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Suburra. Blood on Rome. Directed by Michele Placido, Andrea Molaioli, and Giuseppe Capotondi. Italy. Cattelya, Rai Fiction, Netflix. Two Seasons, Eighteen Episodes, 2017 -.

Netflix came out in Italy on October 22. Sollima's 2015 film *Suburra* premiered in theaters on October 14 and then streamed on Netflix on the 22nd of the same month, in tandem with a marketing campaign promoting the series *Suburra. La serie/ Suburra. Blood on Rome*. This innovative marketing strategy amped up prior to the premier of the series and focused on the central trio composed of Aureliano Adami (Alessandro Borghi), Alberto "Spadino" Aneleti (Giacomo Ferrara), and Gabriele "Lele" Marchilli (Eduardo Valdarnini). Narrative foregrounds in particular Aureliano, most likely for Borghi's blossoming star status, as well as the homosocial bond between Aureliano and Spadino, a bond that intensifies throughout Season One as Spadino's attraction to Aureliano intensifies. *Suburra* is Italy's first made-for-Netflix original production and it premiered globally on Netflix on October 6, 2017, and the second season dropped on February 22, 2019. The series is a prequel to the eponymous 2015 film (Stefano Sollima) and the 2013 novel (Giovanni De Cataldo and Carlo Bonini), takes place in 2008, focusing on the machinations around a corrupt land deal in the seaside town of Ostia. However, the series' main narrative focus is on three young men as they bond and clash and bond again, and as they come of age in the streets of Rome.

In what follows, I address how, in the Italian mainstream television tradition, *Suburra's* representation of a gay male character is pioneering. With its overt queer subtext, *Suburra* is novel in the representation of sex and gender on Italian small screens and appeals to viewers inside and outside of Italy. In particular, Spadino represents the first ever gay sympathetic perpetrator protagonist on Italian small screens, and he is represented in mostly positive terms that prompt viewers to root for him (this is especially the case in the first season). Before Spadino, most gay characters on Italian television were cast in minor roles, and were represented in negative terms, or they are represented as closeted or under-developed (the latter is the case, for example, with *Romanzo criminale. La serie*, 2008-2010). Instead, Spadino is a central protagonist with a fully developed arch. He suffers, loves, cries, and is funny and good looking. Moreover, unlike the transgender character Luca (Susy Di Benedetto) from *Gomorra. La serie* (2014 -), Spadino is not killed off. He possesses many of the same qualities – namely, charisma and craftiness – that might prompt viewers to positively align with other feature criminal protagonists in Italian and American serial television, such as Ciriaco De Marzio (Marco D'Amore) from *Gomorra. La serie*, or Don Draper (Jon Hamm) from *Mad Men* (2007-2015).

On social media, Netflix is quite open to foregrounding Spadino's sexuality, and drawing attention to the Spadino/Aureliano bond. On Valentine's Day, 2019, for examples, Netflix posted a pseudo-poster to the series' Facebook page that is modelled after publicity material for the queer coming-of-age film *Call Me By Your Name* (Luca Guadagnino, 2017). The poster features Spadino and Aureliano staring out towards viewers under the title *Chiamame cor Nome Tuo, Aureliá/Call Me By Your Name, Aureliá* (in Roman dialect; Figure 1). Citations on the poster include one by the fake newspaper *Il Postino* which reads "La storia d'amore che è riuscita a commuovere anche i cuori più duri/The love story that succeeded in moving even the coldest hearts" and *OstiaToday* declares that it is "Quasi mejo di una carbonara/Almost better than a Carbonara." This last reference recalls episode 1.6 where the pair's homoerotic bond is made manifest when they share a thermal bath and rub mud on each other's backs, then dine on a plate of *aglio, olio, e peperoncino*. Netflix also features several promotional videos, and there are several

fan videos – from fans in Italy and internationally – featuring the pair, and user comments around them are uniformly positive.



Fig. 1 Post to Netflix Italia's Facebook page.

<https://www.facebook.com/SuburraNetflix/photos/a.1373870779397541/1998791346905478/?type=3&theater>. All images are reproduced for the sole purpose of scholarly discussion.

Like other recent Italian programs featured on Sky, HBO, and Netflix, *Suburra* appeals to viewers both inside and outside of Italy. This broad fanbase is due to the series' focus on the Italian "dark heart" narrative – which has a rich history in Italian film and television. Plotlines develop the bromances and romantic lives of the three central antiheroes in a format that boasts high production values, star actors (such as Borghi), a contemporary soundtrack, and filming locations in many of Rome's most recognizable areas. A review of over two thousand posts, fan blogs, and fan videos relating to the first season reveals that fans worldwide root for Spadino and endorse the Spadino/Aureliano bond, which opens up interesting channels for a more revolutionary representation, and reception practice, of the series' queer position. For example, one user comments: "bellissimo! Adoro questi due, non ci sono parole per descrivere quanto li ami / beautiful! I adore these two, there are no words to describe how much I love them."¹

However, the second season feels much more overtly political, and presents some challenges with regards to the series' potentially progressive depiction of gay and queer characters and themes. Included is a focal plotline surrounding illegal migrants and extreme right-wing politics, which lends a contemporary feel to the series considering current debates in Italy about the refugee crisis, and legislation around it. In addition, interpersonal relationships are minimized

¹ User comment to: BloodlessAgain. 2017. "Aureliano + Spadino shining lights are placed in the dark." *YouTube*, October 11. Accessed December 14 April 11, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d4llp_qcivE.

(in part because Season One saw the killing off of the trios' fathers, or father figures). Two storylines that run throughout Season Two also problematize the series' earlier enlightened position with regards to queer and gay sexuality: 1) Spadino's wife Angelica (Carlotta Antonelli) is pregnant; 2) Spadino has a covert relationship with a deejay who pushes Spadino to go public, with devastating results.

Much more so than in Season One, in Season Two, Lele (the third member of the group) is less connected to the Spadino/Aureliano dyad, where the pair frequently spends time together planning and plotting, and talking about life and love. Early in the season Aureliano swiftly befriends Spadino after their violent breakup at the end of 1.10. Aureliano's former homophobia vanishes, and, after Lele's suicide in 2.8, Aureliano tells Spadino that he loves him with "ti voglio bene," an expression that underlines an emotional, over an erotic, bond (Figure 2). The earlier, and palpable, sexual tension between the two (or at least Spadino's lust for Aureliano) vanishes as their relationship transitions to one of a homosocial bond common in many crime thrillers. When Spadino tells Aureliano that he is expecting a child and that he is seeing someone on the side, Aureliano is visibly happy, and Spadino is elated when his family predicts that he will have a boy, thus continuing the family lineage. Episode 2.5 ends with Spadino and Aureliano shopping for a crib for the Anacleti heir, a humorous and endearing plot point that inscribes normativity into their relationship, while enforcing the position that *they* will never overstep the boundary of friendship (Figure 3).



Fig. 2 Still from *Suburra: Blood on Rome* (2.8) All images are reproduced for the sole purpose of scholarly discussion.



Fig. 3 Still from *Suburra: Blood on Rome* (2.5) All images are reproduced for the sole purpose of scholarly discussion.

Interestingly, only one sex scene is visualized in Season Two. It is a very explicit encounter between Spadino and his boyfriend in 2.1; it is implied that Aureliano has sex with new love interest Nadia Gravoni (Federica Sabatini) but viewers are only privy to a pre-coital kiss. Spadino's boyfriend appears in a few more scenes during the season, when he asks Spadino to attend a concert with him, or shows up at the Anacleti compound demanding to see his beloved. This overstepping raises eyebrows, and gives Spadino's enemies exactly what they need to blackmail him into relinquishing power. Some minutes before the season's conclusion, Spadino learns that his lover had been kidnapped, and, whilst tortured had revealed the truth of their relationship. Spadino, however, chooses without difficulty and stabs his boyfriend in the neck, holding him as he bleeds to death. A few minutes later, Spadino and Aureliano unite to burn Lele's body on a funeral pyre. Lyrics from theme song "Alti e bassi" by Brokenspeakers – "il giorno che vale compare stamme accanto te/on a tough day, buddy stand by me" – play, reinforcing the homosocial bond. This bond is further bolstered by the introduction of neofascist radio announcer Adriano (Jacopo Venturiero) who, minutes before the season concludes, offers to join forces to achieve power and ensure just vendetta. This reconfiguration of the triumvirate recalls contemporary politics, in particular events by the Lega that have persecuted queerness in Italy. *Suburra. Blood on Rome* is a welcome addition to Italian television programs engaging with gay cultures and featuring a gay character who is constructed to warrant viewer sympathies. Ultimately however, although *Suburra* is innovative in its treatment of queer and gay themes and characters, the series concludes with an emphasis on a gang mentality predicated on a homosocial pact that violently excludes queer desire.

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