Re-thinking the Coming-of-Age: Transmedial Representation of Youth in Italian Culture [1950s to Present]

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O: The recent attention on youth in cultural products such as TV series and films, as well as books, made necessary a new, more up-to-date investigation on the ways coming of age is represented today in Italian culture. From Paolo Sorrentino's latest autobiographical motion picture *The hand of God*, to the Netflix series *Baby* and transnational coming-of-age novels such Durastanti's *La straniera,* the patterns that lead young characters toward maturity have changed since the earliest stages of the genre.

The *Bildungsroman* as a frame for fictional and non-fictional storytelling has been so entangled in society that has been deeply affected in its structure by social and cultural changes (e.g. Fascism, mass society, feminism, Berlusconi's television). Therefore, what does coming of age really mean today? Has its representation changed over the years (from the 1950's to present) and, if so, what does it tell us about Italian society?

On the occasion of the Conference of the Society for Italian Studies held at University of Warwick on the 21st and 22nd of April 2022, I invited Professor Danielle Hipkins and Dr Nicoletta Mandolini to join a conversation in order to discuss youth and coming-of-age representations in the new media. The outcomes of this interview show how much the intermedial migration of the coming of age from the novel to cinema and graphic novels stretched and manipulated a literary genre that appeared to be struggling at keeping up with our times.

How are films and graphic novels positioned with regard to the literary genre of the female Bildungsroman? Does the representation of youth change at the shift of the medium? If so, what are the most relevant differences?

N: The graphic Bildungsroman is an emerging genre that became successful with the increasing popularity of the graphic novel format.[1] The graphic novel, as recent studies carried out on the topic suggest, tends toward realism (Beatens and Frey 12) and non-fiction (Chute and DeKoven 777). At a thematic level, the macro category of the life story is among the most frequent to be found when browsing through graphic novels. For example, autobiography is a widespread genre when it comes to graphic novels' production and consumption (Beatens and Frey 12; Kyler), to the point that scholars and readers have introduced the term "graphic memoir" to identify autobiographical works created by means of comics. As opposed to serial superhero comics, where the presence of female authors is traditionally scarce and where female characters are generally marginalised and/or objectified (Cocca), the graphic novel sector abounds with women creators and many of them have selected the genre of the graphic memoir for their works. Internationally acclaimed examples can be made on this regard: from Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000-2003), to Alison

Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006), *Are You My Mother?* (2012) and *The Secret to Superhuman Strength* (2021), passing from Phoebe Gloeckner's *A Child's Life and Other Stories* (1998). All the aforementioned graphic memoires intersect with the coming of age or Bildungsroman genres, as they recount the personal stories of growth of the authors. The biography is another genre whose popularity is pivotal among graphic novels readers and creators (Kuhlman 124-126), an example being *Maus* (1980), by Art Spiegleman, possibly the most acclaimed, popular and controversial graphic novel of all times, in which the author retraces the story of his father, Vladek Spiegelman, who survived Auschwitz by using zoomorphic characters to highlight the hierarchy between Nazis (represented as cats) and Jews (represented as mice). Even among graphic biographies, the presence of women authors and protagonist is striking, which testifies to the importance that the genre is currently assigning to female life stories where, needless to say, the coming of age part that portrays the characters' formative years often plays a significant role. Acclaimed examples taken from the international context include works such as *Red Rosa* (2015), by Kate Evans, or *Artemisia* (2017), by Nathalie Ferlut and Tamia Bodouin, on the lives of the political activist Rosa Luxemburg and of the Baroque painter Artemisia Gentileschi respectively.

The success of the life stories and Bildungsroman-like plots in graphic novels is not surprising if we consider that another point on which existing scholarship on graphic narratives insists is that graphic novels possess medium-specific features that make them particularly suited for narrating effectively and in a complex way a journey of self-discovery. When I talk about medium-specific features, I refer to those characteristics that pertain to the comics medium (to which, despite the numerous controversies on its status and definition, the graphic novel belongs). Among these, time, which is pretty important when we analyse a genre like the coming of age, has been identified as an element that, through the comics medium, can be conveyed as an eminently subjective experience. As Elisabeth El Refaie suggested, graphic narratives allow to represent time as fluid because "many of its formal features follow patterns that reflect the way memory itself works" (El Refaie 95). An example of these medium-specific features is the possibility of spatially juxtaposing past and present events in the same page, double page or set of panels, so to make different temporalities simultaneously visible to the reader's eye, who "reads" time as lived by the protagonist. FIGURE 1, which is taken from *Romanzo Esplicito* (2018), the debut graphic novel by Fumettibrutti, one of the most celebrated Italian comics artist and author of a coming of age trilogy, exemplifies this. The serialised vertical juxtaposition of two panels, each representing an event from the past (the yellow one on top) and from the present (the blue one at the bottom), allows the reader to enter the dynamic of mental comparison between the idealised old times of the protagonists' teenage and the grim reality of her present days.

Another interesting feature of comics is its ability to portray the drawn self as plural (El Refaie 52-60). This can be done by means of the same strategy that I just mentioned, that of juxtaposing different time frames in the same page, which allows to offer to the reader's gaze a glimpse on the different moments of the character's life story as well as on his/her/their shifting anatomy. Or it can be done through cartooning itself, which allows cartoonists enough freedom, thus permitting them to experiment with the visual portrayal of characters as multifarious. This is the case of FIGURE 2, taken from Satrapi's *Persepolis*, where the artist represents herself as a girl half veiled and half uncovered in a single image. This last characteristic is, I believe, particularly important in the case of the female (and feminist!) autobiography and coming of age. The representation of the Self as plural is important for the feminist coming of age because it is precisely feminist theory and feminist creative practice that have highlighted the importance of challenging representations of the

Self as a monadic, stable and rigid entity that undergoes a linear and conclusive process of growth. Feminist theory and art have promoted an idea of the self as a fluid, shifting and relational entity (e.g. Braidotti; Irigaray; Neimanis) that the comics medium can, because of its medium-specific capacities, implement at a representation level.

D: I would prefer to focus on the coming-of-age story since it addresses more closely the 14-19 year-old age group we are working with for our current project, *A Girls' Eye View*: *Girlhood on the Italian screen since 1950*. I would also like to underline here that my responses are based on the findings of our team (Romana Andò, Maria Elena Alampi and Leonardo Campagna). Although the female *Bildungsroman* is also important for developing gender identities, it tends to address a slightly later phase in the female life cycle than the one we are examining. Indeed we see the female Bildungsroman adapted far less frequently on the Italian screen, perhaps due to its popular association with 'chick lit', and the industry's widespread notion that Italian women are not a target audience for Italian cinema.[2] Coming of age, however, is an increasingly insistent theme in Italian cinema and television, particularly in narratives about girls turning eighteen. This is largely a result of what Handyside and Taylor-Jones have described as 'hypervisibility' of the girl, and Sarah Projansky as her 'spectacularization' over the last two decades that can be traced in popular culture from the proliferation of girl protagonists, often drawn from bestselling Young Adult fiction, such as the *Twilight* and *Hunger Games* series.

With its decidedly realist rather than fantasy bent, in Italian cinema and television the coming-of-age phase has been marked by a lingering emphasis on the sexual coming of age as *the* defining experience for girls, films often featuring a first sexual relationship as the central rite of passage. We can trace this association of 'realism' itself with a sexualised representation of girls and women, constructed by male auteurs, back to Neorealism at least. There is also no doubt that younger girls and women constitute an appealing visual addition to Italian cinema, most particularly for the supposed male heterosexual viewer. However, this recent centrality on the Italian screen is also a result of this new wave of hypervisibility of girls, which includes girls and women in its address, as well as a flourishing of the coming of age novel authored by women, and its adaptation for the screen (still often by male directors). We might consider, for example, the recent examples of *L'Arminuta* (written by Donatella di Pietrantonio, published 2017, adapted for screen by Giuseppe Bonito in 2021) and *Mi chiedo quando ti mancherò* (written by Amanda Davis, 2003, adapted for screen by Chiara Barzini and Francesco Fei in 2019). Certainly, a first sexual experience is part of these narratives, but it no longer becomes the focal point of the protagonist's development, defined instead largely by relations with other women. This relational identity is an important feature of the acclaimed *L'amica geniale* (HBO/Timvision/Rai Italia, 2018-) tetralogy, and in its wake *The Lying Life of Adults* (Netflix, 2023).

The flourishing of intermediality between page and screen includes novels with more literary aspirations, such as *Sirley* (Elisa Amoruso, 2020), adapted by the author for screen as *Maledetta primavera* (Amoruso, 2021) and *L'Arminuta*, as well as films that draw on popular YA fiction, such as *Succede* (written by Sofia Viscardi, 2016, adapted for screen by Francesca Mazzoleni, 2018), *Sul più bello* (written by Eleonora Gaggero, 2020, and adapted for screen by Alice Filippi in the same year and even non-Italian examples like the previously mentioned *Mi chiedo quando ti mancherò*. It is important to remember of course that girlhood films in Italy got a strong popular boost from the YA fiction link with the Federico Moccia series (adapted in the early 2000s), but what defines all these more recent examples is that the fiction is female-authored (if not always female directed). On a commercial level,

there is a close relationship between the addressed readership and the intended audience, so a novel like *L'Arminuta*, of course, inevitably addresses a smaller, more elite group of viewers of arthouse cinema. An Amazon Prime product like *Sul più bello* on the other hand is clearly attempting to draw on the same kind of YA fiction-film link enjoyed by US products like *After* (Gage, 2019), also incredibly popular in Italy.

At the same time, however, it is important to note at least two things. One is that film / television language is obviously transformative in its difference from literary fiction, creating new opportunities for the representation of girlhood, and, inevitably, new risks. As mentioned above, through the long-term use of the girl as trigger for heterosexual male rejuvenation and titillation, directors encounter the difficulty of escaping a sexualizing gaze on the female body. The continued dominance of male directors in Italian cinema does not help this change. A good example comes from the opening of the film *Indivisibili* (De Angelis, 2016). The camera deliberately cuts away from the opening image of prostitutes on the beach to linger instead on the conjoined twins. The camera pans in through their bedroom window to reveal one of them awake masturbating. Such obvious through-the-window voyeurism is deliberately self-conscious, and the classical beauty of the twin performers makes for an uncomfortable knife-edge between titillation and the desire to look away. Nonetheless, it creates the impression that we cannot escape the recycling of images that evoke a male gaze.

A second, related risk concerns a dramatic loss of nuance in the communication of the first person stream of consciousness that so often conveys interiority in the novel. In particular, in the novel other senses can trouble the visual economy of a sexualizing male gaze. Amoruso's *Sirley* concerns the awakening desire of a young teen girl for a mixed race classmate, adding a problematic postcolonial dimension to the problem of a white girl spying on her object of desire in the shower. In the novel this visual dynamic is softened by the sense of smell that dominates Nina's attraction to Sirley, taking us towards a differently embodied dimension, that gets collapsed into the voyeurism of the film version *Maledetta primavera*. *Maledetta primavera* makes an interesting contrast with Celine Sciamma's film *Waterlilies* (2007) which deals with a similar story of an emergent first lesbian crush. However, in this film, as Fiona Handyside argues, Sciamma's use of water and music serve to convey the sensory world of the desiring girl in modes that move beyond such voyeuristic shots of the object of desire.

In recent Italian cinema, there have been attempts to convey similar sensory worlds. These include, for example, of the use of colour in *Nevia* (De Stefano, 2017), in which the rich world of the circus provides the protagonist with much needed relief from life in the Neapolitan periphery. The film *Cloro* (Sanfelice, 2015) uses snow and water to convey the heroine's shifting moodscape, whilst the 'affective dissonances' (Dobson and Kanai) of the protagonists of *Baby* (Netflix, 2018-) permeate its soundtrack. None of these examples, however, make particularly creative inroads with camerawork or montage, and rarely come close to the 'phenomenological' style of British director Andrea Arnold in *Fish Tank* (2009) or *American Honey* (2016). Her techniques of handheld camerawork, following her protagonist 'like a loyal dog' (Jacobs), and sound design that takes us into the world-view of her young protagonists present good examples of how to move beyond the traditional dynamics of the gaze.

Cinema and television can offer something different to the novel in terms of the embodiment that the performer brings to the role. Elisa Gambaro writes about how effective this is in the representation of Lenù's first experience of menstruation in the adaptation of *L'amica geniale*, where the visibility (to others) of her bodily metamorphosis is underlined

by the blood stain on her skirt and 'the actress's performance, her gestures and mimicry, successfully convey the character's awkwardness and confusion' (p. 214).

The embodiment that the performer brings to the role can also make visible a greater range of diversity, in terms of beauty standards and race, increasingly appreciated and sought out by Generation Z viewers. We could take for example Marta, the protagonist of *Sul più bello*, who announces at the opening of the film that she has remained an ugly duckling, and the casting of Ludovica Francesconi confirms a more ordinary kind of aesthetic that meets with great popularity amongst teen audiences.[3] Other films foreground overweight girls, such as *Dolcissime* (Ghiaccio, 2019), and we are seeing the emergence of new star body types, such as Claudia Marsicano. On the issue of race, the indexical link still seems weak, with the casting of an Italian girl as an ethnically Tunisian Muslim in *SKAM Italia* (Sana is played by Beatrice Bruschi). There may be issues of 'plastic diversity', a concept Kristen J. Warner coins to address Netflix's superficial casting practices. The increasingly rich seam of migrant and second-generation literature in Italy offers a lot of potential to challenge these, as the recent adapation of Distekele's *Zero* by Netflix in 2021 illustrates. However, female-authored literature in this area is yet to be adapted, so films and television tend to centre around migrant or second-generation male protagonists, as in *Zero* or *Banglà* (Bhuiyan, 2019).

O: Women graphic novelists' production in Italy seems to privilege the autobiographical angle, which shares a lot with the literary tradition of the memoir. Have you identified specific patterns recurring in the representation of female coming of age in graphic form? The writing of a memoir comes often in relation with a form of trauma. Is it still the case with graphic novels?

N: Trauma has been recognised as crucial in the area of graphic memoir production by women at an international level. One of the most prominent scholars in comics studies, Hillary Chute, analysed in her *Graphic Women* (2010) the work of four internationally renowned graphic novelists, Aline Kominsky-Crumb; Marjane Satrapi, Alison Bechdel, Phebe Gloeckner and Lynda Barry who engaged with the genre of autobiography. In her work, Chute identifies trauma as one of the main thematic components of the autobiographical effort undertaken by the authors, who openly recount the set of abuses, discriminations and adversities they suffered because of their gender and/or sexual orientation (2). The comics medium, according to the scholar, is particularly apt for allowing a representation of traumatic events in which the recognition of the process of victimization and objectification is clear, yet the agentic re-appropriation through self-narration of the same process is equally openly sketched. In other words, Chute evokes Charles Hatfield's idea according to which, in autobiographical comics, the creator draws the Self as if seen from outside, thus practicing self-objectification (115). This, in the case of gendered violence and trauma, turns crucial as it permits women artists to represent themselves as victims (thus denouncing the abuse) and, at the same time, as owners of their own story.

Following a tentative survey that I conducted among 10 graphic novels produced in the last decade and ascribable to the genre, trauma is, unequivocally, a prominent component in the graphic coming of age written by women in Italy. Trauma, which is here either intended in its traditional connotation or as "small" (Moura 2022) and "vicarious" (Kadambi and Ennis), features in all the ten works that I have considered. *Ada* (2018) by Barbara Baldi, Fumettibrutti's trilogy of graphic novels (*Romanzo esplicito* 2018; *P. La mia adolescenza trans* 2019; *Anestesia* 2020), *Caravaggio e la ragazza* (2021) by Nadia Terranova and Lelio

Bonaccorso and *Ti chiamo domani* (2019) by Rita Petruccioli recount episodes of gender-based violence: domestic violence; transphobic violence; sexual violence and attempted rape. *Quasi signorina* (2016) by Cristina Portolano engages with the everyday, small but structuring trauma of growing up a girl in the Italian south during the 1990s. *Stelle o sparo* (2018) by Nova is the story of a young woman who is navigating an existential crisis in the setting of a natural scenario on which the effects of climate change and pollution loom. Similarly, Giulia Sagramola's *Incendi estivi* (2015) describes the summer fires that menace the woods of the Italian peninsula on a yearly basis as a consequence, among other things, of global warming. *Giorni felici* (2021) by Zuzu tells about the return of a traumatic love story from the past. In *La giusta mezura* (2017), Flavia Biondi engages with the topic of sentimental, financial and jobs precarity. Sara Rocchi's and Alice Milani's *Tumulto* (2016) discusses vicarious trauma by telling the story of two Italian young women who undertake a road-trip in the Balkans, thus getting acquainted with the consequences of the not so far Balkan war.

The situation is more complicated when it comes to autobiography. We can see that the presence of the autobiography is significant but not prominent among the 10 graphic novels. The fictional works account for half of the corpus. Moreover, where an autobiographical tendency is present, this rarely translates into a standard and linear practice of self-narration. If we exclude Portolano's *Quasi signorina*, where the coincidence between author, narrator and protagonist is straightforward, the other works present different degrees of inconsistency with Philippe Lejeune's description of autobiography and the so-called autobiographical pact (1975). In Fumettibrutti's trilogy, for example, the author's presentation of her work as based on her own personal story of male to female gender and sexual transition clashes with the split or hiatus between the drawn pre-transition Self (who is identified as P.) and the drawing post-transition Self (whose name is Josephine Yole) (Mandolini). Rita Petruccioli avoids, in *Ti chiamo domani*, the coincidence between name of the protagonist and name of the author, though drafting a coming of age where the existential pact intersects with her own (the protagonist is a cartoonist from Rome who spends some time of her life in France). In *Stelle o sparo*, Nova's decision not to name her protagonist, whose visual features are clearly shaped on her owns, recalls Sibilla Aleramo's reluctant approach towards blatantly disclosing her own identity in *Una donna* (1906), possibly the first semi-autobiographical Bildungsroman and hybrid autobiography of Italian feminist literature (Wood). Curiously, Nova was also presented by her publisher, BAO, as the feminine version of Zerocalcare (Garofoli 2018), who is, not by coincidence, experimenting with the genre of the autofiction. Zuzu, whose art has been repeatedly labelled as autobiographical or semi-autobiographical, works on an ambiguous terrain, as confirmed by a recent Instagram post, where she stated "Autobiografia. Non odio questa parola. Ma mi perseguita. I giornalisti la usano spesso quando parlano del mio lavoro, e alcuni mi hanno chiesto se scriverò mai una storia inventata di sana pianta. È una domanda che mi fa sorridere, perché anche la mia vita è un'invenzione, un racconto che faccio a me stessa e agli altri quando non disegno e non scrivo. […] E chi crede che esistano storie inventate di sana pianta si dice un mucchio di bugie." (Zuzu, "Autobiografia"). I believe that Zuzu's words reflect a fruitful tendency of Italian female graphic novelists to furtherly hybridise the autobiographical approach and to challenge, following the path initiated by women writers as early as the beginning of the Twentieth Century, the idea of a rigid and inalterable truth about someone's Self and self-narration. This has, given the frequent interconnection between the genres, clear repercussions even on the coming of age and the Bildungsroman.

O: In your current project on girls' representation in Italian cinema you also trace a brief history of Italian female audience, pointing out how after the 1950s the industry turned toward male audience and remained there for at least a decade (Morreale, 2011). What are the main changes that can be identified in this shift? Would it be too simplistic to say that 'male gaze' is replaced by empowering female representation when female audience is targeted?

D: We are yet to embark on this aspect of the project, but drawing on previous work, I would say that this shift happened as melodrama gave way to *commedia all'italiana* in the mid to late 1950s, and it is generally agreed that as television gained in popularity women audiences stayed at home, so cinema no longer addressed them. At the same time a loosening up around censorship and the male-dominated industry exacerbated the attention given to a sexualizing male gaze. So, for example, as Natalie Fullwood recounts, women were carefully held in place by control of space. Girls in particular emerge in that period as 'rejuvenators' in a way that I see dominating Italian comedy in different ways right through to the present day. In some arthouse cinema, such as that of Federico Fellini, the girl also takes on a salvific and/or sexually titillating function, and we can see this perpetuated in the work of Paolo Sorrentino today. Both Fullwood and Emma Van Ness, do highlight the work of Antonio Pietrangeli in the 1960s, however, as one that foregrounds female experience, particularly youthful female experience, as one that is fraught and imprisoning. Particularly memorable in this regard is the depiction of Dora (Catherine Spaak) in *La parmigiana* (1963). This kind of preoccupation with, and sensitivity to female experience, is another strand of Italian cinema that continues in more and less successful ways in male-directed girlhood cinema of recent years, in films like *Cloro* or *A Chiara* (Carpignano, 2021).

I do not think we can assume that empowering female representations result when a female audience is targeted. Our project with teen audiences also suggests that we cannot prescribe exactly what an empowering female representation would look like. If you ask teen girls initially what they look for in a role model or a heroine, the word 'strong' emerges. Whilst this seems to imply a straightforward, singular quality, the process of empowerment is always exactly that: a process. Empowerment is not something contemporary teens expect will arrive ready-packaged, but must be worked at and discovered by each individual, so some display of fragility or vulnerability is also required. These findings confirm those in the more focussed study that Romana Andò and I conducted into audiences of *Baby*. It seems that often it is the very process of transformation and survival in the face of difficulties that most appeals to the girls, even if that transformation was not always positive. In this respect, television narratives, with their length and potential for complexity and characterization, can have the upper hand.

O: Internationally graphic novels have been a privileged medium for coming-out stories, thanks to the pioneering works of Alison Bechdel, as instance. Is this also true in the Italian scenario? To what extent the coming-out storyline overlaps with the coming-of-age one? On the other hand, can graphic novels be a way to introduce into mainstream culture specific issues connected to feminist and queer theories?

N: Yes, the Italian case aligns with the international (here mostly intended as Anglophone) tendency exemplified by the Alison Bechdel's case. A good few authors have used the graphic novel format to craft their coming out narrative or, more generally, to recount their personal stories of segregation and subsequent liberation from the burdens of hetero-cis-

normativity. Nowadays, queer authors in the Italian comics scene are numerous, and they have started obtaining critical recognition (Parrinello). In order to reply to your question, I will focus on two cases that, I believe, are emblematic in the context of queer graphic novel production and the coming of age/Bildungsroman.

The first one is that of the already mentioned Fumettibrutti, who came out as a transsexual woman with her second graphic novel, *P. La mia adolescenza trans* (2019), which can be classified as a story of transition and as a coming of age. Fumettibrutti, who was already quite famous among the youngest audiences who followed her on Instagram, became one of the most popular and acclaimed comics artist belonging to the Italian scene precisely in light of this coming out operation. Her access into the mainstream sphere, which granted Italian transsexual and queer young people with a rare model and inspiration, is testified by the decision of popular weekly magazines like *L'Espresso* and *7* to give her space in their front cover.

The second case is that of Nicoz Balboa, whose *Play with fire* (2020) recounts, through the means of autofiction, the author's journey of self-discovery and coming out as a lesbian first and as a female to male transgender subject after. What I find particularly interesting in the case of Balboa, is the fact that the author and protagonist of *Play with fire* is in his late 30s, which is not an age that traditionally aligns with the genres of the coming of age and Bildungsroman. Moreover, self-discovery is represented by Balboa as a practice resulting from a condition of existential precarity (which sums work and sentimental insecurities) that, following a deep internal investigation, leads to the beginning of a transition process that is explicitly portrayed as always provisional and never fully concluded. In light of this, I would say that, when there is a coincidence between the coming out story and that particular subgenre of the Bildungsroman that Rita Felski (122-132) labelled as "novel of self-discovery" – usually narrating women's paths towards liberation from societal gender constraints and towards self-determination – this potentially opens to a redefinition of the Bildungsroman itself. In this sense, the Bildungsroman should be re-conceptualised as a genre that, following the dynamics of a queer/non-linear temporality (Halberstam), extends far beyond the coming of age story, thus including processes of re-negotiation of one's identity that happen in different phases of the subject's life, not only in the so-called formative years of teenage or anagraphic youth,[4] and that are not necessarily conclusive.

O: In an article published on "The Italianist" in 2015 titled *Figlie di Papà*, you pointed out how Italian cinema has a pedagogic angle when it comes to representing girls and sexuality. In particular you analised *Amore 14* by Federico Moccia describing it as more openly directed to a female teen audience, despite some contraddictions still connected to a certain form of male gaze. With recent Nextflix productions such as *Baby* or *SKAM Italia* have girls' representations shifted from a "prescriptive" to a "descriptive" approach? Have they, in other words, become more realistic and less paternalistic? If so, what can be identified as a turning point?

D: Although Baby is based on real events, which is certainly part of its appeal, our reading of it is that it addresses a kind of affective dissonance (as Akane & Kanai describe an increasing presence of teen angst in television series) through its excess, its dark themes (underage prostitution), and particularly, as I mentioned earlier, its soundtrack, which far exceeds a rather stilted dialogue in terms of conveying the characters' affective experiences. It addresses a need, I think, for discussion of the powerful effects of sex and sexual desire on young people that is largely missing from the Italian school curriculum. Skam, on the other

hand (now in its fifth season) draws on more everyday stories, and creates a more recognizable school environment, as opposed to the Netflix mishmash that is the school in Baby. This is important to Italian teen audiences: they really pay attention to these details. However, in selecting the 'teen stories' to tell, SKAM certainly still has a pedagogic effect, particularly in seasons 2 and 4 (recounting coming out and second generation Muslim experiences). We have to remember that these products are now consumed in a broader media landscape that includes Sex Education (Netflix, 2019-2023). Participants do tell us that they learn from this programme. The growing visibility of homosexual characters is important in this respect. Most recently, Prisma (Rai, 2022-2024), also from the maker of SKAM, brings discourses about gender fluidity to the foreground, in a manner unprecedented in Italian film or television history.

O: Can we already talk about an Italian canon of coming-of-age graphic novels? Is there any element that makes Italian graphic coming-of-age stories different from those published abroad?

N: A lack of research in the area of international graphic coming of age does not allow to make scholarly sound comparisons or assessments on this. Therefore, my words are based on an empirical observation that needs to backed-up by further studies.

I mostly see, as my answers to previous questions suggest, a continuity rather than a specificity of the Italian corpus. This applies, in particular, to the recurring theme of trauma and to the importance of the autobiographical tendency in the work of female graphic novelists who engage with the genre of the coming of age/Bildungsroman. However, autofiction or a hybrid approach towards autobiography seems to be particularly important in the Italian case. If we look at the most acclaimed works of graphic coming of age by international women artists, such as Marjane Satrapi's and Alison Bechdel's, the tendency to experiment with autobiography is present – think, for example, at Bechdel's constant reflections of the fallacies of memory – but not to the point of forcing the author into a limbo of uncertainties regarding the adherence of the narrated story to actual facts experienced by the author. Lynda Barry, who intelligently coined the expression "autobifictionalography" to refer to her own work *One! Hundred! Demons!* (2002), and Phoebe Gloeckner (Michael) are among the few who do openly reject linear associations between their art and life. This seems to be a pattern in the Italian context, and it does not only apply to female graphic novelists but also to authors such as Zerocalcare, but also Gipi and Davide Toffolo (Wielgosz).

O: In the past you have criticised the tendency to represent girls as future women, rather than having girls considered on their own terms. Do you see this approach changing in Italy or abroad?

D: Yes, without doubt. Anita Harris was one of the first critics to show how frequently the girl is used to symbolize the future, and this still happens often in Italian cinema, particularly for example when she is deployed as a figure to explore key issues, like the South and organized crime. Carpignano's recent film *A Chiara*, and De Stefano's *Nevia*, however, are both good examples of how it is possible to do both: to discuss broader issues of the future through the figure of the girl, but also provide a sympathetic window into her experience as a girl. I think the most obvious way in which this address of girls on their own terms takes place is through the new series focussing on everyday teen lives, like *SKAM Italia*

(TIMvision/Netflix, 2018-), and teen-oriented comedies like *Sul più bello*. In turn though, I think that also ends up representing girls' own anxieties about the future, most often the question: will they make it to adulthood? The films *Sul più bello*, *Sulla stessa onda* (Camaiti, 2021, for Netflix) and *Anni da cane* (Mollo, 2021, for Amazon) are all about the anxiety of not making it to the adult goals of romance. Time and mistimings are key themes in these films, a new manifestation of what Diane Negra described as 'time panic' for older women trying to juggle a successful career and motherhood under postfeminism. I would suggest that this new 'time panic' concerns, perhaps, other anxieties, experienced by younger women: about appearance and appeal to others, about financial survival, and ultimately, perhaps, about the survival of their world itself.

O: What do you think is the future of coming-of-age stories in the field of graphic novels?

N: As a researcher, I cannot say much about the future trends of graphic novels' production, as my work is grounded in analytical methods that aim at investigating the present of comics creation. In other words, I work on what it exists already and predictions are not my cup of tea. But, as we have seen, graphic novelists are experimenting with the genre and that we will be able to better identify existing and upcoming trends in the near future.

What I can definitely say is something about the use that, as researchers and teachers, we make of graphic novels and comics. Current trends suggest that the graphic novel is an extremely productive format in the sphere of contemporary Italian culture and that its analysis is crucial in the context of a long overdue re-definition of the coming of age genre. If we cannot anticipate future trends, the inclusion of graphic novels in our research and teaching plans is definitely up to us, it is in our control and it is something that, in my opinion, we should facilitate and implement in the field of Italian Studies.

O: It is impossible to discuss female coming-of-age stories without considering the so called "Ferrante Effect" on recent productions. The way female friendship has been depicted by Ferrante and reinterpreted by directors such as Costanzo, Rohrwacher and Luchetti offered a new angle on female friendship in alternative to what you have already called (following Alison Winch) the 'girlfriend gaze' while discussing mainstream productions in the early 2000s (2015). Are we already witnessing an after-Ferrante way of representing girls in Italian cinema and fictions?

D: Yes, I think so. There is certainly greater interest in exploring the complexity of female bonds, beyond the 'mean girls' that characterized earlier representations like *Caterina va in città* (Virzì, 2003). There is still commonly confusion between close female friendship and lesbian relationships (much more so, for instance, than in the depiction of close relations between young men), but it may stem from those difficulties I mentioned earlier around the representation of the youthful female body, always already imagined as sexual. Silvia Ross explores this in relation to the novel *Acciaio* (Silvia Avallone, 2010), citing a form of intermediality between screen and page that suggests how the voyeuristic gaze of the camera creeps into fiction itself. A novel (and film) like *L'Arminuta* manages to avoid this by focussing instead on the sisterly bond. As Ross suggests, this issue of eroticization relates to an insistence on relations of intimacy as individuals, in which girls support one another through dyadic friendships. How can we imagine instead, she asks, collectives and solidarity?

Ilaria De Pascalis has spoken about this expansion in relation to the 'girl groups' of television series like *SKAM* or *Euphoria* (HBO, 2019-), so those new transnational dramas have a powerful impact alongside the more complex representation of female friendship coming through the adaptation of *L'amica geniale*. The interest in this theme cuts across different platforms and formats, and our research into Italian teen female audiences confirms that friendship, group or dyadic, is a theme they relish. What remains unique about *L'amica geniale*, perhaps, in comparison with teen-oriented texts is that it re-centres female friendship across the life-course, carrying it through, beyond the coming of age as the central relationship in later life too, rather than implying that it might get left behind as a 'phase' in becoming a woman.
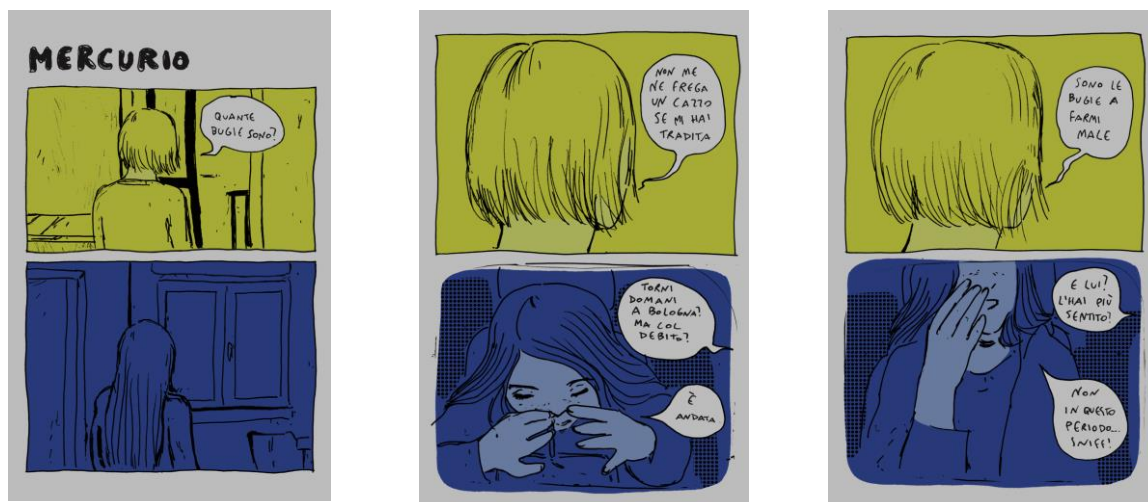
Images

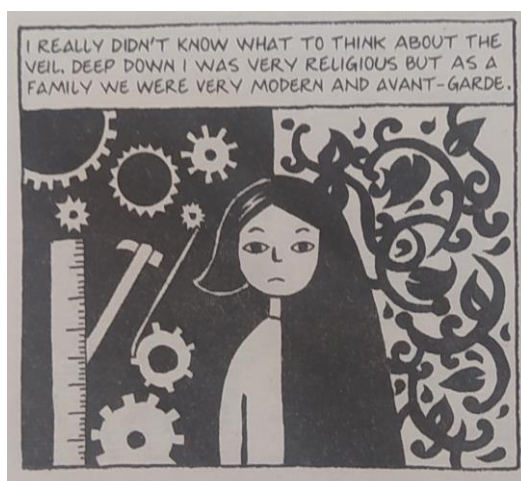FIGURE 1. Fumettibrutti, *Romanzo esplicito*: 39; 42; 43.

FIGURE 2. Satrapi 6.

TITLE	TRAUMA	AUTOBIOGRAPHY
Ada (2018), B. Baldi	Yes	No
Quasi signorina (2016) C. Portolano	Small traumas	Yes
Trilogia (2018-2020), Fumettibrutti	Yes	Hybrid
Caravaggio e la ragazza (2021), N. Terranova and L. Bonaccorso	Yes	No
Stelle o sparo (2018), Nova	Small traumas	Hybrid
Ti chiamo domani (2019), R. Petruccioli	Yes	Hybrid
Incendi estivi (2015), G. Sagramola	Small traumas	No
Giorni felici (2021), Zuzu	Small traumas	Hybrid
La giusta mezura (2017), F. Biondi	Small traumas	No
Tumulto (2016), S. Rocchi and A. Milani	Small traumas and Vicarious trauma	No
TABLE 1. 10 graphic coming of age/Bildungsroman from Italy		

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[1]Emerged as a comics-related format in the 1970s and popularised since the 1990s, the graphic novel is nowadays one of the main sub-categories in the conceptual box of so-called "graphic narratives". Stephen Weiner, who wrote one of the first essays on it, defined graphic novels as "book-length comic books that are meant to be read as one story" ("Preface"). However, a definition of the graphic novel is far from being unanimously accepted among comics studies scholars, given its shifting and evolving characteristics. For a detailed but introductory discussion on the graphic novel, see Beatens and Frey.

[2]Television is more favourable to female audiences, and a recent television series to address that twenty-something life phase is *Guida astrologica per cuori infranti*/ Astrological Guide for Broken Hearts, De Stoppani, Netflix, 2021).

[3]Not only did a second and third film get made, but in our work with six different schools from all over Italy, girls aged 14-19 repeatedly expressed their liking for the protagonist, most markedly in the video essays created for our contest, [Video Essays – A Girls' Eye View (exeter.ac.uk)](#).

[4] An interesting categorisation to be taken into account here is Annis Pratt's "Novel of Re-Birth and Transformation", which includes feminist works where the process of self-discovery happens in a mature age. See Pratt 135-166.

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