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Baby. Directed by Andrea De Sica, Anna Negri (Season One, Episodes 4-5), and Letizia Lamartire (Season Two, Episodes 3-4). Screenplay by GRAMS (Giacomo Durzi, Eleonora Trucchi, Marco Raspanti, Antonio Le Fosse, Isabella Aguilar, Re Salvador, and Giacomo Mazzariol). Italy. Fabula Pictures, Netflix. Two Seasons, Twelve Episodes, 2018-.

Baby, Italy's second Netflix Original series following *Suburra – La serie* / *Suburra: Blood on Rome* (2017-), debuted on Netflix four years after the now infamous “Baby Squillo” scandal—upon which the series is loosely based—made headlines in Italy. The case concerned a sex-trafficking ring set up and run by two young women, referred to in legal documents only as Agnese (age 14) and Angela (age 15), who professed to have taken up the trade as a way to make “easy money” and buy designer clothes, drugs, and expensive gadgets.¹ Such motivations code sex work as an alluring occupation, one granting access to all the accoutrements of an upper-class lifestyle. At the same time, these comments immediately imbue the series with a postfeminist bent which would seem to situate the girls, and hence escorts or prostitutes in general, as “consumers who can ‘have it all.’”² In fact, it was likely such sentiments that led the National Center on Sexual Exploitation (NCSE) to speak out against *Baby*, even before its release on November 30, 2018. In a letter dated January 11, 2018, the NCSE argued that the series “will normalize ... sexually exploitative attitudes,” “eroticize the exploitive system of prostitution,” and “glamoriz[e] ... sexual commodification” (1, 2, 3).³ Despite the series’ “based in reality”-storyline and the self-proclaimed consumerism of Agnese and Angela, in what follows, I discuss how *Baby* resists the tendency to normalize, eroticize, and glamorize sexual exploitation. The series accomplishes this by focusing on the power of the female-female, or femme-social, bond; by subverting attention on the girls’ consumerism; and by resisting the onscreen depiction of actual sex work.

Rather than situate Chiara Altieri (Benedetta Porcaroli) and Ludovica “Ludo” Storti (Alice Pagani), the series’ central protagonists, as passive victims of sex work, *Baby* proposes sex work as a form of actively exerting power and control—over their families, their romantic relationships, and their male clients. Indeed, the series is rather progressive, not only because it does not condemn Chiara and Ludo for their use of sexuality, but also because it positions the femme-social (as opposed to the homosocial bond, which is inherently gendered as exclusively male-male), as a means of fending off the male threat that would seem to marginalize women and situate them only as sexual objects. The focus on Chiara and Ludo’s rapport is a positive shift within teen media where girls are notoriously sidelined and used to facilitate the male coming-of-age experience, only to be subsequently ejected from male-centric narratives. At the same time, the series opens up a space wherein female sexuality is expected and accepted, rather than condemned. As such, *Baby* is a welcome addition to the corpus of teen media that has, until recently, focused solely on male adolescence and its coming of age.

The relationship between young women is a central part of the promotion of *Baby*, being marketed on the back of its two lead characters, Chiara and Ludo. The original poster for the series depicts Chiara gazing straight out at the viewer, a finger to her lips. Chiara’s nose lines up with that of Ludo, viewed in profile, creating a type of optical illusion. The act of shushing, accomplished by both

¹ See Emily Tannenbaum, “The True Story Behind Netflix’s ‘Baby’ Is Even More Disturbing Than the Show,” *Cosmopolitan*, December 3, 2018, www.cosmopolitan.com/entertainment/tv/a25383982/netflix-baby-true-story/. See also Mollie Mitchell, “Baby on Netflix: What is the Baby Squillo case?,” *Express*, November 29, 2018, www.express.co.uk/showbiz/tv-radio/1052045/Baby-Netflix-plot-true-story-what-is-the-Baby-Squillo-case-scandal-Italy-Rome.

² Dana Renga, “Italian Teen Film and the Female Auteur,” in *New Visions of the Child in Italian Cinema*, ed. Danielle Hipkins and Roger Pitt (New York: Peter Lang, 2014), 310.

³ See NCSE President & Chief Executive Officer Patrick Trueman’s January 2018 letter to corporate Netflix officers, available in its entirety on the NCSE website: endsexualexploitation.org/wp-content/uploads/Netflix_Baby_Sign-On-Letter_FINAL_01-11-18-1-1.pdf.

protagonists simultaneously, directly links the girls to the series' tagline, "Can you keep a secret?" visible on Ludo's cheek (Figure 1). The image emphasizes the bond between Chiara and Ludo and, at the same time, it creates an apparent power dynamic, wherein the girls are knowing secret keepers and the viewer is an unknowing truth seeker.

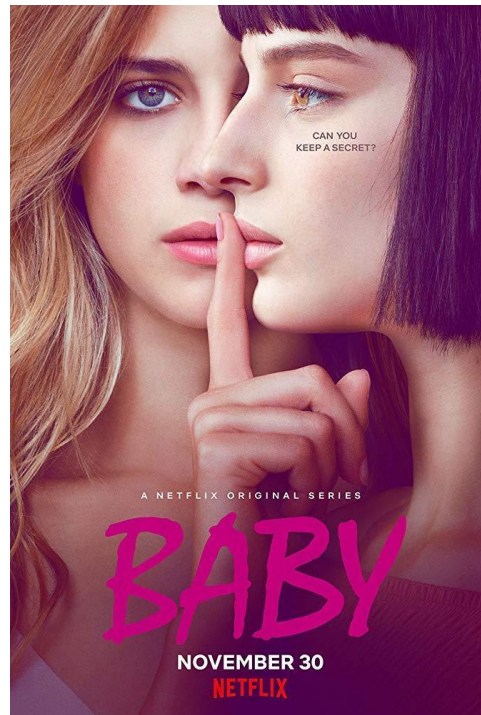


Fig. 1 Original poster for *Baby*.

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7645192/>. All images are reproduced for the sole purpose of scholarly discussion.

Power structures are inherent to sex trafficking as women who participate in sex work almost always have a trafficker that takes most of their money. Therefore, as the NCSE rightly concludes, "prostitution is not empowering" (2).⁴ Yet, the structure of control depicted in the series' initial poster, wherein Chiara and Ludo hold power over the viewer, is central to *Baby* and this becomes obvious throughout both seasons. For example, although the girls are initially enslaved to Saverio (Paolo Calabresi), who functions as their trafficker, by the end of the first season, Saverio has been killed off and the girls take possession of his cell phone, hence gaining access to his clientele. In this way, the girls are no longer bound to their trafficker and are not only able engage in sex work on their terms, but also to keep all of the profits from doing so. They maintain this power and control early on in the second season, but eventually lose it, becoming powerless for the remainder of the season. Ultimately, however, they regain their dominance in the final episode by blackmailing Brando (Mirko Trovato), by way of Brando's father (Massimiliano Tortora). Considering that this final consolidation of power is accomplished by recording Brando's father engaged with a fellow prostitute suggests that, at least to some extent, prostitution is empowering within the narrative context of *Baby*.

However alluring this sense of power might be, it remains clear that prostitution is not an inherently glamorous profession. One way in which the series deglamorizes prostitution is by taking focus away from consumerism, the primary motivation driving Agnese and Angela. Although Chiara

⁴ See Trueman, endsexualexploitation.org/wp-content/uploads/Netflix_Baby_Sign-On-Letter_FINAL_01-11-18-1-1.pdf.

and Ludo relish in the extravagant trappings they are afforded through their participation in sex work, moments of consumerism shore up or complicate the femme-social bond. The only shopping trip depicted in the two seasons, for example, comes about because not only has Simonetta (Isabella Ferrari) once again given away money meant for school tuition, but she has given it to her boyfriend, a man that has broken up the mother-daughter bond. The trip itself, on the other hand, further emphasizes Chiara and Ludo's relationship, particularly through their first purchase: an oversized teddy bear. The affective baggage of the big stuffed animal as a romantic gesture is not lost on the viewer, who can see in this moment a possible instance of femme-eroticism (in contrast to the homoeroticism that so often characterizes teen media). Though homoeroticism is a threat that must be staved off by monogamous heterosexuality, erotic desire between women seems more fluid, and thus, more acceptable, at least within the world of *Baby*.

Despite its source material, the first season of *Baby*—the season which initially concerned the NCSE—does not dedicate as much screen time to actual sex work as one might expect. Although Ludo meets with a dentist a couple times, their encounters are relatively benign, resulting in nothing more than some shared meals, conversation, and a dental exam. And, while Chiara does get paid for having intercourse with a client, this occurs just once and she only accepts payment at the client's insistence that “money helps set clear boundaries.” Chiara's intent to not be paid for sex suggests an attempt to open up a space for female sexual pleasure and desire that has heretofore been closed off in recent teen media. At the same time, the aversion to depicting sex work, together with scenes such as those with the aforementioned teddy bear, assist in highlighting the importance of girlhood and female friendship to female coming-of-age.

Sex work becomes more central in the second season of *Baby*, specifically through the addition of a more experienced escort, Natalia (Denise Capezza). Whereas the first season fails to depict (the harsh realities of) prostitution, the second season exposes the dangers—rather than the glamor—of sex work: Natalia is threatened by a well-known politician; Ludo is nearly raped and subsequently stalked by this same politician and she is likewise molested by one of her teachers. Chiara is caught in her lies about Saverio and is also blackmailed by a scheming Brando, who catches her in the act with a high-profile client. Although such encounters are connected to prostitution, history would prove that such threats are not exclusive to sex work, but are instead a common threat to women. Thus, when Chiara is able to blackmail Brando—with the help of a fellow prostitute—at the end of the second season, the series situates female solidarity as an effective tool in casting off oppression.

Whereas female characters in Italian teen media are often subsumed into male-centric narratives, becoming strategically placed sexual objects available for adolescent males' consumption, this is not the case for *Baby*, where Chiara and Ludo's experiences remain the series' focus. Though the third season has yet to be released, it is clear that Chiara and Ludo are not condemned for the active use of their sexuality; rather, the series provides a positive outlook—or as Chiara puts it, “the best possible world”—for the girls' shared future.

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