be both Italian and American – or neither of them.

CONCLUSIONS

Written, produced, and filmed in Italy, the two Italian TV series, *Zero* (2021) and *Baby* (2018 – 2020) exemplify Netflix's recent interest and production effort towards the teen drama genre. Although the Italian production company Fabula Pictures implemented the making of these two shows (with the inclusion of Red Joint Film in the case of *Zero*), it was Netflix that provided direct funding and obtained exclusive global distribution rights for both series. This is evident from the label "Netflix Originals" attached to *Zero* and *Baby*. As Netflix Originals, these Italian-language TV shows are part of a larger global trend of teen content that sees this US-based streaming platform as the main catalyst.

Scholars and TV critics agree that Netflix has brought about a fresh surge of teen content worldwide. Following the popularity of the American teen dramas *Stranger Things* (2016 -) and *13 Reasons Why* (2017-2020) in the United States and abroad, Netflix began actively seeking licensed content and creating shows that go under the umbrella of teen/young adult content. Over the years, Reed Hastings and March Randolph's Over The Top (OTT) platform has embarked on a substantial production of youth-oriented series globally, resulting in the creation of original shows in several of the single national markets in which the OTT is present.

Netflix's new wave of teen series transcends, in fact, the US mediascape, as evidenced by the diverse geographical origins of its teen products. *Sex Education* (UK, 2019 - 2023), *Elite* (Spain, 2018 -), *Sintonia* (Brazil, 2019 -), *Baby* (Italy, 2018 - 2020), ***Zero*** (Italy, 2021) Blood and Water (South Africa, 2020 -) and *All Of Us Are Dead* (South Korea, 2022) proves that Netflix's investment in creating content supposedly for teenagers extends beyond American national borders. Specifically in the context of Italy, the list of Netflix's Original teen shows goes beyond the object of my study, *Zero* and Baby, as a few more teen dramas, such as *Skam Italia* (2019 -),

Summertime (2020), *La Vita Bugiarda Degli Adulti* (2022), and *DI4RIES* (2022 -) can also be identified.

In the scholarly discourse on this online streaming service, Netflix Originals raises the concern of homogenization because of the way the OTT's media products depict national cultures. On the one hand, these series might be representative of the culture they are from, since they are created in the language of the market they cater to, such as Italian, Spanish (from Spain, in the case of *Elite*), and Portuguese (from Brazil, in case of *Sintonia*). These works are not just in a language other than English, but they are also written, produced, and shot in the actual locations they depict. The characters in these works may thus be representative of the places these series portray as they may be so the narratives they tell.

On the other hand, however, these shows are still the commodities of a US-based corporation that globally distributes media content for financial gain. This contradiction in terms, whereby the shows' local origins do not exclude the spread of TV trends and customs of the American culture brings attention to the major issue of Cultural Imperialism. Some scholars fear that by operating in 191 out of 195 worldwide countries and having reached 260 million paid subscribers at the time of writing, Netflix might perpetuate the exercise of control by one culture, the American one, over others.

That fear is substantiated by the fact that, although there is a tendency to see Netflix as a new way of television because of technological determinism, the platform still relies heavily on the legacy of American linear television. This is shown by Netflix's extensive collection of TV shows licensed from 'old' broadcasters, which have earned Netflix the idea of a nostalgic archive of content from the past. An example is the very recent news that Netflix has acquired the rights to the popular HBO series *Sex and the City* in the United States and Europe.

The new wave of Netflix's teen dramas, for which the online streaming platform taps into a genre well-established in the U.S. media, does not spare concern about cultural homogenization and imperialism. The teen genre is, in fact, a film and TV category that was historically constructed in the American media culture.

As extensively explored in my dissertation, the portrayal of adolescents in film and on television took off after the notion of teenagers was sociologically invented in the Western World. As soon as teens increasingly emerged as an independent demographic with their buying power after World War II, American media began to focus their production on this emerging group of consumers. Because of the sociological changes that brought teenagers to life, the American film industry and subsequently television started to create more and more media products for younger spectators.

The making of new teen-oriented content increasingly established and solidified the conventions of the teen genre. The narrative focus on adolescents rather than adults within the story, the definition of the stock characters highly distinguishable (the jock, the mean girl, the nerd, and the outcast), and the use of the soundtrack for both commercial and narrative purposes are a few of the genre conventions that crystallized over time.

Despite the imprint of American media in the construction of the teen genre, the association between teen series and American culture is not certainly based on the fact that American youths embody the ultimate and universal representation of teenagers worldwide. In other words, the way adolescents may be portrayed on the screen in countries other than the US does not necessarily correspond to how we see it in American movies and TV series.

Instead, associating the teen genre with American programs is due to the widespread success of the series from the US that started being disseminated worldwide in the 1990s and early

2000s. Television series like *Beverly Hills*, *Dawson's Creek*, *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, and *The O.C.* have been largely distributed, to the extent that they have ingrained in the consciousness of national audiences the archetype of teenagers who spend their time in their bedroom, listening to music, writing in journals, and daydreaming about their crush.

Netflix capitalizes on the worldwide success of the American teen series by using it to take root and expand its operations in national markets. In this work, I explored how Netflix strategically has grown in single mediascapes by leveraging the interest of local consumers in certain shows and genres. Typically, these shows and genres are projects that have been dismissed for reason of low ratings. An outcome of this Netflix's strategy is, for instance, the Spanish TV series *Money Heist* that Netflix picked up after the show was canceled by the Spanish broadcaster Antena 3. Following its acquisition by the online streaming service, the program achieved worldwide success and is now linked to the brand identity of Netflix.

Sometimes, what Netflix tries to resuscitate is not a TV show per se but a whole genre. In this case, they are most likely genres that have been overlooked by local broadcasters for a significant period of time and for several reasons. Not providing their audiences with some shows might have been dictated, for example, by editorial decisions. In other words, by not aligning with the broadcasters' identity, those specific genres were dismissed. Other times, there is a monetary explanation behind the lack of interest of media companies in particular genres, as producing some content might be not worth the spend.

For Netflix, however, resuscitating or reigniting genres and programs in a national market is never a losing game. Whatever shows or genres are chosen by Netflix, it seems that that might be always something for which local audiences have a strong affinity, as evidenced by the good response these programs have ignited or the buzz they have created among spectators. Netflix's

strategy of awakening a dormant but highly profitable audience is, for instance, apparent in the Italian case.

Before Netflix arrived in the country, the history of teen media culture had been fragmented because of the scarcity of both teen products and academic studies. On the one hand, local media companies have placed insufficient resources on the production of teen content, demonstrating little interest in this genre. On the other hand, film and TV scholars have often assumed a highbrow approach toward youth-oriented media products, preventing the scholarly debate from digging into the analysis of the teen genre more profoundly.

As a result of the little consideration of both media companies and scholars in the teen genre, the examples of teen films and series are a few in the history of Italian media and they do not emerge as developed and compelling as their American counterparts. The TV examples of *I ragazzi della 3* C and *Compagni di Scuola* that I analyzed in my work, highlight the often one-dimension nature of the teen characters represented on the screen. The result is a stereotypically shallow representation of Italian youth in these primordial instances of teen dramas, which points to a much more endemic disinterest of the national media in the teen genre formation.

While very few Italian television programs or movies can be counted as examples of the teen genre in Italy, there are several TV series in which teen characters are used as ancillary protagonists in the stories. This happens because Italy's main broadcasters are historically generalist TV companies, meaning that they have always aimed at large audiences of which teenage spectators were only a small part.

In my study, I emphasized that the Italian teen series investigated can be categorized as either family comedy or drama, depending on the tone of the tale, rather than teen shows *tout court.* The way these series depict the interaction between adult and teen characters demonstrates that the

stories' main goal remains the moral lesson: these narratives want to share messages about family values, featuring adult characters who possess the ability to provide guidance and serve as mentors for young individuals. On the contrary, in the teen genre conventions, parents, professors, and adults in general are depicted as antagonists to the teen characters, opposing the self-expression and self-affirmation of teenagers.

Although there are historically few locally produced teen programs when it comes to Italy, Italian spectators have consistently shown interest in this genre. The worldwide appeal of the American teen dramas mentioned above has not spared Italian audiences, as proved by the high ratings of the US teen shows on Italian TV in the 1990s and 2000s. The interest in American teen shows by the Italian audience – I contend – validates the hypothesis that Netflix might have seen the potential of embarking on the production of teen content in the country. In fact, Netflix's decision to focus significantly on the making of teen series in Italy, as demonstrated by the number of Italian-language teen shows, is linked to the historical gap between the demand and supply of locally produced teen dramas in the Italian media landscape.

Given for certain the contiguity between Netflix's teen series and the teen genre formally created by American media, the question remains whose stories are told in the teen shows present on the OTT and what specific culture they narrate. For scholars such as Mareike Jenner the adherence of Netflix teen content to the American teen genre is such that these shows demphasize the local in their text. Jenner contends that the Netflix teen series minimizes the portrayal of the story's place to the point that viewers struggle to connect the narrative with a particular region. Out of the instances examined, Jenner specifically reports the example of the British show *Sex Education*. This global Netflix success deliberately omits any explicit mention of particular locales, to the extent that the only clue for viewers to identify the story's setting as someplace in

the United Kingdom is the presence of a standard British accent. Jenner also argues that Netflix intentionally downplayed the cultural references to the UK in order to produce a teen TV series that is not limited to any one culture, aiming to maximize its worldwide popularity.

For the transnational Netflix spectator familiar with the American teen series, it is natural to develop an affinity for a teen show that revolves around high school students organizing the typical end-of-year prom (based on the American model). For the transnational Netflix spectator, it is also simpler to get acquainted with and attached to teenage main protagonists that resemble the standardized series of characters established by the American teen show; just as it becomes ultimately less frictional to watch a series in which the allusions to a specific culture are purged to the point that viewers may not feel alienated or unfamiliar with what they are watching.

In contrast to the idea that Netflix teen series de-emphasize the local culture to reach a global audience, my analysis of the Italian shows *Zero* and *Baby* demonstrated that the cultural imperialism of the teen genre may find some places of resistance and friction. In adapting the teen genre to the Italian market, *Zero*, and *Baby's* screenwriters have found a way "to talk back" to the globalized youth-oriented genre by incorporating into the text several elements that are a clear reference to the Italian culture.

First, both series are based on news events or real-life scenarios, of which they propose a fictionalized but realistic account. In the case of *Zero*, the fantasy story of the Black superhero Omar, who can make himself invisible, intertwines with the representation of second-generation Italians of African descent who live in Italy. The invisibility, which in the fantasy teen drama is a synonym of power and superhuman skill, becomes in the show the metaphor of many people like Omar who are not considered Italian by the law. In Italy, in fact, citizenship status is generally defined by the citizenship of one's parents, which means that those who are born to immigrant

parents are not eligible to acquire Italian citizenship by merely being born in the country. The series returns to this topic quite often throughout the episodes, remarking on a political issue publicly well-known to the Italian audience. More generally, the representation of racism and prejudice towards the Italian-Black community in *Zero* echoes the climate of discrimination in the country perpetuated against non-white-skinned Italians, and often at the center of public discourse.

In the case of *Baby*, on the other hand, the plot draws upon the real-life scandal that brought to light the racket of prostitution of a few high school female students in 2014. The outrage for the *Parioli Baby Prostitutes* – a reference to the wealthy neighborhood of Rome, the Parioli (where the teenagers were from) – spread in the country. The primary cause for the topic gaining national attention was the discovery that prominent individuals, including the spouse of Alessandra Mussolini (a member of the right-wing Forza Italia party and niece of the same name dictator), were the clients of the escorts.

The Italian spectator familiar with the subtext of reality on which the two shows draw cannot help but think that the stories told on the screen in *Zero* and *Baby* are culturally close to them. The rationale behind glocalizing the teen genre, i.e., adapting the genre conventions to the Italian cultural setting – I contend – can be explained by the notion of *cultural proximity* theorized by Joseph Straubhaar. Applying Straubhaar's idea to Netflix, the online streaming service must consider the connection between the product and the specific geographic area when creating television content for potentially local viewers. This is because the cultural closeness between the content and spectators can be decisive for the audience viewing. Spectators might dismiss shows that do not closely align with their own culture, where culture must be understood as language, sayings, sense of humor, customs, and habits, but also locations and people, in other words, all those elements that might reflect the universe of those who are watching.

The localness of Italy in *Zero* and *Baby* returns in several ways throughout the shows: via the narratives, the music choices, the in-location filming, and the camera work that lingers on the locations of the story, Milan and Rome. As a matter of fact, the insistence on the place is relatively absent in the other Netflix teen series as their focus on the localness of the story is rarely emphasized or accentuated.

Certainly, one must inquire as to why Netflix creates narratives that resonate with the cultural backgrounds of its viewers. The primary motive is undoubtedly financial gain. However, disregarding the economic aspect momentarily, the rationale for the writing of glocal products may be elucidated by Netflix's nature as a transnational company.

The transnationalism of Netflix manifests itself at two primary levels. First, for copyright reasons, spectators cannot watch the same content in the 191 countries where Netflix is available. For instance, media products in the Italian Netflix catalog might not be accessible to subscribers in Mexico. Hence then the need to produce Netflix Originals, which by their nature are Netflix's property and therefore watchable wherever the online streaming service operates. Content is therefore the first layer of transnationalism of Netflix as products are not global per se but transnational. Because of reasons of copyrights, they exist at the intersections of global and local contexts.

Second, being transnational for Netflix means collecting and writing shows that aim to speak to a more deterritorialized audience, i.e. consumers who are not necessarily identifiable with one national culture. Because having to create a product that potentially has to speak to the 191 audiences, corresponding to the countries in which the platform operates, means not having to create a product that is oriented toward only one nation. Transnationalism thus becomes the

premise for Netflix to produce content that can strike the right balance between the global and local expectations of potentially universal subscribers.

If transnationalism were indeed the rationale behind Netflix's modus operandi, we would be looking at an interesting example where a global conglomerate implements an upstream self-limitation in order to expand. In the interview with GRAMS, the writers' collective behind *Baby*, reported in Chapter VI, one of the young screenwriters of the show discussing their relationship with Netflix producers, states: "They have never been invasive", [...]From L.A. and Amsterdam they listen to what the national productions are working on, see if it's in line with them, and then they give a lot of strength to the local storytelling framework because then the product will be pushed more in the place where it was made.". Emphasizing the importance that Netflix puts on the localness of its stories, the screenwriter continues: "From Holland we were always asked: how does this happen in Italy? How does it work in Parioli? Put in what you know, not what we imagine."

By arguing Netflix's interest in the localness of its products, which is the main argument of my project, I certainly do not want to convey that the platform is giving up its global aims. In fact, I am only reiterating here one of the two forces that take part in the yoke of the glocal in the teen shows that I analyzed, namely the resistance actualized by the local culture. Based on what *Baby's* screenwriter stated, Netflix seems to allow that resistance. It almost seems to ignite it, letting the local culture find a way to negotiate the absorbing force of the global. Of course, this issue merits further investigation, which allows me to make one last point about a limitation of my research and analysis.

In my project, there is certainly a noticeable missing perspective that I aim to take into account and resort to in the future. That perspective pertains to the audiences and their responses

to the shows that I have examined. In my consideration of the two series, *Zero* and *Baby*, I consistently used a post-structuralist approach to the teen genre. This means that not only have I analyzed the two texts, through a close reading of the series, but I also examined the paratextual elements of the shows, in which I counted the interviews with the screenwriters and the promotional materials.

However, under the post-structuralist perspective of the genre, it is equally necessary to analyze the medium. That is why, I have also extensively dwelt on the history and identity of Netflix, in the attempt to frame this conundrum that scholars still find hard to define (Is Netflix Television or post-TV?). In delving deep into the nature of this medium, I therefore discussed the Netflix Recommendation System, i.e., the infamous algorithm. The analyses of the NRS served to show how in the Netflix logic, the concept of genre categories has been revisited.

If looking for the keywords Rome, Parioli, or Il Barrio on the Netflix search engine means being able to find the shows *Baby* and *Zero*, then it means those same keywords have now become important in the writing of the texts. The altgenres in fact consider elements in the texts that were previously overlooked, such as the urban setting or the specific geographic location of the narrative. And thus they affect how TV series are written via glocalization.

In the post-structuralist approach to the shows analyzed, the only task left is to determine the viewers of these programs and their responses. A close examination of the audiences may first provide useful insights into the nature of the text. For example, we might finally understand if the primary demographic watching these series is teenagers. Teen dramas showcase adolescent characters and have traditionally been classified as content targeted at teens. One should finally verify the truthfulness of this assertion. Finding out that youth-oriented content has in fact several adult viewers watching might explain why teenagers in nowadays teen shows screenwriters make

adolescent characters play all the possible roles. Teenagers can be assassins, superheroes, prostitutes, detectives, therapists, and so on. They often are many things except student, which makes one wonder if this so-called teen content is actually for teens.

However, another matter that may be addressed with a detailed examination of the audiences of *Zero* and *Baby* pertains to the portrayal of Italianness in these series and so the effectiveness of glocalization. A detailed examination of the way viewers respond to these shows would allow us to ascertain if the transnational spectator, both Italian and non, considers the programs as genuine and trustworthy depictions of the target culture. Or, on the contrary, a stereotypical media representation. When pointing to Netflix's audience, it is very difficult to answer these questions as the online streaming service does not release any official data about its viewers. This is the exact reason why I believe that doing qualitative research, namely conducting interviews and focus groups with worldwide viewers, would place the final piece to deem the circle of the poststructuralist approach complete.

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