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Zero. Directed by Ivan Silvestrini (episodes 6-8), Margherita Ferri (episodes 4-5), Paola Randi (episodes 1 & 3), and Mohamed Hossameldin (episode 2). Screenplay by Antonio Dikele Distefano, Carolina Cavalli, Lisandro Monaco, Massimo Vavassori, Stefano Voltaggio, and Menotti (Roberto Marchionni). Italy. Fabula Pictures and Red Joint, Netflix. One Season, Eight Episodes, 2021–.

Zero, the sixth made-in-Italy series for Netflix, aired internationally on April 21, 2021. Part superhero fantasy, part coming-of-age story, the eight-episode series situates itself among other recent Italian teen dramas exploring the topics of sexuality, friendship, family relationships, and identity in contemporary Italy (i.e. *Summertime*, 2020–; *Baby*, 2018–; *SKAM Italia*, 2018–). Yet *Zero* is also groundbreaking for its authentic representation of diversity in Italian media: it is the first Italian television series to feature a predominantly Black cast, and, with the exception of season 4 of *SKAM Italia*, *Zero* is the first Italian television series to portray the complex dynamics of an increasingly multicultural Italy from the perspective of second-generation Italians.¹

The main storyline of *Zero* revolves around Omar (Giuseppe Dave Seke), a young man of Senegalese heritage who resides in public housing in Barrio, Milan with his father (Alex Van Damme) and teen sister, Awa (Virginia Diop). Omar, nicknamed Zero, is an unlikely hero. The timid protagonist prefers solitary hobbies—designing manga with Black characters—to socializing with peers. In his capacity as a pizza deliveryman, Omar is largely ignored by the wealthy white customers he serves. All the same, adhering to conventions of the superhero genre, the otherwise ordinary young man possesses an extraordinary superpower. When Omar’s emotional temperature rises—in moments of fear, sadness, or love—he vanishes. A chance encounter with Sharif (Haroun Fall)—the “king of Barrio” and the outspoken leader of a crew of young Black Italians—sets into motion Omar’s transformation from reticent loner to community-oriented do-gooder. Struck by the utility of invisibility, Sharif recruits Omar to join his crew and protect the Barrio neighborhood from greedy real estate developers.

Zero purposefully aims to strike a balance between commercial success and social commentary. The television series draws inspiration from Antonio Dikele Distefano’s 2018 novel, *Non ho mai avuto la mia età* (*I Was Never My Age*). The twenty-eight year-old Italian author of Angolan descent, who made his debut in screenwriting with this series, is best known for publishing stories that explore the lives of second-generation children born in Italy (*Fuori piove, dentro pure, passo a prenderti?*, 2015; *Prima o poi ci abbracceremo*, 2016; *Chi sta male non lo dice*, 2017). Notwithstanding his personal and professional interest in historically marginalized communities, Dikele Distefano has repeatedly rejected the label of Black writer, and he has dismissed reviewers’ notion that his novels focus entirely on issues of discrimination and racism. Instead, in keeping with his vision, the award-winning author, along with the other co-writers (Carolina Cavalli, Lisandro Monaco, Massimo Vavassori, and Stefano Voltaggio) and creator (Menotti) of *Zero*, endeavored to produce a series that captivates viewers in such a way that “the characters’ racial identity becomes irrelevant.”² This approach—in particular Dikele Distefano’s ability to “convey the universal sense of insecurity and invisibility”—appealed to Netflix’s manager for Italian television series, Ilaria Castiglioni.³ Paraphrasing Castiglioni’s perspective, *Zero* carries out the

¹ The female lead in *Summertime* (Netflix Italia, 2 seasons) is biracial. However, this television series places little emphasis on her multicultural heritage.

² Elisabetta Povoledo, “Netflix to Debut Italy’s First TV Show With a Majority Black Cast, *The New York Times*, April 16, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/16/arts/television/zero-netflix.html>.

³ Sylvia Poggioli, “In New Italian Netflix Series ‘Zero,’ a Black Hero Makes Invisibility His Superpower,” NPR- *All Things Considered*, May 27, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/05/27/997534900/in-new-italian-netflix-series-zero-a-black-hero-makes-invisibility-his-superpowe>.

streaming service's ongoing objective of producing content that entertains, but also better represents Italy's changing society.⁴

On one hand, *Zero* upholds Netflix's mission to craft a universally accessible narrative. The series is not an overt criticism of struggles encountered exclusively by Black Italians. Omar's superpower, much like his exclusion from dominant society, conveys the feelings of vulnerability shared by young adults facing an uncertain future in Italy and globally. A broad public can relate to the particular challenges that arise in a single-parent home, including the lead character's desire to establish independence from his unsentimental father (episodes 1-4, 7-8). Spectators can also empathize with Omar's insecurities about friendship and dating, and, more precisely, the young man's preoccupation with finding his place within the Barrio crew (episodes 2-8), as well as the anxieties he experiences when pursuing Anna (Beatrice Grannò), his first serious love interest (episodes 1-8).

Conversely, be it explicitly or implicitly, the subject of ethno-racial difference is interwoven throughout the entire series. On multiple occasions, Black Italians are inaccurately profiled as delinquents and criminals by their white counterparts. Sharif and friends continuously experience negative run-ins with police officers. They are unjustly accused of vandalizing their own neighborhood and of decapitating an "immigrant statue" (episodes 2, 5). Furthermore, during a celebration hosted at Anna's luxury high rise, an inebriated party-goer mistakes Omar—the only Black guest—for a drug dealer (episode 1). Omar's disillusionment is revealed via voice-over narration, a technique used effectively throughout the series: "Lo spacciatore, il vu cumprà, il ladro, quello che ti serve i drink. Cos'è meglio? Essere scambiato per quello che non sei, o non essere visto affatto?" (A drug dealer, a cheap street vendor, a thief, a waiter. Would you rather be labeled as something you are not? Or just not be seen at all?).

In addition to these glaring instances of stereotyping and racism, more covert examples of discriminatory practices against second-generation Italians loom just beneath the surface. Drawing a connection to this issue's theme of "intersectionality," the overarching plot points of gentrification and socioeconomic disparity that emerge in *Zero* interrogate the (supposedly) correlative relation between race and capital. To be sure, these intersecting social conditions are, in fact, well documented examples of systemic inequalities that perpetuate racism. Distinctions between the neglected Barrio neighborhood and Milan's more affluent districts are conveyed visually. Employing his signature, highly stylized filming technique, expert cinematographer Daniele Cipri juxtaposes tight interiors and unkempt exteriors of Barrio's urban buildings with panning shots of Milan's futuristic, vertically expansive business sector. To provide one final example, we can consider that it is Omar's wealthy, white love interest who naively blames the Barrio residents for their precarious circumstances (episode 1). Citing the "theory of broken windows," Anna essentially claims that individuals should take on the responsibility of improving their environment. She speaks from a position of unchecked privilege, blissfully unaware of the substantial power that profit-oriented industrialists, like her father, hold over vulnerable communities and residents.

A few shortcomings with the series' structure, screenwriting, and genre merit a quick mention. Each twenty-or-so-minute episode is punctuated by frequent flashforwards and flashbacks. This technique works well in the first episode, when key elements of the central storyline are introduced. However, it is better suited for a full-length action feature. Constant disruptions to the linear timeline result in a disjointed narrative, and issues with screenwriting and pacing further compound the series' struggle to establish continuity among episodes. The screenwriters, perhaps eager to experiment with the superhero genre, integrate multiple plot twists and a handful of ancillary storylines. Yet, due in part to the short length and segmentation of each episode, these narrative strategies prove unsuccessful, as they are ultimately unexplained, underdeveloped, or abandoned without clear

⁴ Sylvia Poggioli, "In New Italian Netflix Series 'Zero,' a Black Hero Makes Invisibility His Superpower."

resolution (i.e., the origin of Omar's superpower, the interference of technology on his ability to turn invisible, and the mystery surrounding his mother's absence). By consequence of the action-packed writing, character development also suffers. With the exception of Sharif, members of the Barrio crew—each of whom is the fulcrum of an unexplored subplot—come across as static and superficial. Omar's sister Awa does take on a larger role during the final part of the series (episodes 6-8). However, the revelation that she, too, wields a superpower feels unnecessarily forced and rushed (episode 8).

To conclude, let's return to my opening point about the revolutionary achievements of *Zero*, namely, the portrayal of positive aspects of ethno-racial diversity in Italian media. Firstly, the cast is largely comprised of first and second-generation Italians, which creates a much-needed avenue of representation for the country's increasingly diverse population. Next, in addition to drawing on the authentic voice and literary acumen of Dikele Distefano, this television series casts a spotlight on an up-and-coming Italian-Egyptian filmmaker. Mohamed Hossameldin, who has written and shot three shorts on immigrants, second-generation Italians, and social outcasts (*Yousef*, 2018; *Il passo*, 2017; *Sotto terra*, 2017), directed the second episode of *Zero*. Lastly, the series' soundtrack—praised in numerous Italian and English language reviews—includes a mix of rap, trap, and pop music by Italian and international artists. Two tracks by Mahmood, a performer of Sardinian and Egyptian origin and winner of the 2019 Sanremo Music Festival, are featured: "Barrio" (2019) and "Zero" (2021). In sum, despite flaws in screenwriting and structure, *Zero* deserves recognition for its engagement with critical social issues of present-day Italy. The series signals a fundamental first step in the campaign for authentic representations of diversity in Italian media as spearheaded by activist and documentary filmmaker Fred Kuwornu. *Zero* is also appropriate for undergraduate courses on Black Italy, and it would be of great interest to scholars in Italian Studies and related disciplines whose research centers on race, postcolonialism, and immigration.

A second season of *Zero* has yet to be greenlit. Nevertheless, given the unresolved plot points and open ending, it is evident that Menotti—the series' creator and co-screenwriter of the superhero action film *Lo chiamavano Jeeg Robot* (*They Call Me Jeep*, Gabriele Mainetti, 2015)—has ample material to explore in future episodes.

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