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Editors

# Contemporary Italian Youth Television

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## Teens in Prison: Control and Redemption in *The Sea Beyond*

*Paolo Noto*

*Mare fuori/The Sea Beyond*, produced by Picomedia and Rai Fiction, was first broadcast on Raidue in September 2020. Despite modest initial ratings, the series was renewed for a second season, which aired in autumn 2021. Subsequently, two further seasons were commissioned, a decision influenced by its strong reception among younger audiences and satisfactory international sales. In 2022, Netflix acquired the series, and the promotional prestige of the streaming platform, combined with positive word-of-mouth, led to a significant surge in the show's popularity. The success of *Mare fuori* played a crucial role in establishing the, until then undervalued, streaming platform, RaiPlay, where some episodes starting from the second season have been pre-released. The fifth season was broadcast in spring 2025, and currently, three additional seasons are planned. This, along with a range of ancillary products, has established *Mare fuori* as a unique phenomenon within the Italian context in terms of its longevity and development, one that has engaged numerous screenwriters and directors under the supervision of story editors Maurizio Careddu and Cristiana Farina (who also conceived the series).

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The narrative centres on the experiences of inmates within a fictional juvenile detention facility in Naples. This institution is portrayed as a microcosm where young individuals from diverse backgrounds and with varied personalities coexist. These include, in the first season, an upper-class pianist involved in the accidental death of a friend (Filippo, Nicolas Maupas), a recidivist Romani thief (Naditza, played by Valentina Romani), a well-intentioned boy attempting to escape his criminal family (Carmine, Massimiliano Caiazzo), a manipulative girl exerting control over her peers, Viola (Serena de Ferrari), Ciro, the heir of a Camorra family (Giacomo Giorgio) surrounded by his affiliates, and several dedicated educators.

The prison setting serves as a catalyst for exploring a range of dramaturgical trajectories. These include the inevitable confrontation between youth and adulthood, the suspension of typical adolescent rules and behaviours, and the mandatory acceptance of cohabitation with individuals differing in culture, class, and race. Over the course of the seasons, such narrative paths are dynamically developed through the incorporation of figures and recurring motifs characteristic of melodrama. The narrative world is populated by primary figures, and their replacements: the characters in *Mare fuori* are fundamentally, and before anything else, sons and daughters, fathers and mothers. Biological families (whether rejected, endured, challenged) are nonetheless inescapable in establishing the background and thus the criminal destiny of the youth, and are juxtaposed with elective families. This extends beyond mere metaphor to include the overlapping of professional and parental roles (the male protagonist Carmine, a reluctant killer, has his motherless daughter literally taken into custody by the prison director). Characters can be defined as extroverted, given that their inner qualities are projected onto somatic features and outward appearance, particularly their excessive attire (Martina and Tralli 2024). A typically melodramatic trope appears frequently: that of the *interrupted fête* (Brooks 1976, 29) as a pivotal point for transformations and events. Throughout the seasons, instances include the interruption of Ciro's eighteenth birthday party, the weddings of Carmine and Nina, as well as of Carmine and Rosa Ricci, and the forced marriage of Naditza.

The prison in *Mare fuori*, as is often the case in teen dramas, is highlighted "as a metaphor for school or as a comparable context in terms of roles (young and adult), responsibilities and the interplay between generations and characters" (Spalletta et al. 2025, 7). In the second episode of the first season Gianni/Cardiotrap (Domenico Cuomo), very precisely illustrates this aspect to the newly arrived Filippo: "Listen Fili', if you

don't cause trouble [...] it's like a boarding school: you study, you eat, you play football and you can't have sex". The term originally used by Cardiotrap ("Sienti Filì, qua dentro se non rompi il cazzo [...] è come nu *collegio*: studi, mangi, giochi a pallone e non puoi fare sesso") curiously refers to another television programme that started quietly and then became a cult phenomenon for younger viewers, the unscripted show *Il collegio/The Boarding School* (2017–), an adaptation of the British format *That'll Teach 'Em*, where a group of pre-teens attend a boarding school whose lessons are based on the curriculum of the past.

The points of convergence between *Mare fuori* and *Il collegio*, while perhaps coincidental, are nonetheless symptomatic. In both instances, the programmes were broadcast on Raidue, the Italian public television service's channel targeting a youth audience. They constituted a significant aspect of the network's identity during the delicate phase of the pandemic, a period that witnessed an intensification of broadcast television consumption even among a demographic allegedly resistant to the medium. *Mare fuori* debuted in the midst of the pandemic, in the autumn of 2020, with its final episode broadcast on Wednesday, October 28th. The premiere of the fifth season of *Il collegio* aired just the day before, Tuesday the 27th, also in prime time. This passing of the torch was reversed in subsequent years, with *Mare fuori* succeeding *Il collegio* in prominence as a favourite for young audiences. The crossover between the two narrative universes was further cemented in the last season of *Il collegio* broadcast so far, whose first episode featured a guest appearance by the actor Antonio Orefice (Totò) in the role of a special commissioner for the auditions. In terms of representation and recurring figures, if the prison in *Mare fuori* resembles a boarding school, the boarding school in *Il collegio* could be likened to a prison. Across the various seasons, particularly in the opening sequences, the figurative motif of the gate is emphasised. The theme of family as a distant yet perpetually discussed entity recurs in actions and dialogues. Both the inmates and the pupils show a contradictory mix of feelings towards their families, spanning a spectrum from rejection to the fear of disappointing parental expectations. Music exercises a very high identity-forming power in both productions, but also possesses significant narrative value. In both the fifth season of *Il collegio* and the first of *Mare Fuori*, for example, characters defined as trap artists appear. Throughout the years, music holds redemptive value for the characters of Filippo and Naditza, as well as acting as a cohesive element in their love story. In both programmes, the protagonists are introduced by graphic elements that

synthesise key information (age and origin in *Il collegio*, name and days left before incarceration for *Mare fuori*). Also, the permanence of the young individuals within the institution is subject to evaluation by adults, such as teachers, commissioners, or directly by magistrates. The liminal condition, between the inside and the outside, is marked by the availability of a specific type of attire. Candidates who have not yet been admitted to the boarding school are not permitted to wear the uniform with the traditional tie, while detainees awaiting trial are, to some extent, required to wear such a garment (and in one of the key moments of the second episode, establishing the relationship between Carmine and Filippo, it is revealed that the latter is unable to do a tie knot and must seek assistance from his soon-to-be friend). Within both the prison and the boarding school, we also encounter codified rituals of undressing and dressing that mark entry into the community and detachment from the everyday world, from which the most distinctive accessories and features are left (or should be left) behind. A common denominator is that of more or less playful humiliations concerning the bodies of the young people, subjected to drastic haircuts to conform to the new environment and the removal of jewellery and piercings.

One might well ask why the Italian TV viewers have found this portrayal of adolescence as an age both endangered and dangerous to be of interest, orbiting around mechanisms for containment and discipline. According to the sociologist Vincenzo Scalia, the narrative presented by *Mare fuori* resonated with an audience weary from the COVID-19 emergency, grappling with increasingly restless minors due to their constrained living conditions (Scalia 2025, 8). Certainly, with its narrative and representational dynamics, *Mare fuori*, much like *Il collegio* before it, reaffirms the dual function of teen drama, as a “representation of adolescents’ real-world experiences [...] and a framework through which these experiences can be understood and discussed beyond the screen” (Spalletta et al. 2025, 2).

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