

Teen Identity, Affect and Sex in Rome: Italian teen girl audiences and the dissonant pleasures of Netflix's underage prostitution drama *Baby*

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Abstract

The controversial Italian Netflix original TV series *Baby* (2018-2020) is based on the real-life events of an underage female prostitution scandal in Italy. This article examines the significance of this TV series for Italian teen girl audiences in the context of broader transnational discourses of girlhood, questions of «girlpower» and its limits, female friendship, and particularly sexuality and sexualisation. We use audience research to pay particular attention to the ways in which Italian female teens understand the series. Our research shows how for young audiences the dramatic news story acts as a hook and a point of departure to address a much wider range of concerns about the pressures of girlhood in an Italian context. We find that the shifting identities of the two lead characters allow audiences to imagine themselves in permanent «becoming», rather than as progressing towards a fixed goal. Viewers' responses show how affective and aesthetic strategies used in the series create a series of dissonant viewing pleasures in exploring the often unspoken difficulties of Italian teen female experience, particularly in relation to the expression of sexuality.

Key words: Netflix, *Baby*, girlhood, prostitution, postfeminism, audiences

Introduction: *Baby* as an Italian case

On November 30th 2018, Netflix released the controversial Italian drama *Baby*, a TV series based on the real-life events of the underage female prostitution scandal in Italy, the so-called *Baby Squillo* case of 2015, when it emerged that two girls from the well-to-do Parioli area of Rome, aged 14 and 15, had been prostituted to a number of men, including politicians and lawyers. The TV show, which released its third and final season in 2020, tells the story of two adolescents, Chiara and Ludovica, who attend an elite high school in Rome. Thanks to a series of chance meetings and a growing disenchantment with their lives, they venture into the world of prostitution. The show is centred on the dynamic between the two girls as their marked psychological differences lead them to respond differently to the experience, each evolving in relation to prostitution and to one another. Reserved and restless, Chiara comes from a well-to-do family home, but her parents' marriage is unhappy and they seem distant, if half-heartedly well-meaning. She belongs to the popular crowd at school and is a high achiever, in athletics and her studies, but her private life is dysfunctional. She is seeing her best friend's brother in secret, a secret that eventually explodes in her face. When she meets the impulsive and more outspoken Ludo, who first leads her towards the underworld of prostitution, not only does she find an outlet for her frustrations in this secret life, but also a new and close female bond. Ludo is an outsider at school, someone Chiara's mother tells her to stay away from. She has a 'reputation', largely as a result of a sex video her male classmates share at a party. Ludo is close to her mother, but her mother is divorced, unable to settle into a relationship and short of money. When Ludo sees an opportunity to start to make money through sex, she sees a way out of these troubles. Over the course of the three seasons Ludo's initial interest in this underworld subsides as her romantic obsession with one of the men prostituting her takes the upper hand, whilst Chiara becomes more persistent in her pursuit of interactions with clients, despite her own growing feelings for a male classmate. Through the dynamics of secrecy and the forbidden, that also extend to a subplot about two gay male classmates, the series works slowly towards a rather sudden finale at the

end of season three in which the girls' exploitation is finally investigated and addressed, and the perpetrators held to account.

Despite the show's apparent consonance with the themes of many other transnational teen TV shows, the sensationalist quality of its theme provoked an immediate controversy with accusations that it was glamourizing prostitution, and endangering its target audience. In this article, however, we examine what Italian female teen (fan) audiences made of *Baby's* first and second seasons of the series. Our findings suggest it offers a unique opportunity to understand more about the nuances of what apparently «sexualised» material might mean in a particular national context, indeed the context of its origin.

We will begin by outlining briefly what makes up that Italian national context for teen female audiences, before thinking about the broader transnational context with which it is in dialogue, particularly around sexuality and sexualisation, inevitably the key preoccupations of this series and of our article. We will then go on to outline our audience research method, and show how our findings reflect three distinct areas of response: preoccupation with teen identity, with the aesthetics and affects of the show, and inevitably with sex itself. In our conclusion we will show how these strands are inter-related.

Despite a proliferation of transnational teen high-school TV shows (particularly associated with the Netflix brand), *Baby* was the first one to be made and set in Italy, and so potentially opened up a question of «cultural proximity» for Italian viewers. Its thematic focus is also in tune with the broader concerns of contemporary Italian culture, which has been marked over the last thirty years by a particular incarnation of the sexualisation scandal. On the one hand the exploitation of girls and young women has been inscribed into its social structure through the problematic public relationship between politics and prostitution, which became a cypher for the corruption of Silvio Berlusconi's political regime in the early 2000s. The particular underage prostitution scandal that gave rise to the series itself underlined this association, even after the disappearance of Berlusconi himself as Prime Minister, because it involved high-profile public male figures. Since the late 1990s, increasing liberalization of culture, sexual mores, and a relaxation of control over private TV networks (again associated with Berlusconi) produced a culture of so-called «velinismo», in which young girls and women were objectified on screen as bikini-clad showgirls. This tendency had also become a source of widespread dismay, and a focus for moral panic about Italian girls' aspirations, something we have described elsewhere as «the showgirl effect». The resurgent feminist response to this crisis tended towards a moral puritanism (Ottonelli, 2015: 14) that appeared to blame the women and girls themselves, and left very little room in Italy for the discourses of «girl power» and a more positive vision of youthful female sexuality that postfeminist culture in some other Western cultures was entertaining in the same period. As Arianna Mainardi has observed, the contemporary Italian postfeminist landscape was characterized by «the redefinition of sexual roles, along with the persistence of strict gender norms and a moralistic discourse about girls' bodies and sexualities, such as the timeworn and dangerous distinction between 'good' and 'bad' femininity conveyed by public discussion» (2018: 192).

Indeed anxieties about the dangers that female teen sexuality brings tend to dominate narratives of female teen sexuality in Italy (see dramas about abusive teen relationships like *Un bacio* by Cotroneo, 2016, which explored the issue of sexual images circulated on social media), unless tightly confined to narratives of teen romance (see more recent Italian Netflix teen products, *Summertime* and *Sulla stessa onda*). This particularly marked moral emphasis on policing female sexuality is, of course, closely entwined with Italy's Catholic context, and the discursive use of prostitution as the very ground on which to debate the control of female sexuality is something that can be traced back historically, even prior to the 1950s and the very public debate about the closure of the state-

approved brothel system in 1958 (Arzara, 2019). The narrative use of the threat of prostitution, particularly in relation to vulnerable young girls, as a means of expressing anxieties about female behaviour more generally is something that became visible in Italian cinema as early as the postwar period, when changing gender roles began to threaten the gendered division between public and private (Hipkins, 2016).

In this context it is not surprising that tensions between cultures of «girlpower» (i.e. a new emphasis on young women as agents, particularly with regard to their bodies) and Catholic morality should meet so powerfully in a narrative that at once celebrates youthful female sexual and emotional energy, and, at the same time, represents it as a grave danger to its subjects in the form of vulnerability to prostitution. In this respect, *Baby*, with its advertising of the glamorous duo that many compared to the typical television show pairing of blonde and brunette showgirls, and its ultimately darkly punitive narrative of teen sexual experiment, appears to be on a continuum with these discourses of anxiety about female teen sexuality and its visibility. What is new, and interesting to us, in the series, is the way it factors in a female teen address. This has hitherto been largely absent from Italian film or television, that has tended either towards an anxiety about the previously mentioned «showgirl effect» or to reinforce an «incest motif» that privileges the narration of cross-generational relationships from the male perspective and to the older man's advantage (Hipkins, 2015a & b).¹ Whilst showing some evidence of both these tendencies, in its preoccupation with glamorous 'Lolita' figures involved with older men, *Baby* has equally traits in common with transnational television and discourses of girlhood. It is the intertwining of these two diverse contexts that ultimately determines the unique nature of our findings.

Whilst very little ethnographic work has been conducted on the responses of young women themselves in the Italian context, work on their responses to the figure of the «velina» (Ghigi, 2013) and on their reception of peer-group images on Facebook (Mainardi, 2018) suggest that «the girls' words sometimes reproduce the public discourse that criticises the commodification of female bodies by blaming women who embody that model of femininity instead of the system that supports it» (Mainardi, 2018: 197). In the longer term, *Baby* offers an opportunity to consider whether the portrayal of such explicit exploitation of younger girls by older men offers a new opportunity to voice such systemic critique.

***Baby* in the context of transnational teen television and discourses of girlhood studies**

When the TV show was released, not many viewers – especially outside of Italy, and particularly not adolescents – were aware of the original scandal that inspired the show. Rather, from the start, *Baby* was mostly perceived as another successful example of a teen series produced by Netflix (such as *Elite*, *The End of the Fucking World*, *Sex Education*, *13 Reasons Why*, *Stranger Things*, and even the more recent *Summertime*) in which teen lives are narrated and scrutinized with younger (adolescent?) television audiences in mind.

As a matter of fact, *Baby* is a clear example of a new trend in representing high schoolers and their relationship with sex on TV. Even if this is obviously not a new topic, in recent years we have observed a significant shift compared to similar content in the nineties and early 2000s: in the last few years the OTT (Over the Top Television) services, in particular Netflix, have in fact released many TV series which show teens, whose sex, sexuality, and gender are not taboo subjects. A series of sexually

¹ Other than in the Moccia films that nonetheless maintained a rigorously 'healthy' approach to teen female sexuality, portrayed in the context of heterosexual monogamy (and often markedly patriarchal structures). See Paola Bonifazio (2016).

explicit discursive representations (i.e. *Big Mouth*, *Sex Education* and others) provide the audience with an original opportunity to address worries, fears and uncertainties typical of adolescents in relation to their first sexual experiences. Even when sex is not the main theme of the plot, sexual experiences are represented through less stereotypical and more relatable, at least on an emotional level, characters.

Due to the original story that inspires the series, *Baby* is obviously based on sexual relationships; however, especially during the first season, sex can be considered as a sort of language, a communication tool used by the protagonists to explore and test their identity, to stress the authenticity of their relationships. It is not surprising that the Director Andrea De Sica highlighted the role of the audience in decisions he made about the direction of the story and not the real events that inspired it; the screenwriter Re Salvador also emphasizes that *Baby* is ultimately «a story about love, not prostitution»². The goal of the TV show, then, was and still is the authenticity of the characters, as portraits of a generation.

Actually the TV show questions many crucial issues with respect to girlhood studies: at a general level it stresses the representation of female adolescence within media culture and the multiple possibilities of appropriation open to young people as their personalities evolve; it also emphasizes the actualization of girl friendship as a postfeminist idea of sisterhood (Winch 2013). It obviously puts the issues of sex and sexualisation in the spotlight, but more generally it leads us to reflect on the aesthetic pleasures and pleasurable experience of teen film (Colling 2017). At the same time, it speaks to more recent work that tries to show how teen television expresses ‘affective dissonances’ with regard to ideals of postfeminist girlhood (Dobson and Kanai, 2018).

Starting from this premise, *Baby* is a unique case study for girlhood studies. First of all it represents an ideal opportunity to understand how female adolescents and their sexuality are narrated in everyday media content and to investigate how that is in turn negotiated by its audiences in the national context of its setting. The latter is a crucial point: although audience studies have worked for years on the idea of productive consumers, able not only to decode content and take a critical stand on specific topics but also to share meanings and pleasures of media consumption through their relationships both online and offline, when it comes to *Baby* the debate on the sexualisation of media culture seems to go back in time. Unlike other similar TV show where adolescents routinely have sex, *Baby* was attacked by the National Center on Sexual Exploitation for glamorizing prostitution (as *13 Reasons Why* was accused of glamorizing suicide), even though prostitution is not the only theme but in a certain sense an opportunity to engage with more general problems of contemporary adolescents. With this we seem to be back at the beginning of this millennium, when the academic debate stigmatized a general proliferation of sexual material across a range of media (see among the others Durham, 2008; Gill 2012; Buckingham 2000; Buckingham and Bragg, 2004).

As Anita Harris identified, the debate produced «opposed positionings of young women as exemplars of both success and failure», what she labels the «can-do girl» and «girls at risk» (2004, 14). While the «can-do» discourse suggests the existence of so-called girlpower in girls’ everyday life, the «girl at risk» discourse emphasizes the moral and social concerns in relation to young women’s lives, from pregnancy to sexual disease, to drug abuse (this was for example a concomitant problem with prostitution in the real Baby Squillo case). As R. Danielle Egan has suggested, the discourse of sexualisation is potentially harmful, less in terms of girls’ sexual behaviour than in term of its discursive effect on girls’ lives (2013). A good example of this in the Italian case can be seen in Alberto Pellai’s recent parental self-help book (2015), the first chapter of which is entitled: «Little women grow up ... too fast: How girls learn that to be popular they have to look sexy and available», in which

² https://movieplayer.it/articoli/baby-intervista-cast-serie-italiana-netfix_19920/

parents are advised to monitor carefully how their daughters dress, emphasizing how the eye is always turned upon girls' appearance rather than the ear on their experience. As Mainardi observes in relation to the Italian context: «Girls seek to meet an ambivalent demand, that of being attractive but not inappropriately sexual» (2018). Indeed, the effect of incessant messages about girls and women's appearance are more likely to have less obvious negative developmental consequences than the much vaunted threat of teen pregnancy. Many academic and researchers «have argued that some early adolescent girls are likely to internalize the notion that being sexually attractive is an important aspect of their identity and, as a consequence, experience negative outcomes in a number of domains (e.g. self-esteem, academic outcomes, peer relations)» (McKenney and Bigler 2016, 2).

The point then is not to ask whether adolescents are prematurely sexualised. If they are rather prematurely informed about sex and sexualisation, the real question is how does this precocity «relate to girls' lives as they approach puberty and their first sexual experience» (Kehily, 257)? Although this apparently earlier sexualisation and sexual initiation may be differently experienced and managed by girls, what is evident is that sexuality has to be considered as «a terrain of fundamental political struggle and a medium of emancipation» (Giddens 1993, 181), and both struggles and emancipation now take place in public, despite the intimate nature of sexuality, within media representations that are increasingly sexualised (McNair 2002). Abandoning the ideal of childhood innocence as something that bypasses sexuality (Egan and Hawkes 2008, 16), then, we need to contextualise the sexualisation of girls debate by considering girls' role as witnesses of this sexualisation of culture, and as agents of it.

The research

Baby represents a perfect balance between national representations of girlhood and international TV industry trends in terms of aesthetics and languages. We will therefore situate our analysis of the audience responses in the context of writings on teen television and film, which we will use alongside our own reading of the series. We believe a combination of an ethnographic approach and textual analysis is needed. As Keller *et al.* pointed out «while it is popular in disciplines such as education and sociology, ethnography continues to remain underutilized in our field [girls' media studies]. Yet, we believe that it offers key insights into the gendered meanings and cultural impact of girls' media in particular local contexts and historical moments» (2015, 531). The understanding of audiences as producers of meaning has directed researchers to the day-to-day experiences of audiences and has produced a steadily increasing body of material about the tastes, preferences and pleasures of women. What we reach through an ethnographic approach are the complexities of girls' negotiations with local and global media culture, but also with politics, culture and society. It would also be ingenuous to suggest that we can address these from a neutral position – the girls' interpretation of the series is inevitably in play with our own reading of it across our own national and transnational discursive and viewing contexts.

From an operational point of view, it is worth noting that we started the project after the release of the first season, and continued into the second season: whilst, at a later stage, we may gather evidence about how viewers responded to the series as a whole, it is very useful to focus on the responses to the initial phases of the show. This is because, as in the case of *13 Reasons Why*, the first season of controversial TV-shows is always disruptive, able to generate public debate and polarized sentiments, and in a sense it forces the audience to reflect on the general topics rather than on the storyline. Moreover, focusing on the first and second seasons in many ways avoids the inevitably moralizing aspects of closure that the final season provided. Conducting the research at this stage showed how the series opened up conversations, at least temporarily, before offering more socially acceptable conclusions.

The first step of the research consisted of two exploratory focus groups, carried out respectively in Rome, with 7 students at Sapienza University, and in Naples, with 12 students from secondary school. This stage aimed to seek first impressions about the TV show and perceptions of girlhood representation; we involved students from both high school and university because, whilst they are definitely part of the same generation, with similar media consumption habits, they represent different backgrounds and interests. This step helped us in defining the thematic areas of the interview, including:

- ✓ Collection of personal data relating to media consumption habits,
- ✓ Exploration of the way audiences address gender issues and female representation in media content
- ✓ Analysis of consumption practices in the case of *Baby*: viewing habits, level of satisfaction, story retelling, evaluation of the characters, possible criticisms, perception of realism and proximity
- ✓ Focus on *Baby*'s main female characters and the models of femininity represented in the show; perception of the sentimental and sexual relationships among characters

We then collected qualitative interviews with adolescents and young women in Italy who watched the series³. The interviewees were selected by a snowball sampling technique; essentially potential participants were recruited through university students' recommendations. Interviewees were selected on the basis of the same age scale (15-19), same gender (female). Considering the exploratory nature of the research and Sapienza's students engagement in recruiting the interviewees, we reached a fairly heterogeneous sample in terms of residence area (north, centre, south), urban/non urban background and social classes⁴. The prevalence of the Roman context is the result of a specific choice of the researchers, as we were interested in exploring the role of Rome and Parioli district in the imagery of the TV show.

Participant	Age	Geographical area
P1	17	Abruzzo (small town)
P2	16	Lazio (small town)
P3	16	Abruzzo (small town)
P4	17	Abruzzo (small town)
P5	14	Veneto (large town)
P6	15	Lombardia (large city)
P7	18	Lazio (large city)
P8	16	Lazio (large city)
P9	15	Lazio (small town)
P10	17	Abruzzo (large town)
P11	16	Abruzzo (small town)
P12	18	Lazio (large city)
P13	18	Lazio (small town)
P14	19	Lazio (large city)

³ By the end of December 2019 we had interviewed 23 Italian girls between 14 and 19. The interviews were conducted in collaboration with a group of young researchers coordinated by the authors. In particular, the authors would like to thank Francesca Aliperta and Michela Maggi.

⁴ For the purpose of this research, which is the first step in a wider project on girlhood media representation and audience perception, named 'A Girls' Eye View' funded in 2021 by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council UK, the authors decided to focus on a fairly homogeneous sample with respect to ethnicity and religion, due to the peculiarity of the case study (the tv show *Baby* and the story behind it), the specific research questions (sex and sexualisation in audience perception) and the restricted number of interviews collected at this exploratory stage. The main project will be managed in partnership with high schools in Italy to reach a significant diversification in the sample and a range of media content that also represents this diversification too.

P15	18	Lazio (large city)
P16	19	Lazio (small twn)
P17	18	Lazio (large city)
P18	19	Lazio (large city)
P19	19	Lazio (large city)
P20	16	Lazio (large city)
P21	19	Lazio (large city)
P22	?	Lazio (large city)
P23	?	Lazio (large city)

«I don't know why, but in the end, Chiara is a bit of every girl» (P16): Negotiating girlhood

What our viewers find perhaps the most significant feature the series is its open approach to its female protagonists' trajectories. In many recent TV series based on female characters, the *fil rouge* is the idea of becoming. As Renold and Ringrose stated, it is now more correct to refer to «the concept of “becoming” to foreground the transitional space of young femininity as always in-movement, where transitions are experienced as multiple, liminal and reversible, rather than one progressive state to another» (2011).

In the words of one viewer: «Chiara doesn't know her identity, she doesn't understand who she is.... so she sort of tries out every experience» (P11). As Stuart Hall suggests, we can «use “identity” to refer to the meeting point, the point of suture, between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to “interpellate”, speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be “spoken”. Identities are thus points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us» (1996: 5-6). Thanks to the huge production of TV content dedicated to them, contemporary female teenagers may find many different points of temporary attachment, point of *suture* within television discourses; in other words they can select and combine different kinds of female role models,⁵ creating a sort of bricolage of personalities that is strongly consistent with the idea of an identity under construction, tentative, contradictory, but open, productive and definitely experimental. As we have already stressed, nowadays, girlhood is a more complex experience than it used to be. The transition to adulthood is characterized by contradictory experiences and is marked by high levels of experimentation. In this multiplicity of experiences, the media continue to play a decisive role, providing girls with a range of opportunities, cultural resources and nuanced gender-related performances.

When we approach girlhood representation, we have to consider that it is always unstable, under construction, since it is the result of a constant struggle between consolidated imageries and the attempt to shift them: «The narratives from which we draw are themselves drawn from socially available discourses and meanings, and our stories have meaning because of their historical, contextual, political standing in a particular time (Foucault 1972, 1980). Narratives of girlhood, then, both liberate and limit; they offer choice as well as constraint across the continuum. And the girl, in all her subjectivities, navigates the tenuous terrain» (Brown, 2011, 117). We are witnessing, then, a recurrent «trying on» of new identities; girls negotiate their identities rather than «take up» the one which is given most frequently. As we anticipated, girls nowadays have to balance the notion of

⁵ Obviously, they might also include male role models, although that possibility does not emerge within this study, in the context of this female-led series.

girlpower in circulation since the late nineties, the postfeminist claim of independence, «do it yourself identity», and the corresponding neoliberal individualism that is based on a progressive obsolescence of feminism as something that is taken for granted in the everyday life of the youngest generations (Mc Robbie, 2009).

This is why within the TV shows – not only in the case of *Baby* – contradictory characters may coexist; moreover, the same character may experience the coexistence of contradictory personalities within a plot that is diluted over many seasons (that mirrors the long path of the adolescent evolution too), as our interviewees' comments suggest:

For example, in *Sex Education* there is that blonde girl... yes, Maeve... well, she is quite unique. She's out of control, but she's also a genius. She's had a crazy life because I think her mother was a drug addict, but she is very clever, she reads... and she's tough as well. She does what she likes. (P4)

I think that some adjectives that describe them are “courageous”, but also “cheeky” or “rebellious” about routine. In the films the female protagonist rebels against the routine and does things out of the ordinary (P8).

An equivalent of girlpower for our interviewees consists of the ability to deal with challenges of everyday life, without depending on a stereotypical representation that depicts girls as good, bad or even mad (Brown, 2011). The characters are not one-dimensional and inflexible: rather they are genuine and convincing because of their ambivalence. The complementarity between strength and fragility was constantly highlighted by our interviewees when defining Chiara, Ludovica and other female protagonists within other TV shows.

Well... Chiara, the blonde one, in some ways seems someone a bit like me. However the other one has got balls, but I don't know... I liked the chance they have to do everything, to go beyond. To get up and go.... (P4)

Ludo, as we said earlier, has got balls, and Chiara is submissive, but in the end she gets her way. Tough... they're both tough. Chiara can be uncaring, but sometimes she can be sweet. (P4)

We are then far from the stereotypical idea of the adolescent female heroine who builds her identity in relation to those constructs that don't represent her (the traditional idea of subjugated women) and strives for a certain idea of an 'other' that has to be built (the ideal 'other' of masculinity?). Rather we are faced with protagonists who experience an interior conflict between what they represent and aim to represent in the evolution of their identity.

Chiara was very different at the beginning, then as things went on she turned into a sort of Ludovica, whilst still remaining Chiara, because she still stayed herself. She lets herself get a bit duped by Ludovica, but she doesn't get completely contaminated in her being... in her actions perhaps, yes, but not in her character, I don't think. (P6)

It's like a moment of vulnerability. You begin to grow and experience stronger and deeper emotions. You begin to understand family dynamics as well and what isn't working in your own family. Your worries increase. [...] Yes... in this fragile state, in this comparison with someone older, and the need to feel more independent. You search for closer relationships, love and friendship. (P7)

Even the opposition between conformity and rebellion seems to be nuanced: as Catherine Driscoll pointed out «the opposition between pleasure in consumption figured as conformity and pleasure against the grain of such conformity does not provide a useful model for considering girl culture, where resistance is often just another form of conformity and conformity may be compatible with other resistances» (2002, 12).

As discussed previously, it is worth noting also the character of Camilla, who embodies Ludovica's antagonist in Chiara's choice of friend and orients the viewer to attach affectively to both Chiara and Ludovica, their friendship, and ultimately their experiences. She belongs to the same social milieu and shares with Chiara the same *habitus* (clearly visible in their shared fashion style and haircut, interest in sport, similar bedrooms, peer group). During the first season Camilla is represented as a «can-do girl» in stark contrast with the «at-risk girl» attitudes of Ludovica (and subsequently Chiara).

Ah, ok, there was Camilla. I can remember the girls' names. There was Camilla, who was seen as the good girl, I remember. A real goody-two-shoes. So let's say that Chiara was friends with Camilla, but when she gets to know Ludovica she completely separates from Camilla because... perhaps she's a girl who can sometimes seem boring because she's so serious ... and she's too attached to the rules.(P9)

From the interviewees' perspective Camilla is immediately recognized as the good girl (especially with respect to the first season), but her character is not able to mobilize empathic feelings among the audience. More precisely Camilla may be perceived as representing the kind of girlhood the protagonist desires to leave behind.

I think that perhaps Chiara wants to try to live a life that's different from the norm, just to... I don't know, to separate from Camilla, to make her understand that she's capable of doing other kinds of things. Let's say that's the sense I make of it. (P9)

They are all young girls. [...] They are adolescents with the usual problems, but from different backgrounds. (P7)

To briefly summarize, the female protagonists in the TV show as well as girls in everyday life are represented as diverse but united in their attempt to learn how to behave and live heuristically and not through rules and instructions. Their evolution is a kind of self-management and to survive they must learn, change, and adapt, even if living means breaking rules, as for Chiara and Ludovica. In this sense we can define Chiara and Ludovica as using the concept of evo feminism. As Schubart argues in her analysis of teen leaders in the TV show *The 100*, «By using evo as prefix, I want to invoke the idea of evolution as a need to adapt to survive» (2018, 4).

Our interviewees seem convinced about this idea of evolution. And the comprehension of evolution as heuristic experience allows girls to understand, if not justify, the consequences of growing up breaking social rules.

I'm not justifying them, but I can feel a bit of sympathy and compassion. Nothing can justify something like that.

But no, in the end they are only girls, so you mustn't completely condemn them.(P18)

Adolescence is not described in a very positive way. And... personally I don't know anyone who's experienced this, but in my view it's realistic, in the sense that... it's very easy, it often happens that adolescents find themselves disoriented or caught up in a series of events that leave them

alone and lost perhaps. And according to how one reacts perhaps you end up with the wrong people. (P2)

What we can observe here is something more than the common tendency for «discussions of media effects» typically to «involve a form of displacement, in which it is always “other people” who are seen to be more vulnerable than oneself» (Buckingham and Bragg 35). The sense of realism, understood here as relating to real events and locations and to the revelation of aspects of life normally hidden, and in particular the emotional and affective access to that reality that the series’ aesthetics provide, as we shall discuss below, supports girls in reflecting on behaviours as part of the difficult process of growing up in a society that privileges a rhetoric of choice, but actually still endorses narrowly conceived, contradictory models of femininity.

Aesthetic pleasure in affective dissonances

«Sex is the most real thing there is» (P4): this comment offers a provocative point of departure for thinking about teen responses to underage prostitution as the thematic focus for the series. The comment can be related in part to the notion that prostitution typically offers a shortcut to a perceived realism, by revealing what is normally hidden from mainstream society. As discussed above, respondents also often mention the fact that the series is based on something that really happened, in a place close to them in time and space: «I was drawn to the two girls and the context they were dealing with here in Rome... so I was curious to see what they had to say about it» (P. 21). Whilst they may sometimes express some surprise about this real-life quality, it is clearly important to them because it validates what else the series reveals: «it’s distant from my own experience but it’s about something that really happened in Rome a few years ago so it’s about a real situation» (P. 20) The theme’s entanglement with questions of coercion and sexual abuse, adult control and teen agency, secrecy and revelation presents a particularly thought-provoking and original point of intersection with the usual pleasures of teen drama. In this section we examine the ways in which viewers react to the form of the series itself, drawing as it does on particular tropes of teen television and film, and creating space for a variety of adolescent issues. It both takes us away from sex, and, as we explore in the following section, leads us straight back to it, as the unspeakable secret at the heart of adolescent female experience, despite the proliferation of the sexualisation discourse discussed above.

As several viewers observe, the question of prostitution takes a back seat in the first season, which instead takes time to establish the school scene, dangling the «hook» of prostitution to engage viewers for later seasons. As one respondent says:

I didn’t like the first season much, there was no beginning or end, the first season doesn’t have much to do with the theme of underage prostitution. I really liked the second because it showed you how the work was carried out... *great*. (P22)

Whilst viewers generally agree that there is a shift in plot focus between the two series, this viewer’s preference is not universal, however, since viewers find a range of diverse pleasures in the series’ fusion of teen drama and darker news story. Some of their responses confirm the hypotheses of Samantha Colling about the kinds of aesthetic pleasures that can be found in girl teen film (2017, 34-39, 65-66), which we shall examine here, before going on to show how the darker theme of underage prostitution means that these pleasures interweave with what Amy Shields Dobson and Akane Kanai describe as the «affective dissonances» arising in recent Anglophone teen media, particularly television. Dobson and Kanai interpret «the articulation of young women’s anger, insecurity, anxiety, and misplaced confidence» as a means of questioning ideals of perfect girlhood performances in Neoliberal culture. What we will argue here is that for our younger female viewers the taboo topic of

teen prostitution makes the series' articulation of these affective dissonances a significant aspect of its aesthetic pleasure.

Considering recent popular US teen films, Colling argues that the girl teen film should be understood also on its own terms, that is, in relation to the pleasures that it offers target viewers, rather than purely on the grounds of its ideological significance. Amongst these pleasures she cites: the desire for visibility and celebrity satisfied through costume; an emphasis on girl fun and friendship; the «kinaesthetic» pleasures of dance and sport; and the affective power of a music video aesthetic. As we will discuss here below, our findings here confirm most of the pleasures that Colling mentions, but they also extend and further nuance them. Female friendship, for example, is privileged, but in the context of a much more hostile wider environment. Surprisingly, despite the emphasis on shopping in the series, no respondents mention costume, but focus instead on location. In some respects these emphases may reflect the different pleasures offered by television, first of all in its narrative space for evolution and complexity to emerge in friendship, and secondly for familiarity with the pro-filmic space to take precedence over the detail of the more fleeting images of clothing. Above all, however, it is the way in which these pleasures are contaminated with the «realism» of secret and illegal sex, that creates a maelstrom of affective dissonance.

In our audience research on *Baby*, the pleasure of female friendship is frequently cited as an attraction for viewers, for example:

I liked the way the two protagonists get closer, particularly after a first phase in which Chiara was a bit reluctant to get to know Ludovica. I liked how they found one another, how their friendship evolved. I was struck by how it was presented, by the scenes that show them laughing, that show it is a sincere friendship. (P23)

In this scenario affective communication, such as laughter, between Chiara and Ludovica offers one of the rare instances of meaningful connection in the series. The friendship between Chiara and Ludo that lies at the heart of the series offers a model of support in the wilderness of high school that young women warm to. Here one younger respondent (aged 15) describes her own observations about relations between girls:

I have heard of some friends, not many, who have suffered because of bullying and betrayal in middle school ...not through love but through friendship, getting shunned. Or not having a relationship with a certain girl any more for some reason ... because of other friendships and preferring them to her ... friendships that are not real or true compared to a lasting friendship. (P9)

What makes this central friendship more appealing then, is that it operates in an otherwise hostile and individualistic society that respondents recognize. This brutality is of course one that the friendship between Chiara and Ludovica is also part of, since, as we cited earlier: «Chiara was friends with Camilla, but on meeting Ludovica, she detaches herself completely from Camilla because... perhaps because she's a girl who can seem boring because she's serious» (P9). Camilla is markedly oriented towards the «gendered affective investments» identified by Dobson and Kanai as «drives for perfection, confidence, and the careful observance of feeling rules» (771).

The new friendship is immediately «dissonant», since Chiara's mother warns her to stay away from Ludo, explaining that one girl's bad (sexual) reputation is contagious, articulating the sexual double standard that Italian teen girls are particularly exposed to. If the central friendship is socially taboo

and becomes a secret, then the sex is a second part of that secret, a further reclamation of girls' shared interest in desire, and a bold attempt to transgress the requirement for «girl fun» always to be visible, and legal. It is this closer friendship that respondents cite as leading Chiara towards prostitution, so that pleasure in the friendship tacitly endorses the forbidden pleasure the girls take in exploring their seductive powers. One further way in which the friendship can also be read as dissonant, or against the grain, is also in its potential to be open to readings of same sex desire. Although this reading did not arise in our interviews, there is evidence of it in fan cultures (such as Tumblr).⁶ In this way it offers another implicit signifier for the exploration of illicit female desire, in keeping with the narrative possibility prostitution traditionally offers to focus on female bonding as well as sexualities perceived to be «deviant»(Johnson, 5). This implicit representation is typical of problematic representations of LGBTQ identities in Italian transnational television products (Heim, 2020).

Another aesthetic pleasure of the series, which stretches beyond the model offered by Colling and is more closely aligned with the norms of the transnational teen television genre, lies in its depiction of a certain glamorous environment, as the following extract indicates:

P4: Yes, really... if I could live in that world, that would be a real transformation in my life

I: How do you mean?

P4: In the sense that here everything is the same. A bit of adrenaline would be nice... I would like a livelier, more stimulating environment. (P4)

The use of the adjectives «vivace» [lively] and «stimolante» [stimulating], coming particularly from respondents in less urban areas, like this respondent from a small town in Abruzzo, hint at the possibility that the series might indeed glamorize prostitution, although all are quick to deny that. The decision to set the series in the Parioli district, a well-to-do suburb of Rome, apparently motivated by the news story, nonetheless also enables a typical teen televisual engagement with a more desirable location⁷:

The classroom dynamics are close to my world, but distant from it because of the area in which they are born and develop certain habits. In the Parioli they're obviously used to going to house parties, expensive places, the school too, the college where they do athletics – if only it had been like that at my school. (P23)

Whilst the Parioli district is attractive to some viewers from outside the capital who feel that this location represents a distant, but really existing glamour, for many of our respondents based in, or even near to Rome itself there is a different kind of pleasure at play: that of recognition. For these viewers, the pleasures the series offered are intensified by and grounded in the reality of what they see on screen: «After all it is something closer to us, it's about Rome...» (P11) «I had seen them shooting some scenes in my area of the city, so I was curious about it» (P18); «I would recommend it because it makes you aware of a situation very close to us, as Roman teens, even if you're not from the Parioli, it is nonetheless very close to us» (P22). These respondents emphasize its accuracy from various points of view: «The divide between Northern and Southern Rome is well explained» (P18), an accuracy that renders the events they are watching more *possible*: «It was well made, very simple, something I could do myself if I went to certain clubs in Rome» (P23).

If this kind of location gives rise to particular viewing pleasures, from recognition to the vision of «expensive places», Parioli offers locations that we can associate with other pleasures, such

⁶ See, for example, 'babynetflixamore', for a number of posts underlining the relationship between Ludo and Chiara as the central love story.

⁷ Luca Barra confirms that the school in Parioli where the series was shot was chosen for its potential to cohere with a more Americanized vision of the high school (AAIS conference presentation, 30th May, 2021).

as those of costume (we often see the girls in ostentatiously expensive, sparkly clothes),⁸ music, sport, and not least of all what Colling describes as the «kinaesthetic» pleasures of dancing, evidenced in this comment:

I was struck by the first time in the nightclub, where her feelings and her approach to this...ermm, oh god, I don't know how to say it (she blushes again). (P14)

What is striking here is that the kinaesthetic pleasure is also one of sexual confidence, since the scene to which the respondent refers is Chiara's first encounter, through an increasing sexualised dance, with an older man and a possible client. Thus the aural and visual pleasures of the series are quite literally coloured by the theme of sexualisation, and several respondents comment on the excitement generated by the hot pink script of the series title.

It is useful here to remember the words of Sharon Lamb, cited in Peggy Orenstein's famous essay on Princesses «Cinderella ate my daughter»: «the natural progression from pale, innocent pink is not to other colors. It's to hot, sexy pink – exactly the kind of sexualisation parents are trying to avoid» (2012, 333). The series is very knowing in its presentation of this transition, if we consider the shots of Chiara's bedroom where her parents see her, precisely a pale innocent pink.

Perhaps the recurrent theme in our interviews that most resonates with Colling's analysis is the music, as several participants comment: «I saw the ad on Instagram. There was also the music in the background because this version of Cindy Lauper's song [Girls Just Wanna Have Fun] really appealed to me» (P6); «There are aspects I liked very much, like the editing, the settings, the soundtrack, which for me was spot-on» (P23).

The use of soundtrack as a shortcut to affect intensifies even further in the second series, but we can find many examples that permit us to relate the apparent excess of teen emotion to the excess of the storyline of prostitution. Moments that respondents cite as particularly moving are marked by this formal emphasis on soundtrack over dialogue, such as this one:

One moment that particularly struck me was when Ludovica manages to convince her mother to [let her] go to her father's wedding and when she arrives there she overhears him and her sister criticizing her. That scene touched me – I felt sorry for her. (P18)

This sequence sees Ludovica transition directly from this upsetting scene to passionate sex with Fiore, her protector, all to the strained and melancholy theme song of *Baby*. In fact, scenes of heterosexual sex, always involving girls seeking some form of emotional satisfaction in it, are often accompanied by a melancholy soundtrack. The first series keeps the extreme nature of sex as prostitution at the edge of the plot, but its constant association with taboo and secrecy transforms that sex into something quite different – a form of transgressive behaviour that is not necessarily only to do with sexual desire itself. As one respondent puts it, sex «is used to explain... the emotional state of the characters» (P21). Whilst the respondents acknowledge the dramatic nature of the plot and the role of sex in it, which strikes many of them as surprising, particularly when they reflect on its «real» inspiration, they are for the most part drawn to the notion that the girls' move towards prostitution initially appears to be an outlet for something else: anger (they carry within them an anger that isn't... welcomed by... anywhere, P21), insecurity (all the insecurities emerge, in their many variations, that girls of that age experience, P17), emptiness (it makes them feel full of what they are missing, P21), a lack of power, something different, transgression, difficult family lives, stress, boredom. These affects, particularly anger, are 'sticky', as Sara Ahmed suggests, in that they sometimes seep into the responses of our interviewees too, in their reaction to the series:

⁸ In its materiality costume can encourage tactile empathy: the audio-viewer is invited to enjoy a sensory encounter with the textures and physicality on display (Colling, pp. 35-6)

the main response is anger, yes... disgust about how... in the end they treat them and exploit... the weaknesses of these girls... then.. a certain tenderness too because... from one perspective... I understand... it makes you angry, but also sorry this whole business of these girls... who get so desperate in the end... and anger is always in there in the end. (P23)

Affect also attaches to their modes of identification, as individuals and as a collective: «the theme of insecurity is something close to me... not only to me, but I think that all teenagers experience this problem» (P19). This negative affect generated by the series resonates powerfully with the notion of affective dissonances that Shields Dobson and Kanai see emerging in response to the «gendered affective investments» required of young women, clear in the description of the protagonist Chiara as someone «who has to manage the situation» (P21). The pleasure in watching, and above all, feeling these dissonances emerge through the coincidence of narrative and musical soundtrack, leads us to read Chiara in the light of a balancing act described by Anita Harris and Amy Shields Dobson in the figure of the girl as a «suffering actor» (2015), whose agency is recognized, but as one facing continual compromise and obstacles.

The decision to have sex with an older man, for money, comes to stand in for a problem, an attempt to resolve issues of self-confidence, and an outlet for negative emotions about a lack of power. Paradoxically, since underage prostitution is about an acute imbalance in social power, rather than addressing that effect, it serves to exacerbate it. Some comments make it clear that the situation the girls find themselves spins out of their control: «they didn't know how to manage it because it was actually bigger than them» (P7). It is on this sentimental level that the series resonates most powerfully with teenagers: «on the emotional, yes, because they are the thoughts and issues of teens. Not so much in actions, because what we're describing here is unique. The series wanted to highlight the problem of underage prostitution, drugs... I don't think you can say that all adolescents are like that» (P13). However the strength of these themes allows for an excess that dramatizes these emotions in what many viewers find a compelling storyline (as frequent accounts of binge-watching testify).

Thus the aesthetic pleasures of the series: girl fun and friendship, the glamour of the setting, the «kinaesthetic» pleasures of dance and sport, and the affective power of a music video aesthetic, that constitute the fantasy elements of the series, more transnational in tone, are also often interwoven with the more 'realist', or darker news story-based, Italian elements of the show, that connote negative affects of anger, insecurity and stress. It is precisely the way in which these are interwoven over the course of the series that suggest the series triggers a complex set of responses in Italian teen audiences that speak to their context in a particular way.

Sex and prostitution

In all of this what happens to the issue of sex and sexual desire itself? This rarely emerges from the responses, which, whilst a by-product of inevitable reticence in the interview dynamic, also suggests that the invisibility of teen female desire in popular culture hypothesized by Deborah Tolman might be in play here (2012). In commenting on the gendered expression of sexual desire, one respondent notes: «Girls can get together with a boy for fun, but in the end the consequences are always different» (P4). This confirms the double bind that Katherine Farrimond argues young women encounter in relation to their sexuality: «the complexities of trying to live as a teenage girl in an environment which insists that girls' only power is their sexuality, and yet judges and vilifies them for publically utilising it» (2018, 70). What the series gets at is this disconnect between how girls and young women are supposed to perform and how they are then made to feel about it, particularly in the double standards around sexiness versus the slut-shaming that Farrimond refers to, and that Mainardi confirms is an issue experienced acutely by girls in Italy (2018, 197). As we indicate above,

transgressive sex becomes a language for something that cannot be expressed – a risky attempt possibly to reclaim sex and subjecthood on radically different terms.

For one respondent this is also related to a lack of knowledge on the protagonists' part: «they wanted to express what they couldn't express or perhaps didn't know yet... »(P20). It also suggests that the series raises questions about what it feels like to live in a society that presumes a handling of advanced levels of knowledge and understanding, so-called «technologies of sexiness» that (might) in fact evade young women (Evans and Riley 2014). More recently, Katherine Angel has argued that contemporary culture demands self-knowledge of women, particularly a sexual self-knowledge that is in fact a chimera (Angel, 2021, 14). As one respondent puts it: «there is a gaping abyss between how they feel and how they think they should be» (P21). That a teen series like *Baby*, possibly for the first time in Italy, takes this gap seriously explains part of its appeal. The series' protagonists (played by performers several years older than their fictional age) even embody this mismatch between the appearance of mature sexuality and the felt experience of adolescence: «their femininity is different from that of the other girls – they seem more confident, sensual ... I would compare them to a sort of *femme fatale*, but it's a sensuality that is too mature, that doesn't suit them»(P18).

Turning to the question of how the act of prostitution itself is handled, in relation to the second series in particular respondents show a keen interest in and often surprise about the link between the real-life events and the theme of the show, expressing curiosity about the news item. «I was seeing young girls of sixteen, fifteen who ..um.. were having sexual relations with much older people, for me it was something almost unimaginable and so it was interesting, but odd in a certain sense»(P20). Most often, however, this interest and learning takes on affective qualities too. First of all fascination, and then disgust:

I really liked the scenes in which the girls, Chiara and Ludovica, interact with the clients, how the relationship is. There were scenes that really disgusted me. Those were my favourite ones because they showed what these girls of 17 were really doing which was absurd.(P22)

Totally disgusted! Or rather, disgusted by the adult who experiences pleasure in going with young girl, amongst other things then there's a horrific scene that I'll explain to you now.(P14)

The level of repulsion expressed here is surprising considering the relatively high tolerance for intergenerational relationships in other Italian genres, as mentioned earlier in relation to the recurrent «incest motif». This might suggest that the repulsion has more to do with the act of prostitution itself than the sex, but more significantly it is an animated and *fascinated* disgust which betrays an interest in alternative expressions of female sexuality, outside of the romantic heterosexual model (ending in marriage, or at least monogamy) still normalized in mainstream Italian visual narrative and culture. Responses to the nature of the act divide into roughly two groups. Firstly, those who express doubt about its plausibility, more precisely doubting the possibility of those «technologies of sexiness» being in evidence at this age:

In the series there are ridiculous things like the fact that a minor can be paid for sex and here it's represented like it's a natural thing. I would have demonized it instead – I would have changed the perspective. A girl who goes with an older man cannot be that relaxed about it, there are details they've missed out that could have made it more realistic. (P23)

On the other hand, there are those respondents from whom the prostitution becomes a talking point with friends and a yardstick for their own behaviour.

R: She asked me what I would have done if I were Ludovica, that is that to get money she went to dinner with a man much older than her.

I: so you talked a bit about how the underage prostitution worked.

R: Exactly, obviously, she only asked me about the dinner, on the condition that there was nothing else. I honestly said no, because I'm really paranoid and look after myself. I would never have gone to a dinner like that... but she said that only for a dinner, for 500 euros, she would have done it, I wouldn't. (P14)

This exchange is typical of a tendency for respondents always to be categorical about not ever wanting to follow this route themselves (even if others might). However, that these conversations are triggered by the series suggests that its pleasures include the possibility of imagining *alternative* and socially taboo directions for their sexual behaviour, however limited these other directions appear in themselves. The speculation about decision-making is characterized by some linguistic confusion about the degree of agency the girls themselves enjoy in the series. «these girls were, actually it's difficult to find the right words here, because I don't know whether to say the young girls sold themselves or were sold... maybe both» (P14). The early seasons' deliberate ambiguity about power and control in this scenario, as it seesaws between a tale of empowered self-realization and exploitation, are perhaps the key to its suspense, but also re-inscribe an ambiguity about female adolescent sexual control. It is this ambiguity about control that is perhaps the most compelling «affective dissonance» generated by the narrative of underage prostitution. This brings to us the central tension between the rhetorical celebration of postfeminist independence in transnational media and the actual constraints of neoliberal self-management that emerge in the negotiation of girlhood identities in everyday life in Italy.

Conclusion

In its dramatization of underage prostitution young Italian female viewers find in *Baby* resonance with a threatening world of adult sexuality which they know they encounter at a disadvantage, as one that exploits power differentials in gender and generation on a very visible and sometimes violent level. What our research also suggests Italian female teen audiences are getting from this show (that they might not be getting elsewhere in an Italian context) is some acknowledgement of double standards around female sexuality, and the possibility of confounding them, at least in fantasy. Our audiences' responses hint at frustration over the mismatch, in Italian culture, between expressions of young women's sexual freedom in transnational postfeminist representational culture and the reality of a national patriarchal culture that prizes female sexual continence, whilst continuing to objectify young women's bodies. Taking the argument that Dobson and Kanai put forward about the 'affective dissonances' of Anglophone teen television and building on the notion of the 'aesthetic pleasures' that Sam Colling finds in Anglophone teen film, we suggest that the particular dissonant pleasures found in this series' representation of a real-life case of underage prostitution create points of engagement for some Italian viewers, wherein they can explore the difficulties of expressing teen female sexuality in a culture where patriarchy and postfeminism collide with particular force. The show, however, offers them the opportunity to explore playfully, as a form of «evofeminism», how to perform identities as sexually maturing girls, manifest in their desire to 'try on' radically differing identities (which is also nuanced by age and location) and experience vicariously taboo activities undertaken by the lead protagonists, less important in their substance than in their transgressive quality. Whether this open quality of the series is ultimately closed down for these viewers by the ending of the third season, which sees the girls separated and duly reinscribed as victims of patriarchal culture, is a question for future research. Given the restricted nature of our interview sample to date, further research is also needed to tell us to what extent the parameters set by the series' protagonists – who, despite their subversive behaviours, embody white, able-bodied, conventionally beautiful, heterosexual femininity – exclude a broader, more diverse viewership from also enjoying such means of engagement and connection. Whilst what we have conducted here is a fan study, work we are conducting on broader viewing patterns and preferences amongst Italian girls

suggests that not all of them find the characters of *Baby* convincing or relatable. One further particularly fruitful direction in which to take this research would be through transnational research, since comparative studies would tell us more about how these intense levels of response to the series we have found in the Italian context are diluted or nuanced in different national contexts.

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