

# Queering Italy: A Queer Vision of Today's Italy in the Streaming Platforms' Serial Landscape

Greta Delpanno / Ph.D. Thesis Project<sup>1</sup>

Université de Montréal and Alma Mater Studiorum –  
University of Bologna

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This research project aims to investigate the most recent Italian TV series available on streaming platforms that discuss gender identity and the exploration of sexuality by today's youth. Conducted as part of a joint Ph.D. programme between the University of Bologna and the University of Montréal, the research explores the intersection of queer representation and Italian TV series on streaming platforms, examining how these themes are addressed within the Italian context in relation to international serial productions.

The theoretical framework of this research lies at the convergence of television studies, queer theories, and production studies, with the goal of exploring LGBTQ+ representation in Italian TV series, particularly within the context of streaming platforms. The project takes an interdisciplinary approach that integrates cinema and television, feminist and queer studies, and cultural analysis, to understand how streaming platforms, with their global reach and ability to personalize user experiences, can contribute to the proliferation of LGBTQ+ content, and how TV series can contribute to the debate on new possibilities of inclusion.

The corpus of selected TV series, including

Netflix, Prime Video, and Rai Play, was chosen to investigate queer representations within an Italian context, comparing them with other international productions that address these themes, such as *Sense8* (Netflix, 2015-2018), *Sex Education* (Netflix, 2019–), *Euphoria* (HBO, 2019–), and *Heartbreak High* (Netflix, 2022–). In particular, the series *Prisma* (Prime Video, 2022–) serves as the primary case study for its ability to address gender fluidity and sexuality without labels, in a setting that oscillates between modernity and the past. Set in Latina, a city with a historical legacy tied to fascism, *Prisma* explores the collision between the freedom of expression of young protagonists and a socio-cultural context still marked by traditional dynamics.

Other Italian series that will contribute to understanding the national television landscape include, but are not limited to: *Baby* (Netflix, 2018-2020), *La vita che volevi* (RaiPlay, 2022), *Mental* (RaiPlay, 2020), *Mare Fuori* (Rai 2, RaiPlay, 2020–), *Nudes* (RaiPlay, 2021), *SKAM Italia* (TIMvision, 2018–), *Summertime* (Netflix, 2020-2022) and *Un professore* (Rai 1, 2021–).

The focus of the first research axis explores the production and marketing dynamics of digital platforms, highlighting how the algorithm

<sup>1</sup> Joint Ph.D. thesis co-supervised by Professor Marta Boni and Professor Paola Brembilla. For information: [marta.boni@umontreal.ca](mailto:marta.boni@umontreal.ca) and [p.brembilla@unibo.it](mailto:p.brembilla@unibo.it).



plays a crucial role in fostering audience loyalty through content personalization and how this personalization can lead to the creation of "filter bubbles" (Kustritz 2015). Such bubbles can isolate users in media environments that reinforce their pre-existing beliefs, thus reducing exposure to different perspectives and limiting the possibility of broader cultural dialogue. However, the wide variety of content offered by platforms like Netflix makes it possible to cater to both a broad audience and niche groups, ensuring greater visibility for otherwise marginalized queer productions (Anderson 2006).

The "paradox of queer television" also needs to be discussed, which highlights the difficulties and contradictions in the representation of queer identities in mainstream media. Richard Dyer (2002) argues that queer characters are often portrayed through limiting stereotypes that serve the narrative and reduce the complexity of queer experiences. Judith Butler (1990) describes this phenomenon as a "heterosexualization of desire," in which queer identities are conformed to heteronormative models, thus limiting their subversive potential. This approach risks diminishing the potential of LGBTQ+ representations as tools for challenging established social norms. Television, in this sense, functions both as a mirror of society and as an active agent in shaping cultural norms, according to John Fiske's "television as culture" theory (1987) and Stuart Hall's communication model (1980), which view media as playing a crucial role in either perpetuating or contesting dominant ideologies.

Another key concept is the "creation of a queer imaginary" through digital platforms. Streaming platforms, such as Netflix, have helped spread a global queer language, where the term "queer" is used both as an identity and as a tool for challenging existing norms. The concept of "queer potentiality" introduced by José Esteban Muñoz (2009), is central to this research. Muñoz describes queer as a future possibility, an ideal not yet realized but representing a way of seeing

and feeling beyond the limits imposed by the current reality. This is particularly relevant in the context of adolescent TV series, where coming out is often depicted as a rite of passage and as a process of identity formation typical of "coming of age" (Monaghan 2016; Tremblay 2017).

At the center of this research is also the representation of Italy itself, questioning whether we can speak of a "queer Italy". On one hand, these productions feature recurring patterns, themes, and stereotypes about the country, its culture, and its territory, which make Italy more recognizable and exportable abroad, especially for productions intended for streaming platforms and thus with a global reach. On the other hand, there are also more suspended representations, dreamlike, idyllic places, immersed in nature, as seen in some scenes of *Prisma* and in some film productions such as *Le fate ignoranti* (Ferzan Özpetek, 2001) and *Call Me by Your Name* (Luca Guadagnino, 2017). These have helped to present an image of a more open and inclusive Italy, even though these representations often remain isolated and surrounded by a political and social context that limits their impact (Rigoletto 2014).

The research explores how digital platforms can create new spaces for LGBTQ+ visibility, while also examining how these representations are sometimes limited by commercial logic. Indeed, platforms tend to favor easily consumable content, sacrificing the complexity of represented identities in favor of mainstream visibility that can reach a broader audience (Martin 2014). In this context, "queer television" (Rouleau 2022) is not merely a platform for inclusivity but becomes a battleground where the tension between visibility and normalization is at play.

The project's methodology involves a mixed approach combining qualitative and quantitative analysis and the study of production practices. Qualitative analysis will focus on observing television texts, emphasizing key scenes and dialogues to decode how queerness is represented through images, sound, themes, editing, etc. As for quantitative analysis, specific

on-screen and off-screen data will be collected, such as the time devoted to heteronormative and queer representations, to track differences and similarities. The analysis of production practices will be enriched by interviews with production members, aimed at better understanding the motivations behind the choice to address these themes.

By combining qualitative and quantitative analysis, supported by interdisciplinary reflection, the project aims to explore how streaming platforms have created new spaces for LGBTQ+ visibility and the tensions that emerge from this process.

In conclusion, this research explores how representations in Italian TV series can contribute to the construction of a queer imaginary. The theoretical framework adopted aims to understand if and how Italian TV series can contribute to building a queer imaginary in a socio-cultural context marked by strong tensions between conservatism and pushes toward inclusion. Television and streaming platforms are configured as essential spaces for the development of non-conforming identities, offering both opportunities for resistance and challenges related to the normalization of LGBTQ+ representations.

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