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Abstract: In this brief piece we discuss the role of collaboration in our research project, *A Girls’ Eye View*, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) in the UK in 2021. The project is both the result and the ongoing story of multiple collaborations, mostly all-female collaborations, between academic scholars of different generations, schools, teachers, students, and female professionals in the field of Italian media productions. The main objective is to understand the relationship (if there is one) between Italian TV and cinema content and young female audiences. At the same time, this research aims to fill the significant gap in girlhood studies in Italy, where public reflection and debate about female media representations and women’s conditions are needed as fundamental keystones of any feminist project. Finally, the research aims to create a bridge between the media industry and young female audiences, starting from the shortage of female gazes behind the camera in the Italian cinema and TV industry and the need for a new pact between producers and consumers. In our first published written reflection on the project we discuss how it has been shaped by changes, chances, and challenges, and how we have addressed those as a team.

Keywords: Collaboration, girlhood, feminism, cinema, television

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On Female Collaborations Within the Frame of Audience Research: *A Girls' Eye View* Between Changes, Chances, and Challenges

ROMANA ANDÒ, DANIELLE HIPKINS

Introduction

In 2017 we were asked to write a piece on Italian girlhood for this journal. Until then we had not been aware of each other's work; however, starting from different perspectives (textual analysis and audience reception) but with similar research goals, we began to collaborate.

This research project, *A Girls' Eye View*, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) in the UK in 2021 is both the result and the ongoing story of multiple collaborations, mostly all-female collaborations, between academic scholars of different generations, schools, teachers, students, and female professionals in the field of Italian media productions. The main objective is to understand the relationship (if there is one) between Italian TV and cinema content and young female audiences. At the same time, this research aims to fill the significant gap in girlhood studies in Italy, where public reflection and debate about female media representations and women's conditions are needed as fundamental keystones of any feminist project. Finally, the research aims to create a bridge between the media industry and young female audiences, starting from the shortage of female gazes behind the camera in the Italian cinema and TV industry and the need for a new pact between producers and consumers.

In 2019, when we were planning the project, we asked a group of Italian young women, aged 18–25, what they thought of screen representations of girlhood produced in Italy. “Where is the product for us?” the group asked. A second group, of girls aged 14–16, took it for granted that “their” product was in fact mainly US-produced film and television, and that Italian cinema and television were at most “for their parents.” Where indeed are the Italian-made products that address and depict younger women? Over the last decade a series of new conditions in both media production and consumption make this a timely moment for the Italian film industry to build these audiences. Whilst Italian audiences have always valued US products, in the early 1950s young women were a strong element of Italian cinema's address.¹ Over the decade, however, it turned towards male audiences, and stayed there.

The first promising shift in this scenario is related to the emergence of the Over The Top television services (such as Netflix and Amazon Prime Video) within the Italian media industry. These platforms are currently rebuilding what we can call teen TV and cinema, thanks to a series of quality TV shows and films that resonate powerfully with adolescents worldwide. New targeted products, perfectly recognizable in terms of aesthetics and themes, have rekindled the attention of an audience who had already left the biggest screens in favour of smartphones and social media entertainment. Shows like *Sex Education*, *13 Reasons Why*, *Stranger Things*, *The end of the f***ing world*, *The 100s*, *Shadow Hunters*, as well as films like *The Kissing Booth* and *Tall Girl* have created new tastes and consumption needs among adolescents. Moreover, as platform services have blurred the boundaries between film and television, in terms of both content and production quality, and shifted traditional power hierarchies, they are opening up new opportunities to address young women.²

This is also taking place in the Italian context. There, recent television series like *L'amica geniale* / *My Brilliant Friend* (RAI/HBO, 2018–), *Baby* (Netflix original, 2018–2021), *We Are Who We Are* (SKY, 2020), and *SKAM Italia* (Timvision/Netflix, 2018–), as well as films like *18 regali* / *18 Presents* (Amato, 2020), *Sulla stessa onda* / *Caught by a Wave* (Netflix, 2021), and *Anni da cane* / *Dog Years* (Amazon original,

¹ Morreale, *Così piangevano: Il cinema melò nell'Italia degli anni cinquanta*.

² Buccifero, “Women and Netflix: Disrupting Traditional Boundaries Between Television and Film.”

2021) have started to address and attract younger female audiences. Considering the growing attention invested by the media industries in reaching this target, we started this project to understand the extent to which those cinema and television products recognize and represent girls effectively, triggering engagement or even identification. In other words, this project aims to contribute in a timely fashion to a new inclusivity for the Italian media industry. It aims to re-engage the film and television industry with female audiences, and female audiences with Italian cinema and TV, around the question of girlhood, using a feminist, intergenerational perspective that brings girls' and women's voices to the foreground.

For this reason, in its first phase, our analysis of Italian cinema and television will integrate the responses of Italian girls (aged 14 to 18), drawing upon data generated through individual interviews, screenings and focus group discussion. Our project will also set young women's consumption of Italian products in the context of their broader patterns of media consumption, and ask just how important Italian productions are, or could be, to their process of growing up. If they do not perceive them as relevant, why is that? When it is, how do they respond to them?

At the same time, this project will provide us with an incredible chance to give girlhood studies more visibility than in the past, within the Italian context. The following reflections from the two lead investigators on the project concern this first phase, as we reflect upon how, in this broader context of change, chances and challenges, we have experienced the first year of our collaboration, and how might learn from this as we develop the project over the next two years.

Changes: Increased online activity

In the process of investigating girls' interests, choices, tastes, and habits in terms of media consumption through interviews and focus groups, the number of research questions has increased unexpectedly. This increase is driven by the specific characteristics of this generation, which we discovered as soon as we started the research. Firstly, this generation grew up with media content that has addressed the idea of female empowerment since childhood.³ Secondly, they are living their adolescence online, getting in touch with new kinds of content (social media entertainment), new protagonists (online microcelebrities); and new social platforms on which to search for identification and negotiate their representation.⁴ Finally, they are able to draw on a huge range of international media content, in particular TV shows that open up their perspectives beyond the boundaries of Italian culture and society.

From the outset the shape of our project, originally developed in 2018–2019, has been changed by COVID-19. The pandemic began the month after the project was submitted for approval, and we did not expect a project that involved so much fieldwork to obtain funding at this time. When it did, we realized that the intervening months that had made Zoom or Google Meet part of everyday life would help us. We have therefore conducted the majority of the 70 interviews carried out so far via these teleconference systems. This has obviously been easier logistically and has enabled us to widen our scope (our project so far involves six schools in different regions of Italy: Lombardy, Friuli Venezia Giulia, Abruzzo, Lazio, Calabria, Sicily) since all the preliminary meetings, as well as almost all the interviews with the girls, conducted during school time, were managed online.

Moreover, the increased familiarity with modes of online interaction that has arisen with Covid-19, in particular the use of survey links, has also increased the possibility of engaging with our

³ Banet-Weiser, *Kids Rule! Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship*.

⁴ Twenge, *Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious*; Giles, *Twenty-first Century Celebrity*; Andò, "The Ordinary Celebrity."

participants prior to meeting them in a variety of ways. One method that has worked very well so far as a form of engagement has been asking them to vote for the first film we screen from a list of trailers on our site [A Girls' Eye View](https://agirlseyeview.exeter.ac.uk/it/).⁵ This has had the interesting result that, even when they do not like the film, they seem to take more ownership over how the project unfolds.

Serendipities often emerge from this blend of student and researcher choices. In one case the viewing of one episode of *L'amica geniale / My Brilliant Friend* (series selected by them, episode selected by us) and *Cosmonauta / Cosmonaut* (Nicchiarelli, 2009), selected by us, stimulated interesting reflections on both content and aspects of the media production. Starting from the latter point, what emerged from the debate was a general perceived distance from both products in terms of the storytelling rhythm. The media competencies acquired by teen audiences thanks to the continuous overexposure to international media content over the last few years, have created specific expectations in terms of television and cinema-quality standards. We refer to the so-called “complex TV” which is based on engaging story-worlds that use complex techniques of narrative discourse, by playing with temporality, building complex characters and incorporating transmedia.⁶ The attention to these aspects allowed us to understand how the difference between the story and the storytelling is important for the young audience. As a matter of fact, even if they could appreciate the story of the protagonists of the presented case studies, and they were invited to focus on it, they rejected the way the story was told. This was not only related to the historical context in which the stories were based, and both TV and cinema elicited a similar response.

This change in the production of media content has affected our research, inviting us to open up a more fruitful dialogue with the media industry. What we discovered about the importance of the storytelling compared to the plot, has added new research questions to share with the many different figures engaged in the production and distribution process. For this reason we started collaborating with the [Women in Film, Television & Media Italia](https://wifmitalia.it/) association to share reflections and to discover more about the processes of development and writing behind the final product.⁷

As the point of the project is collaboration, we are also engaging with professionals from the TV industry, from marketing to scriptwriting, inviting them onto the same stage at [a public event in Milan](https://wifmitalia.it/), for school students and their teachers. As the panel only featured adults in this early phase of the project, our young audience asked us to organize more opportunities to meet and talk with young actors and actresses, or Tik Tok celebrities. Again, this has pushed us to reconsider our agenda and initiate further collaborations.

Most recently a large group of male and female students chose to watch the films *Succede / That's Life* and *Nevia*, and contributed to a lively post-screening debate about both films (fig. 1).⁸ From a series of diverse responses, we were struck by a tension that emerged in the juxtaposition of the two film. Some students found a teen romance like *Succede* “scontato” or obvious in its predictable narrative of a teen friendship that becomes romantic, whilst the same students were disappointed that a more dramatic “festival” film like *Nevia* left too many threads hanging in its open ending. There is definitely something to investigate here about how cinema can address the competition with television, in which that tension can be regularly opened up and quickly resolved. In relation to this, our interviews have highlighted a tendency for participants always to focus on the most recent content they have watched, even forgetting the titles of the previous season. This seems to be an effect of the proliferation of

⁵ For more information, see the full website *A Girls' Eye View*, <https://agirlseyeview.exeter.ac.uk/it/>.

⁶ Mittel, *Complex TV*.

⁷ Domizia De Rosa, “Una storia tutta da scrivere insieme,” *Women in Film, Television & Media Italia*, WiFT&M, accessed 23 December 2022, <https://wifmitalia.it/chi-siamo/>

⁸ Mazzoleni, *Succede*; De Stefano, *Nevia*.

content delivered by OTT services, which creates a sort of watching bulimia, very focused on the present season or even last episode.

From a methodological perspective, this change in TV temporality affects the temporality of the research, forcing the researchers to be constantly up to date about the release of new content. (for example *Mare Fuori*, Rai, 2020, emerged forcefully in the latest focus groups and interviews). It also presents difficulties in exploring content in depth (as a content appears forgotten as soon as adolescents have concluded their watching window). This temporality makes our model of shared screenings followed by discussion all the more necessary, but leaves us wondering how we might construct a “collective media biography” for this generation.⁹

Chances: Towards greater participation



Fig. 1 An example of a school screening of *Succede*, followed by lively discussion in February 2022

From the outset, given the school-facing nature of this project, and its timing—at the tail end of a global pandemic—our leading question has been how to engage our participants and provide them with a space of reflection, an opportunity to observe themselves and their consumption from a more critical perspective, a chance to strengthen their ties at school. That means both teachers, who have been under huge pressure to adapt to online teaching and continually changing restrictions, and young people, whose social worlds have undergone a disorientating transformation. If they have fallen behind with their work, as is inevitable, how can our taking them out of lessons to work on this project, enrich rather than further hinder the work of students and teachers? If they have been driven to consume online content in isolation, should we involve them in a project that might involve even more screen time? Maybe, considering the atmosphere and mood of the inter views we collect-

ed and the enthusiastic response we got from the girls, we can suggest that what they found in the research was exactly the opportunity to share their thoughts about content watched since then and, mostly, the chance to talk about this with no filters. They also avoid the judgement that adolescents sometimes experience, from both peers and adults, when it comes to expressing fandom or their tastes in public.¹⁰ Many times, at the end of the interviews, the girls thank us, but their voluntary participation is something we never take for granted.

⁹ Gonick & Gannon, *Becoming Girl*.

¹⁰ Cann, *Girls Like This, Boys Like That*.

¹¹ Harvey, *Feminist Media Studies*.

As different people meet over the course of this project, new ideas bounce around and off one another, doors open, and new pathways form. This has been true of the ways in which we have forged connections with schools, all of which have arisen from existing personal contacts, but also of the development of our methods, from all quarters, and at every stage. From that extra keen student who has inspired us to design a film criticism competition, or the interviewees, who asked us whether they could learn more about how to make videos on their favourite content. Our Erasmus plus intern Flavia Franguelli, from the University of Turin, made the suggestion of getting all pupils to write brief notes at the end of the film screening, in case they were too shy to contribute orally. When we implemented this in the following school using post-it notes, one of our collaborator teachers suggested that we read out the notes aloud to stimulate debate. Faced with a large group, this worked very well—the notes stayed anonymous unless the participants wanted to claim them, but some did, taking the microphone to defend them, and opening up further discussion. Thus we moved from the screening of a teen romance to a discussion of whether love itself was an illusion, and what the particular social barriers to its realization might be.

Fruitful and chance collisions of ideas and needs have also taken place around the kinds of activities we conduct with our focus groups. In asking the girls to prepare work on their favourite female protagonists we found that from a choice of activities they were most frequently drawn to the PowerPoint, which is maybe the result of a scholastic approach they expect at the beginning of the research, as it happens within the frame of the school itself. Diligent, and sometimes excellent, as these presentations were, they did not have the power to communicate with their fellow students as a clip might, but few chose this latter option. We are still exploring the easiest way to get students to contribute clips to a class discussion, but this kind of work now engages them in more depth with one another's choices. The schools' own desires to include this kind of work in the PCTO programme (a way of crediting extracurricular work), merely to make space for it, coincides with our effort to help the girls identify clips, and it reminded us of a suggestion by a member of our advisory board, Mary Celeste Kearney. She asked why, if we originally proposed to use the video essay to disseminate some of our findings, we did not ask the girls themselves to craft video essays themselves? Whilst this still seems like a logistical tall order, the interest of our participants and teachers in this kind of participatory visual method is inspiring us to try.¹²

Challenges: Inclusions and exclusions

Working in schools challenges us to think every day about how to convey what we are doing with our research. To give an example, what do we say to the boy who approaches us as soon as we enter one school and asks (in a very friendly way): Why have you excluded boys from your project? A good question. Our first answer is easy: We haven't excluded boys. We welcome them to the screenings and discussions of our films. It is only the individual interviews and focus groups that are limited to girls, and the confidence with which the participants have communicated on issues like body shaming, the male gaze, abortion and the limits imposed on their personal freedom suggests that this exclusive focus is still needed. Nonetheless, while we started from the premise that girls and women have been written out of cinema history, this far into the research it is clear that boys, particularly where masculinity intersects with regional identity, often feel disenfranchised, and we will work hard to make space for their concerns in the public-facing activities of this project, and subsequent stages of its development.

¹² Michelle et al, *Participatory Visual Methodologies*.

Challenges from academia have repeatedly made us aware about being careful in the use of a gender category itself as the basis for empirical research of this kind. As we opened out towards an academic network on the category of girlhood, one potential participant expressed anxiety that we might not present a safe space for more fluid notions of gender identity. Indeed this is clearly a very sensitive and important area for us, and we are careful to make sure teachers are aware that we are open to the inclusion of those identifying as girls and non-binary.

We will continue to invite these challenges, which come directly from our participants, and we share them in the hope that they can shape not only this project, but those of others too. It is with this in mind that in spring 2022 we are launching an academic network around the theme of girlhood to create regular spaces for exchange about this project and those of others, and we welcome new members, so please contact us if you are interested!

Conclusions

These changes, chances, and challenges have all been easier to address as a team, whose success owes much to its other two core members, Maria Elena Alampi (University of Exeter) and Leonardo Campagna (Sapienza University of Rome). With so much change the key question concerns how much of what we originally planned is core, and how much we can flex. If this sounds like terminology from your Pilates class, there is some sense in that. If lockdown taught us anything, it is how much harder it is to exercise alone, and how much easier together, in the push-pull of regular dialogue and exchange around shared goals. This is a dialogue and exchange that we look forward to widening in the near future.

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