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Casual Films inside a Bigger Strategy: Investigating the Film Production Agreement between Mediaset and Netflix

By Luca Barra and Paolo Noto¹

In early June 2015, after months of rumours and audience anticipation, the trade press announced that Netflix was about to launch in Italy (Spangler 2015; Barra 2017). A year after it arrived in other central and western European countries (France, Germany, Luxembourg, Belgium, Austria, Switzerland), the streaming platform's Italian arrival was part of its southern-Europe strategy (with Spain and Portugal). With an aggressive rollout policy and an ability to bring users tailored content, Netflix was revolutionising the production and distribution sector. Some years later, on 30 April 2020, the financial daily *Il Sole 24 Ore* reported that Netflix was joining ANICA, the Italian trade association for producers, distributors and representatives of the audiovisual industry. Effectively, Netflix would finally sit at the table where the Italian industry players tackle delicate questions, like managing film exploitation windows, restructuring the production sector in a post-pandemic world, and negotiating with the authorities on state subsidies and legal framework updates.

What happened in the nearly five years between these two events? What strategies, decisions and contingencies prompted Netflix's conversion from the ultimate outsider (Lobato 2019) into an insider and pivotal player in the Italian industry? And were these changes born of conviction or convenience? We address these questions through a case study: the partnership agreement between Netflix and Mediaset to produce seven films for release first on Netflix and then later on Mediaset's free and pay linear channels. The films were: *Ultras* (Francesco Lettieri, 2020), *Under the Riccione Sun/Sotto il sole di Riccione* (YouNuts!, 2020), *The Last Paradiso/L'ultimo Paradiso* (Rocco Ricciardulli, 2021), *The Divine Ponytail/Il divin codino* (Letizia Lamartire, 2021), *Caught by a Wave/Sulla stessa onda* (Massimiliano Camaiti, 2021), *My Brother, My Sister/Mio fratello, mia sorella* (Roberto Capucci, 2021) and *Yara* (Marco Tullio Giordana, 2021).

The agreement was interesting for at least four interrelated reasons. Firstly, the two parties' relative importance and size. Mediaset is Italy's leading private television group, number one in advertising revenues and second for audience share only to the public-service broadcaster, Rai (AGCOM 2022). Beside operating free-to-air channels and an on-demand service called Infinity, Mediaset has interests also in other major European markets, including Germany and Spain. With long-standing links to entrepreneur-turned-politician Silvio Berlusconi, Mediaset belongs to a media group that has contributed substantially since the late 1970s both to the commercialisation of the Italian and European television industry (Barra, de Leeuw, Classen 2017) and to the production and distribution of content for cinema and television (Canova, Moccagatta 2022). When the agreement was signed, Mediaset's original scripted productions had been flatlining for years in terms of both their ratings and prestige.

A second point of interest was the largely disappointing production results of and audience response to the films. For despite the much-trumpeted announcement, with the partial exception of *Yara*, the seven titles were not successful; they seemed not to enjoy the cultural impact or ratings that might have been expected from the joint backing of two major, complementary players. There was a big difference between how the films were promoted and how they actually turned out and were received.

Thirdly, observing how the products were managed and promoted can provide useful insights to illuminate Netflix's general strategy in Italy. Like other platforms, Netflix has also linked up with legacy players and used 'frenemy collaborations' (Iordache, Raats and Afilipoaie 2022, 240) to acclimatise to the new markets and facilitate its penetration of them. As in many European countries, the approach involved broader strategies and tactical efforts (Basciera and Re 2018).

Lastly, this agreement's timing is also interesting. It was signed just months before the Covid-19 pandemic has profoundly altered media audiences' consumption habits and how they organise their time (whether these changes will prove irreversible is not yet known). Studying how

this partnership evolved can therefore give us some understanding of how both broadcasters and digital operators have adapted their ongoing projects to a new and unexpected scenario.

A brief timeline of the key events involving Netflix's first few years in Italy may be useful. Prior to producing the films with Mediaset, Netflix had already begun to collaborate on content and on technical and commercial matters with other Italian audiovisual players and telecoms firms. After an initial announcement at the October 2015 launch and the release of *Suburra* in cinemas, Netflix's first local series, *Suburra. La serie*, was released in 2017. A prequel to the film, it took up the themes, settings, genre and tone of the Sky Italia experiments that had given international visibility to quality Italian drama, especially *Romanzo criminale* (2008-2010) and *Gomorra* (2014-2021) (Barra and Scaglioni 2015, 2021). The following year, season one of *Baby* (2018-2020) emerged, taking a news story of under-age prostitution and developing it as a teen drama (Barra 2023). 2018 also saw the release of *Five Star Christmas / Natale a 5 stelle* and *On My Skin / Sulla mia pelle*, films made with Lucky Red, a long-established Italian name in production and distribution. The former was a comedy in *cinapanettone* vein (O'Leary 2013), a farcical affair with vague topical allusions (usually aimed at cinemas over Christmas); Carlo and Enrico Vanzina, the formula's originators in the 1980s, wrote the script. *Sulla mia pelle* belongs to another typically Italian genre: the *film di impegno civile*, long-standing form of political exposé (Holdaway and Missero 2020). Much more interestingly, it provided an initial litmus test of Netflix's impact on the Italian media arena. The film was screened at the 2018 Venice Festival to good reviews and was shown in theatres and on Netflix simultaneously: Italy's first day-and-date release. Alarmed distributors and cinemas found themselves with a competitor who could black out the theatrical window at a stroke. Lucky Red founder Andrea Occhipinti even resigned as president of the ANICA distributors section (A. Bio. 2022), a rather resounding move, given his and its company's prestige in Italian film industry, where many players perceived the agreement with Netflix as a discreditable concession. In an insight that helps to flesh out the Netflix modus operandi, Occhipinti noted that they decided to buy the global screening rights to the film at the post-production stage

and insisted on distributing it day-and-date (Noto 2019). Netflix's collaboration with local players continued less traumatically in the ensuing months, with film *Lo spietato* (acquired from Rai Cinema, the public broadcaster's production arm) and series *Luna nera* (with independent producer Fandango). This overview of the global platform's first steps in Italy shows the variety of genres, tones and production levels it embraced, highlighting a complex web of overlaps, strong bonds and equally significant departures from Italian film and TV production praxis, in a form of industrial and cultural localisation.

The Announcements and Beyond. The Netflix–Mediaset Movie Pact

On the morning of October 8th, 2019, the hallowed halls of Rome's National Gallery of Modern Art hosted a crowd of film, media and entertainment journalists for a press conference like no other, given the players involved and what was to be announced. On one hand, at the same table were two well-known major operators, often presented in the public discourse as rivals – one standing for tradition, the other for revolution in a turbulent digital arena. On the other, this Netflix–Mediaset agreement hinged on a disjointed array of films – not (as might have been expected) TV shows, both companies' core business – where titles were trumpeted before production had begun, or even clearly mapped out. But these peculiarities showed how important the occasion was, as the presence of so many leading digital- and print-media outlets and the volume of articles confirmed. Representing Netflix, in one of its rare Italian forays, was the company figurehead and one of its most visible managers: co-founder and then CEO Reed Hastings. He took the opportunity to outline Netflix's role in the Italian market, revealing the number of subscribers (then 2 million) and how much it was investing in local product (€200 million over two years). He also hinted at establishing an Italian office (opened in Rome in 2022). On the Mediaset side, replacing Vice-President and CEO Pier Silvio Berlusconi, who had a flu, was another senior if less recognisable figure, Director General of Content Alessandro Salem. Besides the main speeches, the variety of other contributions gave the impression of a major happening – a judicious mix of tradition and innovation, an array of

creative, authorial and professional talent, and a dialogue with the Italian cinema world, as the ‘group photo’ accompanying many reports suggested. It included: ex-footballer Roberto Baggio, the subject of one of the films, *The Divine Ponytail*, and the young actor who plays him, Andrea Arcangeli; film icon Riccardo Scamarcio, star, screenwriter and producer of *The Last Paradiso*; experienced producer Nicola Giuliano from Indigo Film (for *Ultras*) and younger colleague Olivia Musini from Cinemaundici (*Hit by a Wave*); a bastion of popular cinema in Enrico Vanzina, for *Under the Riccione Sun*; and debut director Letizia Lamartire (*The Divine Ponytail*).

Besides presenting the two-year, seven-film agreement and a few scant details on the first five, the press conference – and the reports the next day – revealed key elements of how the partnership would work and to what ends. First, it focused on the collaboration between two big companies of global reach that are not direct competitors or rivals but, in Hastings’ words, ‘complement’ one another. For Salem, it represented ‘the first step towards a closer collaboration’ that should have continued into the future (Cappelli 2019). This framing also emerged from the absent Berlusconi’s comments in a press release:

It is an honour to sign an exclusive agreement with a modern, innovative global company like Netflix. And it is also an honour to see Mediaset’s leadership in content production in Italy recognised [...]. Mediaset is the leader in Italy and Spain. And very soon, with the scale of our MediaForEurope project, we shall be building on agreements like this, which is excellent news for Italy’s entire film and production industry. By uniting Mediaset’s know-how and Netflix’s power, the sector can look forward to fresh investment (Mediaset 2019).

This underlining of the relationship with Italian cinema is a second key to understanding the event, both as a way of reassuring the national audiovisual industry players and providing a springboard to unprecedented opportunities. For whereas Mediaset wanted to consolidate its efforts over several decades, Netflix was pointing to what it had already achieved and committing to a dialogue with the creative and production professionals that would hardly prove disruptive at all. Hastings stressed that ‘Netflix currently prefers to work with independent Italian producers’ (Gnocchi 2019) and ‘we have produced numerous films; we’ve even been to Venice. [*On My Skin*] was a big hit for us, and

we saw how we needed to focus on Italian films' (Crippa 2019). Salem continued: 'our agreement is based on a shared concept: the strategic importance of original production [...]. It's a simple idea: telling stories made by Italian talent, hopefully to be enjoyed around the world' (Leone 2019).

The richness and variety of the stories, the talents, the Italian professionals is a third frame of reference embraced both at the press conference and in the promotional materials. In the first five films' two-line synopses, the keywords span a spectrum of tones, themes and genres: 'a learning journey,' 'a group of teenagers,' 'troubled couples,' '1950s Italy,' 'a chronicle,' 'a painful love story' (Mediaset 2019). The directors included mainstream debutants graduating from important work on smaller productions, festival cinema, shorts and videoclips: Lamartire, Francesco Lettieri, Rocco Ricciardulli, Massimiliano Camaiti, and YouNuts! (Niccolò Celaia and Antonio Usbergo, supported by the experienced Enrico Vanzina); the fact that most films 'are to be helmed by young up-and-coming directors' was emphasised by the foreign press (Vivarelli 2019), and shows Netflix's transnational effort to be seen as 'the most prolific commissioner of films by early career film-makers' (Meir 2023, 289). The early hints about the actors reflected a similar desire for fresh or little-known faces, a new generation of performers, as done already by the premium series produced by Sky Italia. The roster of production houses confirms the desire for variety and renewal: each film had a different company, from little Fabula to large Lucky Red, outfits that Netflix had been working with since its early days in Italy, plus independents with strong creative leads (Indigo Film, Lebowski, Cinemaundici, later Blossom Films). Italian cinema is branded as a highly creative, highly innovative arena with a long tradition, committed to broadening its diversity of genres and generations, thanks to Mediaset and Netflix. As Hastings emphasises, 'we have similar tastes to Mediaset when it comes to films. This will enable us to expand in other markets, but for now we are focusing on these seven films, and we hope they are well received' (Biondi 2019). It was taken for granted that the subsequent stages would be promoted just as vigorously, on Netflix and on free TV (Canale 5, Mediaset's top network, was repeatedly mentioned), but that did not happen.

In the months after the announcement, production began or continued independently on the first five films, in a confabulation between the indie producers, who had the most skin in the game, Netflix, which also exerted editorial control, and Mediaset, with a more detached role and contacts mainly due to existing relationships with the country's production sector. Essentially, as Mediaset's Executive Vice-President Strategy and Corporate Marketing, Federico di Chio, would later confirm, 'Netflix was the main producer; we were minority co-producers,' although its contribution was crucial in the films' finance mix:

We came in with the acquisition of the TV rights: what used to be called 'antenna rights' with a twist, because besides the free-to-air we also have the rights to catch-up TV. We cover a slice of the overall budget: Netflix handles the cost of the film less the tax credit, while we're working to the total cost. There's the tax credit; there's our share; production companies might get something back from the film commissions, or product placement. And with what's left, Netflix has first-window rights, a one-year exclusive, and non-exclusive rights in the free-to-air years too (2022).

The agreement thus mapped out a life cycle for the films that departed from the cinema norm, but was essentially in line with premium series: a one-year exclusive window on Netflix followed by an early television window brought forward to 12 months after the Netflix release, instead of the usual 24- to 36-month traditional free-to-air window after theatrical release and pay TV. The contract with Netflix also gave Mediaset an option to acquire the perpetual rights to the films, in addition to the first free-to-air window, at a defined cost. The last two films were added to the deal down the road, without promotional recognition, and especially *Yara* which, made by experienced professionals and Mediaset-owned producer Taodue, was a way safer bet.

The details of the partnership helped to dispel the promotional fog, reducing the scale of the overall operation and reshaping it as a primarily distribution-based agreement. Even before an Italian editorial strategy had been put in place, Netflix entered a new market with the will of establishing relationships with local broadcasters and production companies, also to see which of the Italian professional entities could become preferred suppliers. Within this framework, it chose a

diverse group of projects, specially developed or already pitched and on many players' radars, favouring quantity and speed over the individual films' overall cohesiveness or creative merit. Most films were mainly mid- to low-budget productions that would otherwise have struggled to see the light of day. More than the individual titles, what counted was the body of material, and the number of film titles that it aimed to launch. More even than the resulting finished oeuvre, it was the very existence of the operation itself, its declared aims and ambitions, its promotional narrative among professionals and audiences. As di Chio sums up: 'Netflix needed it to send a reassuring message to the professionals, explaining that it wanted to talk to the existing production sector. Mediaset focused on narrating the agreement to end users, for it made it "look cool" to collaborate with Netflix, to say "we are a major player in the eyes of innovators"' (2022). Netflix counted on Mediaset as a 'broker' to start and develop stronger connections inside the Italian industry; while Mediaset tested the agreements with global platforms later continued, for television series in Italy and Spain, with Amazon.

These impressions are also backed up by the releases of the announced films. The first to emerge was *Ultras* – bearing a different title from *Al di là del risultato*, announced at the press conference. The date, March 9th, 2020, was highly significant, at the very onset of the Covid-19 lockdown that kept most of the Italian population at home for months. Whereas that period coincided with a massive increase in viewership of and subscription to on-demand platforms, the pandemic also clearly frustrated all the efforts to promote the film, set in the world of football fandom, as the stadiums were closed. Netflix's second film release, *Under the Riccione Sun* which was launched on July 1st, 2020, was much better timed. It came out in summer as the worst of the lockdown ended, backed by a huge promotional push, something reserved for just a few Italian titles. But this was an exception. Subsequent films came out many months later, impacted partly by the film sets being closed in spring 2020 and then by its strict health protocols. Often, Netflix's marketing consisted of a splash screen on the home page, with no other promotional activities at all. This was the fate of *The Last Paradiso*, released on February 5th, 2021, which relied entirely on Riccardo Scamarcio, and *Hit*

by *a Wave*, distributed from March 25th, 2021 to a teen audience already in the loop as a result of other similar film and series. *The Divine Ponytail*, out on May 26th, 2021, bucked the trend with a comprehensive build-up and promotional effort across the sport and entertainment pages, although mention of the Netflix–Mediaset accord was limited, two years after the big announcement, to a few footnotes only; the same happened with *Yara*, released on October 18th, 2021, able to reach top-ten positions in several markets on Netflix. *My Brother, My Sister / Mio fratello mia sorella* (Roberto Capucci), out some days before, on October 8th, 2021, confirmed the absence of a specific marketing discourse for the films.

Consolidated Genres: Exploring the Films from the Netflix–Mediaset Pact

As with the production models, the films’ textual features denote the producers’ and commissioners’ preference for established storytelling and genre models with a patina of innovation. The small but strategic variations to typical patterns are ways to tailor the content to the target audience. For on one hand, long narrative structures were tweaked for young or young-adult Italian audiences; on the other, Netflix’s global subscribers would enjoy recognisable elements of Italian landscapes and lifestyles in the films’ mise-en-scène. From this perspective, the Netflix touch – if such a thing exists – seems to lie more in the fine tuning rather than in narrative and visual substance. Conversely, the subtle experimentation with stories or settings was designed to achieve a degree of familiarity for Italian Mediaset viewers, used to Italian films and TV shows from the previous two decades. In terms of genres, there was a clear continuity with the Italian TV movie tradition, with few exceptions. Examining the films in more detail also helps us to grasp why the critical reception was not so favourable.

The first release on Netflix, *Ultras* harks back to a production cycle that helped to put Italian TV drama on screens even in hitherto unreceptive countries, largely through the efforts of pay networks like Sky: *Gomorra. La serie* (2014–21), the crime drama that it echoes for its setting in Naples. The film was Francesco Lettieri’s directorial debut, although he was already known for his

sombre music videos. The film is not directly about crime, but rather a story set in the world of football hooliganism. The genre filter is the male melodrama, with characters engaged in coming-of-age, guilt and redemption journeys, personal sacrifice and inter-generational conflicts. The narrative is secondary to recreating a setting and a minute observation of character: here, *Ultras* recalls recent Neapolitan films by directors Leonardo Di Costanzo (*L'intervallo*, 2012) or Matteo Garrone (*Gomorra*, 2008, and the less successful *Reality*, 2012, also starring Aniello Arena). The Netflix extra ingredient is the use of the football world and its visual and audio apparatus, 'the banners, the chants, the colours, the smoke flares,' so 'to trigger our sense of nostalgia,' as in *Stranger Things* (Cotugno 2020), although some critics complained about the unoriginal outcome (Chimento 2020).

The gloomy drama of *Ultras* is a stark contrast with the holiday comedy *Under the Riccione Sun*, where 'all is colourful, all is vibrant, dancing from one episode to the next' (Gironi 2020). But here, too, the direction is entrusted to two music video specialists making their feature film debut: the directorial duo YouNuts! The film belongs to a very familiar Italian genre: the youth comedy set in a tourist hotspot (here, Riccione in the north-east); it is a kind of teen beach movie where a romantic and sexual coming-of-age story meets the summer holidays. In this case, the nostalgia is built-in, bringing a cult template up to date with the teenage aesthetic and rites of 2020 (gig jobs, sexting, Instagram stories, contemporary hit songs). The tie-in to the Italian beach comedy legacy comes also from the involvement of screenwriter Enrico Vanzina, this subgenre's founding father (with his deceased brother Carlo), and actors as Isabella Ferrari and Andrea Roncato, who starred in similar films in the 1980s. And the leading parts are played by actors familiar from teen series like *SKAM Italia* (TIMvision, then Netflix, 2018-ongoing), *Baby* and *La compagnia del cigno* (Rai, 2019-2021). With a plot fragmented in multiple sketched-out storylines, the film indulged in purely visual sequences where aerial views of the eastern Italian coast shot from drones added to the visual appeal. *Under the Riccione Sun* was the only film under the agreement to meet with a degree of critical approval (Sozzo 2020, Caiani 2020, Manca 2020); it was also the only one to spawn a

sequel, released in the summer of 2022 on Netflix: *Under the Amalfi Sun / Sotto il sole di Amalfi* (Martina Pastori), following the vicissitudes of one of the couples in a move from the Riccione melting pot to the more exclusive southern milieu of Amalfi. (This film was, however, independent of the Mediaset agreement.)

The southern Italian landscape was the star of *The Last Paradiso*. The *mezzogiorno* setting (in Puglia) in the rural past (the 1950s) and the blend of sex and crime made curious allusion to certain hit television dramas on Mediaset. The film, directed by Rocco Ricciardulli and produced as a star vehicle by actor Riccardo Scamarcio, feels like a kind of upscale version of mass-appeal products as the series *L'onore e il rispetto* (Mediaset, 2006–17). The film tells the story of Ciccio Paradiso, a farm worker who cannot tolerate exploitation, nor control his libido, falling in love with the wrong woman, the daughter of a cruel landowner. The initial idea was to delve into social themes as the mistreatment of agricultural workers and south–north migration (Finos 2021), but the activist element evaporated, the political dimension being limited to the central character's personal misfortunes (Birreci 2021).

Slightly detached from Italy's cinema and TV tradition was *Hit by a Wave*. This too was a story of ill-fated love in southern Italy, set in contemporary Palermo. The movie centres on two teenagers with a passion for sailing, and the main theme was the illness that befalls the young woman in the couple. The film belongs to a teen drama subgenre referred to somewhat disparagingly as *sick flicks* or *teen weepies*, blending teen humour and medical drama à la *The Fault in Our Stars* (Casella 2021; Moccagatta 2020). There is plenty of the warm, rich colour and lingering Sicilian landscapes, but the film's focus was on the expressivity and mental states of two ordinary-seeming, yet sensitive adolescents. *Sulla stessa onda* gained a modest yet positive audience score (78%) on Rotten Tomatoes, reflecting its presence, albeit minor, in the global distribution.

Things played out differently for the fifth film distributed under the agreement, *The Divine Ponytail*. Here, the link with tradition was clear from the choice of genre, a mainstream favourite:

the biopic of an iconic local figure (Buonanno 2012), namely the footballer Roberto Baggio, centring on his notorious penalty miss in the 1994 World Cup final. The film is a curious sport biopic, where the football field is seldom seen, with ‘intimate insights into a much-loved popular personality’ (Grasso 2021) and his attempt to find a balance among his own ambitions, others’ expectations and personal setbacks. What emerges is a sort of male melodrama (again), firmly focused on the star’s family history and his relationship with his father. The lack of a recognisable football setting that would satisfy fans is offset by an emphasis on local accents. Netflix’s export needs were distilled into ‘an international soundtrack that shoehorns hits from the time by Oasis and the Smashing Pumpkins into a story that they have precious little to do with’ (Sacchi 2021), evoking a very Anglo-American sense of nostalgia for the decade, along with sequences that flash up recognisable Italian landmarks like a night view of Florence. In this case, Netflix’s influence is also discerned in the attention to global sport events, a feature of many of its documentaries, and in the choice of a female director, Letizia Lamartire, or Fabula’s youthful production.

Still in the melodramatic vein is *My Brother, My Sister*, which, however, takes up the mixture with comedy and the focus on the vicissitudes of a dysfunctional family typical of Gabriele Muccino’s cinema. The film, produced by veteran popular cinema producer Marco Belardi, seems to fine-tune a formula previously tried and tested: familiar theme and representation of problems related to mental health, a mix of experienced (Claudia Pandolfi, Alessandro Preziosi) and younger actors (Ludovica Martino), a stereotyped depiction of the seascape and the Roman cityscape through aerial shots and long takes, and insistence on explanatory dialogues that make the outcome verbose and didactic (Sammarco 2021).

In sum, these films adapt Netflix’s localisation strategies to the Italian context. As happened elsewhere in Europe, the policy of co-producing with local players favoured genres, in a broad sense, like crime, drama and comedy, adapted based on a complex series of factors, ‘including the size of the market in terms of subscriber base, the strength of its media industry, the potential for export and transnational appeal, collaborations with local partners, and the type of investment

made' (Afilipoaie, Iordache and Raats 2021, 317). What counts more than the theoretical genre-defining elements are the textual echoes between films, as they all offer a landscape recognisable to overseas viewers, clearly been codified as Italian by television and cinema (Florence, Puglia, Sicily, the Romagna riviera, Naples, Rome) and presented to best effect with recurrent use of filming techniques calculated to build visual appeal (from the air using drones, long establishing shots and a warm, soft colour palette). Specific events recur with a regularity that would merit further analysis: four films, for example, contain a firework display, not always justified by the plot. The casting is familiar without being obvious, as with quality TV movies, with a blend of debutant, established and A-list actors. The choice of cast is the key to the localisation of these films, showing clearly how teen and young-adult audiences are the target.

This swift overview of the textual and genre features appears to affirm that these films have all the features of a TV movie, regardless of their actual quality, as di Chio confirms (2022). A curious symptom of this is that when promoting the films, Netflix emphasised that some were not being released in theatres, even though this was never originally planned – as if to add a patina of quality to the products, an attempt that did not prove entirely fruitful. The partial exception to all this discourse is the seventh film, *Yara*. The only one to have benefited from an albeit limited theatrical distribution, as well as the only one to have an experienced professional as Marco Tullio Giordana as director, *Yara* is produced by Taodue, a company owned by Mediaset, which at the beginning of the 2000s contributed to making the broadcaster a leader in Italian fiction. Thematic and stylistic continuities with the other films of the agreement are not lacking, but they seem to be pushed in a different direction. In *Yara*, too, there is the Italian landscape, but it is the foggy landscape of Lombardy (curiously enough, the film is shot around Rome). Here, too, there are the omnipresent drones: but their presence is thematised right from the opening sequence, as the point of view shot of a model aircraft leads the viewers to the discovery of the corpse of the girl who gives the film its title. No quality patina, no Mediterranean seascape, no troubled but stylish young people: the film is reminiscent from a visual point of view, restrained to the point of poverty, and in

the acting style, essential almost to the point of estrangement, of the fictional inserts of true crime shows such as *Deadly Women* (Discovery Channel, 2005-ongoing) or *Fear the Neighbor* (Investigation Discovery, 2014-ongoing). It is difficult to surmise a causal link between these characteristics, as the deliberately paratactic structure of the film (Ciofani 2022), and its success, but the fact is that *Yara* is the only title to have had a good circulation in Italy and abroad, leaving unexpected indications on the path to relevance for these films.

Conclusions: A Partial Success, and a Way to Understand Global Platform Localisation in Europe

By contextualising the Netflix–Mediaset film production agreement within the global platform's first forays into the Italian editorial and industrial scene, on one hand, and by dissecting the agreement's announcement, the production and distribution details, the textual and genre aspects of the seven titles produced and their muted reception, on the other, we can now address some specific features of this case history and account for its production logic, end products and the ways in which it was carried out. This can also help to further illuminate the clashes between global and national approaches and among cinema traditions, television requirements and the digital impetus.

First, in the usual combination of hype and reality that typifies the activities of the global platforms, in the dialogue between the need for a different kind of promotion *ex ante* and *ex post* and the practical implications of producing and distributing these films, the functional value of such an agreement emerges clearly. From the Mediaset perspective, di Chio admits as much: 'It was taken as a co-production agreement with a kind of strategic thrust to it, but it was primarily a very tactical thing, a way of sniffing each other out, with a dusting of communication thrown in' (2022). On the Netflix side, announcing and making films with Mediaset was a way to demonstrate its cultural and economic interest in investing in Italy, in getting properly involved in the local market with original Italian products, in expanding the national library without having to invest as much time and effort as if it had done so alone. Similarly, Mediaset could show it was a partner of interest

for Netflix, building a corporate promotional effort around it thanks to having provided a small number of titles at reasonable cost. Finally, in this win-win situation, the independent Italian producers could benefit from these resources at a time when the sector was in crisis, while positioning themselves as serious partners. But the missed opportunity lay primarily not in the products' underwhelming appeal but in the lack of a follow-up. Netflix consolidated its presence in Italy with a local office and an editorial policy, as Mediaset entered into more structured agreements with other on-demand partners like Prime Video. 'It was an initiative of limited scope, for a series of products that were not of the highest profile, at least in terms of their value for television – useful titles, decent mid-range products. It was an end unto itself, in a way, for it went no further; the partnership with Netflix did not continue' (di Chio 2022). The promotion and communication campaign aside, the deal worked essentially because both expectations and investments were modest. In the Mediaset manager's words, 'it was an initiative that was good for everyone without being pivotal for anyone' (di Chio 2022). This explains both the greater focus on the preliminaries than on the outputs and the reception that some months and years later the individual films received.

The way in which the seven products under this agreement were referred to also reveals a multifarious and contradictory process of negotiation that transcends their different genres. In promotional vein, they were presented as cinema, as 'films,' even though a release to theatres never happened and was never more than alluded to. The aim was to convey a sense of continuity and to imply quality and value. Netflix used the generic term 'originals,' embracing films, series and TV programmes, allowing its platform brand to mask the products' specific individual features. From the perspective of Mediaset and much of the production community, these titles were 'TV movies,' films made for the small screen. This category includes by default all straight-to-platform titles not receiving the kind of major promotional push deployed for releases to cinemas. Indeed, 'the industry has long used its "film TV" category to say that textually they are films but from a production, distribution, promotional standpoint they are not the same: they are not released to theatres. Contractually specified, this category remains a different kind of creature, without codified

windows even when the product quality is the same' (di Chio 2022). *Yara*, the last title to 'fill' the agreement, is a double exception (in its limited theatrical release as in its proximity to Italian TV fiction and true crime series) that has also marked the need to deeply change the original strategy, and go back to more traditional pathways to achieve relevance and success. In this vein, the Netflix–Mediaset agreement as a whole resulted in hybrid, slightly ill-defined products halfway between their fully cinematic ambition – supported by publicity especially at release time, yet not always reflected in the texts – and the world of 'imperfect' TV movies, made without proper planning for the needs of television schedules, digital libraries and their audiences.

This uncertain, floating nature is echoed in the films' fate in the second part of their life cycle, the television window on the Mediaset networks. This phase is still under way, but the initial evidence is already damning. Only two titles, *Sotto il sole di Riccione* and *Il divin codino*, have aired as announced on prime time on the group's flagship channel, Canale 5. The first film, broadcast on 21 September 2021 at the start of a new season, drew little more than 2 million viewers (a disappointing 10.46% share), well below the network's average ratings; the second one aired on October 18th, 2022 and received similar figures (2,033,000 viewers, 11.5% share), despite substantial promotion. Both films have not been repeated. The first screening of *Ultras*, on May 11th, 2021, at the end of the important 'guarantee period,' was on the least important of Mediaset's three mainstream networks, Retequattro, aimed at mature audiences, and at 1 AM. Rather than a slot to showcase the film, it seemed more like a way to fulfil an obligation; there were 105,000 viewers (a 4.06% share). A year later, the film has been shown another four times – in prime time (May 29th, 2022) and then in the morning (May 30th, June 18th and 19th) – on a minor themed channel, Cine34, a digital channel used to screen Italian films that the media group has bought with frequent reruns. Ratings remained low. On one hand, the Mediaset schedulers saw the film as ill-suited to prime time on prestigious channels; on the other, showing it when they did only made the film available to a tiny audience: a classic case of a self-fulfilling prophecy. The other films have not yet aired unencrypted on any Mediaset channel, even though the exploitation window opened

long ago, so this is another sign. Regardless of press conference announcements, Mediaset considers most of these films, with a potential future exception in the hopefully more popular *Yara*, as 'library material or filler for themed channels, things we buy to fill the schedules at reasonable cost. In general, we don't buy any films that are not for high-season prime time on the mainstream channels, unless explicitly as filler' (di Chio 2022). These Netflix-Mediaset films are precisely that: library titles to plug otherwise empty slots in the schedule, having fulfilled their promotional ends.

To conclude, this story is the small yet significant result of the lengthy negotiations and many different agendas behind the deal between two major television and digital players, their film production output, the encounter of the Italian audiovisual industry and a platform of global reach, and the seven films that came of it. What began with a fanfare and a big promotional push ended up with a handful of films that have often struggled to find a foothold in either the Netflix library or Mediaset linear schedules. What was presented as a major venture was in fact much smaller in scope, both economically and creatively. The films had independent journeys, before and after, had little in common and did nothing to build an identity. They soon fragmented into their various host identities, like 'Netflix originals' or 'Mediaset premieres' with no further mention of the agreement. The early promise of a pact able to give a new, fresh shape to Italian cinema production and distribution resulted in a more limited delivery of a bunch of sparse, discontinuous efforts, without a long-term plan. But it is precisely this failure that helps us to understand more about both the platforms' strategies when entering a new market and subsequently seeking to consolidate and find a balance, and the existing Italian audiovisual players' approach to newcomers, in a mix of enthusiasm and suspicion. *Al di là del risultato*, - 'regardless of the result' -, to use the working title of one of the films, what really counts is the journey there.

Looking at this deal in the broader context of European cinema and television, Netflix's use of Mediaset – and vice versa – is echoed across the continent by many partnerships, both short-lived and ongoing, between global platforms and European media conglomerates. As Meir has shown, Europe's biggest corporate players, such as Studiocanal (France), SF Studios (Scandinavia), and the

RTL Group (Germany), all have played vital and multifaceted roles in facilitating the production and distribution of European films and series by the global platforms, in so doing profiting from their arrival and in the best cases also assisting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) such as producers and distributors to bargain effectively with the giant US corporations (2021). From the perspective of the global platforms, these local collaborations have helped to accelerate production activity that otherwise may have taken much longer, given their relative ignorance of the existing creative landscapes of different European film and television markets – and this role has often been more important than the actual creative results of these collaborations. As this chapter has shown, Mediaset has played a crucial role as a mediator and accelerator between Netflix and the Italian audiovisual production sector, and this helped also to consolidate on a promotional level the role of the company as a corporate constituent of Italian media and an innovator. Understanding the true complexity of the many transitions of European cinema, television, and the unstable borders in between them, during the streaming era can thus only benefit from a close attention to the many acts of mediation, exchange and transformation that are found across Europe during this period.

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Endnotes

1 This chapter has been discussed and devised jointly by the two authors. The introductory section and ‘Consolidated Genres: Exploring the Films from the Netflix–Mediaset Pact’ are written by Paolo Noto; ‘The Announcements and Beyond. The Netflix–Mediaset Movie Pact’ and ‘A Partial Success: Conclusions’, by Luca Barra.