



Rai Fiction Teen Series for Mainstream Channels: Programming and Production

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While notable for productions like *Compagni di scuola/School Friends* (2001) and *Braccialetti rossi/The Red Band Society* (2014–2016) that resonate with younger audiences, Rai historically overlooked the fifteen-to-thirty-four age group until just a few years ago (Scaglioni 2019). Despite the complexities entailed in strategically allocating resources towards this demographic group, while taking into account both the competition for the target audience’s attention and the financial considerations in balancing these allocations, it is crucial for the public service broadcaster to engage the new generations. According to Massimo Scaglioni, of the two possible ways to reach the objective, the simplest “consists in putting younger audiences seen as ‘target’ back on the Rai agenda, according to a logic similar to that of commercial television” (2019, 90, my translation). Furthermore, he identifies the quality of the narrative as a further element in which to invest to redefine the service and win back the youth target. In this sense, Rai should “renew languages, genres, narrative methods while keeping in mind the popular nature of television communication”

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(Scaglioni 2019, 99, my translation); engage forms of co-production; invest more in serial storytelling.

Nowadays, it seems therefore that the public service broadcaster is proceeding, not without difficulties, in the desired direction. In fact, as far as the teen offering goes, context analysis shows the presence of three major players on the Italian audiovisual scene: Netflix, Amazon Prime Video—OTT platforms—and Rai which, with its linear and digital variations, is second only to Netflix in terms of number of teen television series being produced. The public service TV offer is designed around the need to reach the target of Generation Z, whose young members are the main consumers of television series (Riva and Scarcelli 2016), in the dialectic between the need to extend Rai's national borders and Italian specificity, and in the consequent urgency of narratives that acknowledge the complexity of new generations, while attempting to remain faithful to their editorial line. However, where the digital solution, at least potentially, has the tools to achieve these objectives, even in the face of the complex challenges presented by competitors, mainstream Rai, with its output for generalist channels, faces an even more difficult challenge: it must deal both with the network's internal production, differentiating itself from the offers of the digital platform, and externally, with the proliferation of streaming services, as well as winning new audiences without alienating existing ones, showing loyalty to its vast target pool and, even more so, towards its traditional corporate mission.

In this context, it is necessary to consider the important role played by Rai Fiction in the person of Eleonora Andreatta, president from 2012 to 2020. Over the years, Andreatta had contributed to shaping Rai Fiction through leadership oriented towards diversification, innovation, and the production of high-quality content. She encouraged collaboration with independent producers and participation in co-productions so as to create programmes that could compete internationally in terms of quality and content, while also focusing on artistic quality and programme production that deals with relevant themes and stories. This, naturally, revitalised Rai's teen-oriented proposal.

This dedication to innovation and quality emerges starting from Rai's 2015 report and persists in subsequent reports, all of which highlight the importance of reaching diverse audience segments. Rai's strategic direction, as outlined in the 2015 report (Rai 2015), underscores a concerted effort to adapt to evolving audience preferences and demographics, thus ensuring continued relevance and appeal across generations. This approach

mirrors Andreatta's vision, which prioritises both artistic integrity and responsiveness to shifting audience dynamics.

Raiuno, as the flagship channel of the Italian public broadcasting service, primarily prioritises audience maximisation and the provision of content that reflects the values and pertinent themes of Italian society. Its programming, encompassing exclusive events, successful drama series, and major sporting fixtures, caters to a broad and varied audience. However, the channel also recognises the significance of engaging younger viewers through captivating formats and refined presentations, which can exert a notable societal impact. While maintaining a vigilant focus on the needs of all demographic groups, Raidue tends to attract older age cohorts owing to its established programming and reputation for reliability and quality.

In contrast, Raidue distinguishes itself with a more dynamic and innovative approach aimed at appealing to a young contemporary audience. The channel endeavours to rejuvenate its viewership through a diverse programming slate spanning cultural content, news, entertainment, and lighter fare. The channel positions itself as a modern television channel adept at accommodating the preferences and interests of new generations, while offering a balanced blend of entertainment and information.

Finally, Raitre stands out for its commitment to providing genuine public service, focusing on in-depth journalism, historical and scientific dissemination, and high-quality cultural programming. Despite its inclination towards a more serious and informative approach, the channel has placed particular emphasis on engaging younger audiences, recognising their importance in shaping the future landscape of television. This commitment is reflected in significant efforts to project content onto digital platforms and social media networks, aimed at maintaining a delicate balance between the network's tradition of excellence and the imperative to attract a more dynamic audience.

Therefore, the analysis of Rai Fiction's teen series since 2015 on generalist channels becomes a crucial element for understanding which strategies Rai adapts to the audiences' needs and tastes and what evolution it is going through in the dynamic and competitive context of contemporary media. To this end, the selection of the series took place following specific criteria: firstly, all products that fully fall into the teen drama category were considered valid. Although there are large stylistic and narrative differences between the different productions, the protagonists of these series are generally teenagers, or young adults, who play a fundamental role in the narrative, albeit with different degrees of protagonism. Also, the

narrative development has its focus in the experiences, emotions, and dynamics of adolescence, representing the challenges and difficulties that young people have to face in the period that precedes and prepares them for adult life. Nine serial titles were thus selected and watched in their entirety as available up to 2024, in order to capture, in their complexity, the characters and features of the narrative structure and the plots.

- *L'amica geniale/My Brilliant Friend* (2018–2024)
- *Ognuno è perfetto/Everyone Is Perfect* (2019)
- *Boez/Boez* (2019)
- *Pezzi unici/Unique Pieces* (2019)
- *La Compagnia del Cigno/The Swan's Ensemble* (2019–2021)
- *Mare fuori/The Sea Beyond* (2020–present)
- *Un professore/A Professor* (2021–present)
- *Corpo libero/The Gymnasts* (2022)
- *Vivere non è un gioco da ragazzi/Living Is Not Child's Play* (2023)

In the landscape of teen-oriented content across Rai channels, Raiuno leads with six series, followed by Raidue with two, and Raitre with a single title. The nine series can be categorised into two groups: five as self-contained miniseries and four as long serials spanning multiple seasons. The preference for miniseries aligns with narrative, financial, and market adaptability considerations. Additionally, the list highlights Raiuno and Raidue teen dramas in prime time, emphasising their pivotal role and the broadcaster's aim to engage a diverse audience. The only exception is Raitre's docu-series *Boez*, placed in access prime time, due to its experimental, reportage format. Genre-wise, drama dominates, often blended with dramedy, while the inclusion of crime and thriller elements adds suspense, offering a diverse and engaging narrative for teenage viewers.

It is unsurprising that Raiuno stands as the most prolific channel, consistently maintaining its position as the driving force in the field of fiction. However, despite some exceptions, the majority of the series remain anchored to the stereotypes of Italian fiction, rooted in the popular and pedagogical precepts of public service broadcasting, lacking alignment with the styles, themes, and value horizons of the new generations and revealing the difficulties of reaching and reconciling different audiences.

Raidue takes a distinct role, notwithstanding its relatively modest teen-oriented portfolio. It establishes itself as a representative of contemporary television, aspiring to recapture its target audience through engaging and

unconventional narratives. The series *The Gymnasts* and *The Sea Beyond* not only embody sophistication but also resonate with the audience, reintroducing complexity, dignity, and relevance to the teenage life experience. Through characterisation that embraces socio-economic, sexual orientation, and gender identity diversity, these productions try to offer a glimpse into the complex social and cultural realities that define the contemporary youth context. Furthermore, they tackle issues relevant to new generations such as bullying and, albeit marginally, mental health, serving as vehicles for critical analysis and reflection on society. A central aspect of such narratives is the attempt to highlight youth empowerment, as they are portrayed as active agents of social change and protagonists of their own stories.

Raitre occupies a marginal place in teen programming: it confirms itself as the least attentive to the teen target audience and to fictional stories of youth. The network has only one series, *Boez*, created in collaboration with the Ministry of Justice, a docu-series that tells the story of the redemption of young people convicted of breaking the law, on a walking journey along the Via Francigena, the mediaeval pilgrim route. The documentary stands out for its social consciousness and its link with the editorial policy of the channel which historically has narrated reality and the nation using languages from reportage to in-depth journalistic analysis.

An examination of the production and distribution routines, the nature of the relationship forged with the public, the functions carried out within the television system, and the attributes of content and form enable the identification of two main variations in the strategic operations employed by Rai Fiction for the generalist channels: the production of a linear seriality, in the footsteps of previous examples of Italian fiction, for the national audience, and the production of original content, with a complex narrative structure and a strong international vocation.

Most of the investigated series belong to the first macro-category. Specifically, eight coming-of-age products have been identified: *Unique Pieces*, *The Swan's Ensemble*, *Everyone Is Perfect*, *Boez*, *The Sea Beyond*, *A Professor*, *The Gymnasts*, *Living Is Not Child's Play*. Despite the different plots, and a notable difference in the story and production quality (we will see how *The Sea Beyond* fits into this category only partially), they are all products that fall within the "linear seriality", so defined because it presents characteristics that show an anchoring to a traditional public service model, typical of linear television.

The content analysis highlights a first thematic core which is related to the representation of diversity and pluralism. Unlike their competitors' outputs, in these teen dramas there is an absence of both ethnic and religious multiculturalism—all the characters are white and first-generation Italians. Catholicism, instead, often emerges in its iconographic characteristics, even though it does not represent an influential element in the plot. In this regard, as O'Rawe claims, an examination of cinema (and of Italian serials, especially if produced and distributed on the linear model) can never be considered complete “if it ignores the influence of Catholicism and, specifically, the role of the Catholic Church” (2015, 44, my translation).

Unique Pieces stands as a notable example in this regard. Within the narrative, viewers can observe the portrayal of sacred sites such as small churches, as well as the placement of crucifixes in settings outside the conventional ecclesiastical walls, within the spaces frequented by the characters. Moreover, religious artisanal objects like crosses and rosaries are commonly featured in the set design of the series. The practice of craftsmanship itself, playing a significant role as a tool of empowerment for the protagonists, may evoke connections to the Christian religion, a correlation supported by the fact that Italian artisanal tradition often draws from religious culture. Therefore, craftsmanship not only evokes the symbolism and objects intrinsically linked to Catholic tradition and spirituality, but also conjures significant figures of Christian culture, including those of Joseph and Jesus. These elements collectively contribute to cultivating an ambiance reflective of the pervasive presence of Catholicism in the characters' daily lives, despite not being a central theme of the plot.

The iconographic presence of Catholicism, especially in the Raiuno series, may reflect the attempt, which has been discussed, to balance tradition with modernity. Integrating religious symbols without making them the focus of the story could be a way to respect traditional history and culture, without being obsolete or alien to younger and/or secular viewers.

Greater openness is reserved for sexual identity, in particular sexual orientation and homosexuality, both male and female. The theme is not marginal and also involves the protagonists. *The Gymnasts*, for Raidue, is a significant thriller in which female sexuality and homosexuality are shown openly, integrated into the plot without being a central theme. The narrative, which tells of a group of young professional gymnasts on a retreat in the mountains to prepare for a competition, and involved in a mysterious murder, is centred on female leadership and filtered through a youthful

gaze, taking shape in the discovery of one's own body and the body of others. In this context, sexual identity is not subject to sugarcoating and offers a perspective that does not have educational purposes but simply represents the young generations in their natural diversity. Of an opposite nature is *A Professor*, for Raiuno, which addresses the themes of virility and male homosexuality in a more conflictual way, involving the protagonist and the surrounding community in evident tensions. In this case, the representation is filtered through an adult gaze and is mainly aimed at parents, taking on an educational and reflective tone. The divergence in representations highlights not only the different perspectives of the two networks, but also the way in which they uniquely address sensitive topics, trying to adapt them to the expectations and needs of their target audience.

Apart from this, however, no other significant explorations of gender identity and value horizons involving Generation Z emerge. Rather, it emerges that diversity is actually present, but not in the form of cultural diversity: it seems to be determined by elements of a physical/biological and ethical-moral nature. Firstly, where Subscription Video on Demand (SVOD) platforms demonstrate a strong sensitivity towards mental health, generalist channels mainly present neurodiversity. An illustration of this phenomenon is found in *Ognuno è perfetto* (Everyone Is Perfect), included in the survey because, despite its protagonists not being teenagers, it features elements that position the series within the field of coming-of-age narratives, such as the intricacies of plot, thematic content, and the narrative environment, coupled with the nature of the characters. The series unfolds as the compelling story of a group of young adults with Down syndrome embarking on an overseas journey, encapsulating themes of love, friendship, and equality. The diversity in physical/biological characteristics, moreover, albeit with different nuances, mirrors the typical representation of the medical teen drama in Rai's traditional fiction, which achieved success with *The Red Band Society*.

Secondly, diversity takes on a negative meaning and is identifiable in those attitudes that do not conform to social rules: in other words, misconduct as an element of diversity. *Boez*, *Living Is Not Child's Play*, *Unique Pieces*, *The Sea Beyond*, and *A Professor*, represent wholly, or in part, problematic kids who have, or have had, problems with the law and deviated "from the right path": drugs, alcohol, theft, violence of various kinds. The narratives explore the path of redemption and empowerment, with each series presenting different issues which receive the same judgement and monitoring treatment. These stories fulfil the most traditional public

service function: reducing the negative effects on society, caused by the logic of the free market which is aimed only at profit, and encouraging positive effects, such as the creation of an informed and active community in the exercise of democracy. Scaglioni defines them as positive and negative externalities:

The topic of violence in the media, for example, is a constant in the debate on possible negative effects for society as a whole, especially when considering the effectiveness of the media and television in constructing related stories and images. (2019, 47, my translation)

In this sense, public service TV's attempt to demystify the charm of evil, and represent the criminal system in the most realistic way possible, is evident.

The second thematic nucleus is related to youth protagonism and the role assumed by adults. It is possible to observe how the seriality of SVOD platforms has contributed to restoring absolute centrality to young people, often the only protagonists of the scene and the sole reference target. Generalist public service channels propose instead narratives in which the adult is a central figure, if not the protagonist, often played by well-known Italian actors or actresses (Carolina Crescentini in *The Sea Beyond*, Alessandro Gassman in *A Professor*, Sergio Castellitto in *Unique Pieces*, Claudio Bisio in *Living Is Not Child's Play*, and so on). The point of reference is generally a teacher, a parent, a legal guardian, or similar authority figures. As already mentioned, adolescence is told and filtered through the adult gaze and the young characters being represented require constant parental intervention, as they are unable to get by on their own. It is a narrative that reflects the management model of Rai, characterised by its paternalistic nature, which is based on a pedagogical concept and attempts to carry out its main mission in an effective way.

Directly connected to this point is the third thematic nucleus, consisting of the role assumed by institutions. Beyond the characters, the narrative environment also takes on a specific pedagogical function. If in the Netflix teen series, such as *Skam Italia* (Netflix, 2018–present) and *Summertime* (Netflix, 2020–2022), the school is present but does not influence the characters and has only a partial, if not absent, disciplining role, in Rai's teen series it is the place where identities, rules, and social values are reconfigured. Culture, understood as the sum of arts and literature, and sport, are masters of life and discipline and are conveyed by an

often severe and strict authority figure. Think of *The Swan's Ensemble*, set in a music academy, and its protagonist, the ruthless Maestro Marioni (nicknamed “the bastard”). Or again, *The Gymnasts*, which evolves its story through sport and in the non-place of the sports hall, in a prison allegory which becomes more evident and concrete in *Unique Pieces*, in which a group of young people with a difficult past is forced to follow a path of rehabilitation, which makes craftsmanship an example of virtue and moderation. It is *The Sea Beyond* that marks the concrete, no longer metaphorical, passage from the school/academy environment to the prison dimension, in which classical music is a symbol of elevation and redemption. It is also through these narrative tropes that the paternalistic attitude towards the public is best expressed, whose objective, according to Scaglioni, “is not so much propaganda, indoctrination, consensus-building, but rather intellectual elevation, acculturation, the growth of the spirit and minds of the national community” (2019, 35, my translation).

Within the second macro-area, a distinctive trend emerges, characterised by two main trajectories. On the one hand, there are high-budget co-productions aligning with broadcasters renowned for prioritising quality television, exemplified by the series *My Brilliant Friend*. On the other hand, there is more traditional content, reimagined with a contemporary twist for a teenage audience, as seen in *The Sea Beyond*, whose rights have been successfully sold across various European nations. Both series share a common objective: the exportation of a markedly Italian essence. The HBO/Rai collaboration in adapting Elena Ferrante’s globally acclaimed Neapolitan Novels, *My Brilliant Friend*, exemplifies this trend. Premiering in November 2018, and filmed predominantly in Italian, often incorporating Neapolitan dialect, the series reached audiences both in Italy and abroad through subtitles, garnering a substantial international following (Renga 2020). Its success can be attributed to its high production values, socio-political relevance, diverse filming locations, global distribution strategy, innovative casting of young female talent, and a strong female-led narrative. However, as argued by Danielle Hipkins and Dana Renga, the products attracting viewers outside Italy highlight a prevalent ignorance “towards contemporary Italian Cinema [and television] wherein ‘quality’ still equals Neorealism” (2016, 381). Indeed, *My Brilliant Friend* exhibits several neorealist elements that contribute to its authentic and realistic atmosphere. These encompass a thorough depiction of daily life in the 1950s and 1960s Naples, with particular emphasis on the socio-economic circumstances of the working class. The series delves into interpersonal

dynamics and the trials characters encounter in their day-to-day existence, thus echoing the neorealist focus on ordinary people and their narratives. Moreover, it employs genuine locales and a visual lexicon that evokes Naples's urban and cultural milieu during that era.

Elements of this narrative, albeit manifested differently, resurface in *The Sea Beyond*, whose distribution history illustrates how a series upholding the characteristic features of public service TV can garner international appeal and shed light on the key roles played by Rai and Netflix in the reconfiguration of teen-oriented audiovisual products. Premiered on Raidue in 2020, the series faced initial challenges, encountering unwarranted comparisons with the well-established *Gomorra-la serie / Gomorrah* (2014–2021), influenced by the shared regional context of Naples, the criminal dimension, and overlapping actors. Despite the initial scepticism and a narrative seemingly skewed towards adult themes, the series gradually revealed its captivating storyline, securing a dedicated audience. A first turning point occurred in late 2021, when Beta Film acquired international distribution rights, leading to agreements with various global broadcasters and streaming platforms. Recognising its potential, Rai renewed the series for a third and fourth seasons in March of the following year. A second crucial moment unfolded in June 2022 when, leveraging the 2017 agreement between Rai and Netflix, the series became accessible on the streaming platform. The immediate success was attributed to Netflix's extensive promotion on social media, employing its characteristic communication style which focused on romantic "shipping" of characters and viral clips. Notably, a video capturing a nun interrupting a kiss between the lead actresses in the streets of Naples gained substantial traction. This strategic communication approach appears designed to position *The Sea Beyond* as an authentic Netflix product, contributing to a production landscape where the streaming giant incorporates public service content.

As previously mentioned, a shared element in the two series is the prominent role of Naples and the Campania region. However, across all examined series within the public service domain, a distinct regional characterisation emerges. This extends beyond Naples, encompassing a less structured acting style marked by a pronounced regional inflection in speech. The deliberate emphasis on regionalism can be attributed to dual objectives: firstly, an endeavour to capture the genuineness and authenticity inherent in youth narratives, aligning with the expressive manners of Generation Z; secondly, a strategic focus on regionalism and Italian

identity, utilising local settings, dialects, authentic faces, and the reliability that ensure the success of international exports.

The regional characterisation is intertwined with series frequently adopting the crime genre, presenting itself as a continuation of certain successful elements in contemporary Italian seriality, while incorporating influences from American models, adapting them to Italian standards. This approach is guided by a global perspective “with a local sensitivity” (Barra 2023, 249). The national connotation is evident, with series drawing inspiration from the two main Italian genres: narratives told from the criminals’ perspective and social dramas recounting the exploits of legal heroes (Barra and Scaglioni 2015). At the same time, the landscape of overseas crime drama, rich with subgenres including teen crime drama, plays a crucial role. Despite a clear predominance of male characters, there is a growing tendency for female-led narratives characterised by strong female protagonism and solidarity among women. In this context, *The Gymnasts*, alongside series like *Unique Pieces*, *The Sea Beyond*, and *Living Is Not Child’s Play*, appears to strive for national recognisability, while simultaneously crafting a narrative and a female heroine possessing traits conducive to “exportability” in the international market.

In summary, the analysis of Rai Fiction’s teen drama production underscores its significant presence in the competitive television landscape, showcasing Rai’s adeptness in navigating an ever-expanding market. Nonetheless, certain challenges and idiosyncrasies surface in the storytelling approach. The narratives often employ an adolescent language that, while not entirely authentic, is filtered through an adult perspective. This filtration results in a portrayal of young people oscillating between two extremes: one depicting them as lost and incapable, and the other presenting them as prematurely matured individuals with lofty ambitions and values aligning with Rai’s pedagogical mission.

In this sense, Rai’s youth storytelling appears to struggle in accurately and naturally reflecting the experiences and daily interactions of young people. Characters are often placed in challenging, difficult, even extraordinary contexts, in situations that may come across as stereotypical and disconnected from the everyday lives of today’s youth, depriving the stories of the genuineness and lightness of peer relationships. This approach stands in stark contrast to the realistic, almost documentary-like approach of the SVOD offering, which has revitalised teen drama through series such as *Skam Italia* and *Prisma* (2022–present).

In the context of Rai's attempt to address diversity, positive signs such as genre experimentation and the introduction of new protagonists are notable. However, there remains a discernible gap in portraying a diverse range of characters and experiences. This aspect is particularly relevant as the industry continues to evolve, emphasising the importance of reliable representation in reflecting the realities of contemporary adolescence. In any case, encouraging indicators emerge amidst these challenges. Rai distinguishes itself through the production of high-quality, high-budget series which not only contribute to the global export of Italian content, but also signal a positive trajectory towards growth and innovation in the teen drama genre.

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