

Mediascapes journal 27/2026

From Conflict to Connection: Italian female teen audiences and the changing dynamics of mothers and daughters in film and television *

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The mother–daughter relationship is often described as “natural,” rooted in biology and emotional continuity. Yet both motherhood and daughterhood are historically and culturally constructed roles, shaped by social expectations, symbolic hierarchies, and media representations. This article reflects on the evolution of these constructions in contemporary society, combining empirical research on Italian female adolescence with an analysis of recent Italian media. Interviews with adolescent girls reveal a strong idealization of the mother as independent, courageous, emotionally present, and authoritative. However, this aspirational image contrasts sharply with current representations in Italian television series and films, where mothers frequently appear absent, fragile, or emotionally disconnected. The article argues that this tension reflects layered media models that, over time, have redefined what mothers and daughters can or should be. Motherhood and daughterhood thus emerge not as natural givens, but as negotiated and culturally mediated positions.

Keywords: mother, daughter, adolescence, teen tv

* Article submitted on 03/03/2026. Article accepted on 28/06/2026.

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Introduction

The relationship between mother and daughter is too often considered in public debate as a “natural” one, founded on a biological bond and a presumed emotional continuity that pre-dates any cultural mediation. Yet, motherhood and daughterhood are not simply universal givens, but social and symbolic constructs, historically situated and culturally shaped. They define roles, expectations, emotional languages, and power hierarchies that vary over time and find one of their primary loci of production and reproduction in media representations. “Motherhood and mothering are not natural for women, but they are historically, culturally and socially constructed” (Bertolaja Silva, 1999, p. 1)

Cinema, television, literature, and now digital media not only reflect the mother-daughter relationship, but actively contribute to regulating, idealizing, or challenging it, constructing images of motherhood and female filiation that engage with broader shifts in gender models, family models, and female subjectivity.

Starting from this premise the aim of this article is to reflect on the evolution of both motherhood and daughterhood, proceeding from the representation of motherhood as it emerged from the voices of girls interviewed during a research project on female adolescence in Italy and from the contradictions between this vision and the current representation of the mother-daughter relationship in contemporary Italian media. The article thus brings together two distinct, but complementary, sources: a media-historical and theoretical analysis of how the mother-daughter relationship has been constructed across Italian and international cinema and television, and an empirical analysis of interviews with adolescent girls. The interview material is not treated as a results section illustrating or confirming the theoretical framework; rather, it functions as an independent source, a counter-narrative that we put into dialogue, and at points into tension, with the media representations discussed above. In other words, the girls’ idealization of the mother as an independent, courageous woman, but also an authoritative role model, present and emotionally close to her daughter figure, as described during the interviews, appears profoundly at odds with the most recent representations of motherhood seen in Italian TV series and films, where, instead, absent, fragile mothers, incapable of emotional connection, even impervious to the feeling of reciprocity towards their daughters, prevail.

Our hypothesis, therefore, is that the symbolic construction of contemporary motherhood and daughterhood reflects layered media models that over the last fifty years have contributed to defining (or rather redefining) what a mother and daughter can, should, or are authorized to be. The structure of the article follows this double movement: we first map the symbolic landscape of media representations to which girls are exposed, before turning, in the second part, to their own accounts, which reveal how they negotiate, resist, or simply bypass those representations.

This essay aims to explore how media representations of the mother-daughter relationship have changed over time, moving from highly normative models to more ambivalent, conflictual, and plural configurations. It also aims to show how these changes reflect and, at the same time, produce new possibilities for thinking about motherhood and daughterhood as non-essential, but negotiated, historically determined, and culturally

mediated experiences¹. As Luisa Muraro has observed, not until the mother-daughter relationship, the primary woman to woman relationship, has been thoroughly examined and repaired, can sisterhood itself be a possibility:

improvvisamente mi accorgo che l'inizio cercato è davanti a me: è il saper amare la madre. [...] questo soltanto, infatti, rompe il circolo vizioso e mi fa uscire dalla trappola di una cultura che, non insegnandomi ad amare mia madre, mi ha privata anche della forza necessaria a cambiarla, lasciandomi soltanto quella di lamentarmi, indefinitamente (Muraro, 2021,13).²

The Mother-Daughter Relationship in Media

The Lost Story: Demeter and Persephone

The Christian roots of Western culture have made the mother-son relationship the most visible iconographical dyad in parent-child relations, supremely patriarchal despite its apparent emphasis on the mother. The Virgin Mother's body only serves as vessel to realize the divine Father-Son inheritance, obscuring the mother's subjectivity as handmaiden, absolving the earthly father of parental responsibility, and making the daughter not merely invisible, but almost irrelevant to the whole plot.³ Nowhere is this more evident than in the Italian context, birthplace of the visual iconography that has reinforced the dominance of this mother-son bond, which we see perpetuated on its screens and in its culture more broadly today (Patriarca, 2010; Falaschini-Lerner & D'Amelio, 2018; Morris & Wilson, 2018).

Yet, as many feminist critics have observed, from Luce Irigaray to Adriana Cavarero, there is an older foundational myth in Western culture: the story of Demeter and Persephone, according to which the very structure of our seasons arises from the love between a mother and her daughter, and the intervention of patriarchal power to separate them. For Irigaray, Hades' abduction of Persephone is the original sin of patriarchy against women: "A lost crossroads of our becoming women is found in the confusion and annihilation of our relationships with the mother and in the obligation to submit to the laws of the universe of men" (Irigaray, 1989, p. 75). For Kathleen Rowe Karlyn this relation remains significant in our storytelling: "Demeter stands as a figure of female rage and impassioned desire, validating a mother's grief at the loss of her daughter while acknowledging the inevitability of that separation, as well as the daughter's own desire" (Rowe Karlyn, 2011, p. 16). It is instructive to think about how even this story is so often retold as a story of male power: muscular portrayals of Hades's abduction of a typically naked and sexualized Persephone abound, but iconographical representations of the reunion of a loving mother and her daughter are few and far between. As Luisa Muraro makes clear:

Prima della politica delle donne, fra la potenza materna da una parte e i miei bisogni dall'altra, mi mancava il passaggio dell'amore e della riconoscenza. [...] lo sentivo e agivo come se la donna che mi ha messa al mondo fosse nemica della mia indipendenza simbolica. [...] non è esatto chiamarla un pensare; si tratta piuttosto di un sottointeso, quasi uno schema sottostante a tutto un modo di sentire e di agire, che niente

da fuori viene a confutare, quando si tratta di una donna, come se fosse naturale che lei detesti sua madre e se ne creda detestata. Si tratta in realtà di un terribile disordine simbolico (Muraro, 2021, 10).⁴

Yet, if we look carefully, traces persist from the times of Magna Grecia that acknowledge the strong connection between mother and daughter that must be broken if patriarchal law is to prevail, as we can see in the separation of the mother and daughter in Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*. One interpretation of tiles (pinakes) dating back to the first half of the fifth century BC representing the abduction of Persephone, found in Locri, Calabria, has been that girls would be required to dedicate these images to Persephone upon marriage. What the Demeter myth intuited, amongst other things, was what feminist psychoanalysis was to confirm many centuries later: "As a result of being parented by a woman and growing up heterosexual, women have different and more complex relational needs in which an exclusive relationship to a man is not enough" (Chodorow, 1978, p.199).

According to Marianne Hirsch, the relative absence of the mother-daughter relationship from mainstream modern narratives, as opposed to father-daughter, or mother-son narratives, was formalized by the prevalence of the motherless child in the nineteenth century novel, as we see in the example of *Jane Eyre* (Charlotte Brontë, 1847). This was due to the unconscious awareness that only a girl whose mother was absent could hope to avoid repetition of the maternal path: "Women writers' attempts to imagine lives for their heroines which will be different from their mothers' make it imperative that mothers be silent or absent in their texts, that they remain in the prehistory of plot, fixed both as objects of desire and as examples not to be emulated" (Hirsch, 1989, p. 34). Girls and women who want to play an active social role outside the home may look to their fathers initially as a model of power and action under patriarchal regimes. In the end, however, this often results in further defeat since fathers frequently reinsert their daughters back into the patriarchal exchange mechanism, handing them over to another man (Driscoll, 2002). Over the twentieth century in Italy, we find many female authors grappling with this discovery. We may refer to the very famous case of Sibilla Aleramo and to her autobiography, *Una donna* (1906), in which she analysed her complex relationship with her parents: on one side, she was completely in love with her father, often described as a sensitive intellectual, a devoted father, an inspirational figure, especially in contrast with the passivity of the mother. However, as soon as Sibilla discovered her father's betrayal of her mother and understood the depressive condition of her mother, subjugated within a marriage that deprived her of freedom, she discovered how the patriarchy works against women. It separates women from one another, deceiving the daughter while separating her from the mother and handing her over to the husband as a kind of sacrifice, like the one inflicted upon Iphigenia, to the cruel power of men and patriarchy.

In cinema itself, we can read echoes of these patterns, both the erasure and resistance of the mother-daughter bond, in flux with waves of feminism and postfeminism. The divas of Italian silent cinema, for example, although perhaps most famously associated with Eleonora Duse's performance in *Cenere/Ash* (Febi, 1916) a tragic story of a mother's sacrifice for her son, also made space for the exploration of the mother-daughter bond through melodramatic films like *Sangue blu/Blue Blood* (Oxilia, 1914), starring Francesca

Bertini (Dalle Vacche, 2008). Indeed, it has typically been through melodrama that the Demeter/Persephone bond has been explored, usually in the name of at least expressing Demeter's rage. Feminist film critics have focussed, in fact, on the recognition of female audiences in Hollywood's maternal melodramas of 1940s and 1950s, like *Stella Dallas* (Vidor, 1938) and *Mildred Pierce* (Curtiz, 1945), which narrated the impossibility of the mother-daughter relationship. They explored the way in which the films both narrated the mother-daughter relationship, allowing cathartic expression of the rage that maternal sacrifice was the only option presented for all women:

The device of devaluing and debasing the actual figure of the mother while sanctifying the institution of motherhood is typical of 'the woman's film' in general and the sub-genre of the maternal melodrama in particular. In these films it is quite remarkable how frequently the self-sacrificing mother must make her sacrifice that of the connection to her children – either for her or their own good (Williams, 1987, p. 300).

These were models echoed in the Italian context of the 1950s in films like *La schiava del peccato/The Slave of Sin* (Matarazzo, 1954) and *Maddalena* (Genina, 1954) (Hipkins, 2014), and perhaps most famously embodied by Sophia Loren in *La ciociara/Two Women* (De Sica, 1960) and what is presented as her failure to "save" her daughter from wartime rape and its consequences.

New Mothers between ideology and myths

In 2019 Giovanna Pezzuoli, a journalist and feminist, who spent her life reflecting on women's conditions, presented as an appendix of *Leggendaria* 135 | maggio 2019,⁵ a short video, titled "Nemiche per la pelle. Le più belle scene madri in 14 film," created together with her daughter, which explored the mother-daughter relationship, from an intense antagonism, with decidedly horror-like overtones (i.e. *Carrie*), to the height of loving identification, exploring every nuance of the relationship. Sexual rivalry, competition, and the daughter's inability to accept herself due to the constant comparison with her adored and envied mother; the lack of communication; the conflict exacerbated by the issue of money; the reversal of roles; the projection of the mother's desires and needs onto her daughter; the risk of symbiosis; and finally, forgiveness, love, and the ability to let go of her daughter.

Through this bricolage of cinematic fragments it is possible to understand that the ways in which we conceive of motherhood have been dramatically changed by the advent of second-wave feminism, also changing the way in which we see daughters. Trying to reconstruct the representation of the mother-daughter relationship in the media in different stages, Keller's three-decade historical theme analysis of women's magazines specifically addressed three mothering ideologies (Keller, 1994): a traditionalist ideology in the 1960s, a feminist ideology in the 1970s, and both a neotraditionalist and economic nurturer ideology in the 1980s. The first, in the 1950s, was an ideological representation of traditional motherhood, staged by white, educated, married women dedicated to raising children. Between the 1960s and 1970s, thanks to the Women's Liberation Movement, a new

mythology of motherhood emerged, supplanting the traditional model: the so-called “super mom”, a full-time working woman who was also a perfect mother at home. During the ‘80s a new-traditional wave (i.e. the new momism) pushed women back into the home to leave their successful professional careers to take care of and to be devoted to their children (as in the case of the “opting out” women investigated by Kuperberg & Stone, 2008).

These motherhood models, even if chronologically situated, coexist in contemporary media representations, creating a kind of discrepancy between ideology and myths (Glenn 1994). As Johnston and Swanson (2003) conclude in their research on motherhood representations in media magazines, although the women’s magazines continue to support “a traditional motherhood ideology, negative myths associated with traditional mothers are upheld. In contrast, nontraditional mothers were presented more positively; the negative myths about employed mothers’ negative emotions and mother–child attachment issues are not upheld” (p. 31)

While investigating how mothers internalize or resist the myths perpetuated in the media, Johnston and Swanson expanded Keller’s models, by identifying four different contemporary mothering ideologies: traditionalist, feminist, neotraditionalist, and economic nurturing that overlap in certain aspects: as a matter of fact the traditionalist (1) and neotraditionalist (3) models are similar in positioning the mother as a self-sacrificing, full-time caregiver. Whilst the traditionalist mother never enters the workplace, the neotraditionalist mother has resigned – possibly part-time – to focus on childcare. The feminist model (2), in comparison, suggests that a ‘good mother’ strives to acquire a sense of self-realization through the pursuit of personal interests and rewarding work. Like her feminist counterpart, the economic-nurturing mother (4) seeks employment outside the home, but primarily to provide goods and services to her children.

In all of these models the spectre of the good and the bad mother continues to hover: mothers continue to measure themselves against the ideal of the good mother, while being aware that such ideals change and resist at the same times. As Pederson pointed out starting from the research conducted on an internet discussion forum such as Mumsnet, “mothers on this site are conscious of, actively engaging with, re-working and to a certain extent rejecting the ideal of the good mother. Their conceptualisation of the good mother is fluid and very much based on defining themselves against bad mothering, which for some is identified with the mothering practices of previous generations”(2016, p.38).

Discovering the daughter

For the purpose of our article, we cannot talk about motherhood models without considering the emergence of different models of daughterhood in media representation. We individuated a series of turning points in these representations, which simultaneously signal a new version of being a daughter together with a new version of being a mother. The first turning point is that of 1980s and 1990s which we can describe as the rise of “Responsible daughtering” (Alford, 2021). During this decade especially, cinema represented mothers as both demanding a close relationship with their daughter and as sexually awakened. This

phase then was an evolution of both Keller's second model (the feminist mother) and the fourth model proposed by Johnston and Swanson, of the mother who works and inevitably has a social life as she enters the public sphere in a non-traditional way, expanded through a focus on mother-daughter relationship which is not based on hierarchy, but rather on similarities (or the attempt to build an equal relationship). This mother and daughter friendship is strongly represented in the very famous intimate "girl talk" bedroom scene (as in *Terms of Endearment*, Brooks, 1983) where the couple share moments of tenderness, loving confidence, expectations in a way that is more similar to a girl-friendship than mother-daughter relationship. This movie rebuilt on one side the mother's resistance of the traditional idea of motherhood, as she discovered a new sexuality and independence in her fifties; on the other side it depicted the tiring struggle of the daughter who continues to invest in a traditional marriage model, refusing her mother's advice from an ideological standpoint. Here we have the new momism, that causes frustration and pain, and the feminist woman. The tension is brought to the fore by the age gap between the two protagonists: unexpectedly the young woman is more traditional than the older one.

The other movie that resonates with this model of mother and daughter relationship is *Mermaids* (1990, US), a film directed by Richard Benjamin that tells the story of an unconventional mother and her daughters. It's the early 1960s: Rachel Flax is a feisty and restless single mother, always ready to move cities when a romantic relationship fails. Throughout her countless moves, she always takes her daughters, from two different marriages, with her. There is a memorable scene in which the protagonists (Cher, Winona Ryder and Christina Ricci) dance along to Jimmy Soul's lyrics while setting the table for dinner. It is the celebration of the imperfect family (and the imperfect mother) that operates within the traditional familiar setting of the kitchen, rewriting roles and relationships in contrast with classic family models, leaving room for the spontaneity and euphoria of a new experience.

The model that emerges from these two movies, despite their differences, such as the age of the daughters and mothers in the two narratives, is that of the "responsible daughter". Daughters have to take care of their mothers, to balance the imbalances in the relationship and curb excesses. In the Italian context in this period we can find echoes of these daughters looking to mothers with new care and curiosity, although all too often this is belated and comes in the form of an investigation into the mother's story after her death (Giorgio, 2002). One of the most striking accounts of this was Mario Martone's adaptation of Elena Ferrante's *L'amore molesto* (Abusive Love, 1995), in which Delia (Anna Bonaiuto) discovers that both she and her dead mother were victims of sexual abuse, an experience that kept them apart in life, but hints left by her mother gift Delia with an understanding that transforms her own sense of self.

Another example could be that of the book (1994) *Va dove ti porta il cuore* by Susanna Tamaro and film based on it (1996), directed by Cristina Comencini. Also in this case the relationship between three generations of women is less based on the daughter's responsibility, but certainly emphasizes the role of the mothers (Olga and Ilaria) as irresponsible and not conforming to a traditional motherhood, while it is the youngest

protagonist Marta (Olga's nephew and Ilaria's daughter) who manages to create an emotional bond and restore Olga's lost role as a mother.

Postfeminism, Popular Feminism and The Daughter's Perspective

The period immediately preceding our interviewees' own engagement with the media, producing much of the media that still informs their viewing, is characterized by a much stronger turn towards the girl's perspective. This reflects the rise of "girlpower" from the late 1990s that revisits the mother-daughter relationship from the girl's point of view.

For Kathleen Rowe Karlyn, the embrace of girlpower in popular culture in this moment came at the expense of the mother-daughter relationship, resulting once again in the disappearance or vilification of the mother. "Where in film history", she asked in 2011, "is Marmee, the strong and beloved mother of four daughters in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*? The 1868 novel has been made into movies numerous times, but failed to inspire other, similarly rich treatments of mothers and daughters" (Rowe Karlyn, p. 13). In *Titanic* (Cameron, 1997), she notes, different generations of women are set in conflict, through the conflict between Rose and her mother, Ruth. In turn from *Clueless* (Heckerling, 1995) to *Juno* (Reitman, 2007), she charts the emergence of 'Daddy's Girls', motherless or daddy-oriented daughters, in a pattern that maps closely onto recent Italian culture, in films like *Buongiorno papà* (Leo, 2012) and *Tutta Colpa di Freud/Blame Freud* (Genovese, 2014).

Katie Kapurch suggests that postfeminist culture actually revisits the idea of the maternal melodrama to chart feelings of ambivalence about the mother-daughter relationship from the girls' perspective in recent Disney films: "Although they still depict adult women's constraints, *Tangled* and *Brave* privilege the representation of the daughter's ambivalence and emotional frustration [...] In these twenty-first-century Disney films, a girl's struggle to assert her identity is central to the narrative, unlike the focus on the mother in "classic" film maternal melodramas". Here, she argues

melodrama's excess allows for a critique of the very things melodrama represents. Paying close attention to mother-daughter interactions [...] reveal[s] the following postfeminist themes as debilitating for girls and detrimental to their relationships with older women: normative femininity and consumerism as empowerment, competing generational feminisms, and the conflicting pressures to articulate individual identity while belonging to female community (Kapurch, 2016, pp. 40-42)

However, the area of popular culture best at recovering female relations, in a way that still remains underestimated in criticism, is through televisual serial narratives that chart female genealogies with cross-generational appeal. *Gilmore Girls* (2000-2007) and *Jane the Virgin* (2014-2019) are both highly popular US television series with international reach that feature three generations of women whose most important relationships are with one another. In *Gilmore Girls* a single mother raises her daughter on her own, refusing to be an authority figure and preferring a mother-daughter relationship model focused on equality and honesty, whilst re-negotiating her relationship with her own overly strict mother. The autonomy of the

rebel mother (pregnant at 16) finds a projection in the ambitious “girlculture” daughter who is very much looking forward to pursuing the education that suits her aspirations the most. Their life unfolds in the imaginary small village of Stars Hollow, moving from shared coffees, ice creams eaten as reciprocal consolation, complicity and small clashes to the continued delight of female audiences old and young (Peterson, 2018). If *Gilmore Girls* has been criticized for its fantasies of whiteness, *Jane the Virgin*, loosely adapted from a Venezuelan telenovela, not only dramatizes the strength of female genealogies, once again in the wake of a teen pregnancy, but situates them in the precarious context of the grandmother’s precarious immigration status.

Most recently, if we look to the slowly increasing presence of female auteur filmmakers in the mainstream, we begin to find answers to Rowe Karlyn’s question about where the mothers are. Female filmmakers are being received and celebrated in a newly popular feminist culture, associated with the success of #MeToo, but also in the Italian context with the anti-femicide campaign, ‘Non una di meno’, which dates back to 2016. Two significant examples of this new kind of feminist work from outside of Italy are Greta Gerwig’s *Lady Bird* (2017) and Celine Sciamma’s *Petite Maman* (2021). The latter imagines a fantastical encounter between a daughter and her mother, in which they are both eight at the same time. Sciamma’s film, in which mother and daughter are played by identical twins, is the most radical of the examples we give here, speaking to the mother-daughter bond, “as painful, romantic and open to reimagining, to tenderness beyond taboo and recrimination” (Wilson, 2023, p 206). In Nelly’s playful, fairy-tale encounter with her mother as an eight-year old in the woods behind her house, we see a rare recovery of the girl in the mother, triggered perhaps by the present-day death of the grandmother. The film focusses on play between mother and daughter, an element frequently missing from screen representations. Despite Sciamma’s international profile, its auteur status does, however, keep it off the radar of most teen female audiences. That is not the case with Gerwig’s *Barbie* (2023). The film was released too recently to emerge in our interviews, but it provides a unique mainstream example of the popularity of narratives that recover the play of girlhood for adult women. In the soft-focus, nostalgic flashback memories of the mother figure, Gloria, it is the bonding play with her daughter that she misses after her daughter’s rejection of Barbie, employed by Gerwig as archetypal symbol of girlhood play.

Lady Bird, an earlier film of Gerwig’s, is mentioned by some of our respondents, as is *Little Women* (2019). *Lady Bird* is a teen film that subtly reverses the priorities of a classic teen film, making a difficult mother-daughter relationship, rather than a heterosexual romantic one, its primary focal point. As mother and daughter come into conflict, elements of maternal melodrama punctuate the film form, spilling over into classic melodramatic motifs like the prom dress that Christine’s Mum alters for her, and Jon Brion’s tearjerking soundtrack. The film is told primarily from the perspective of the daughter, expressing the daughter’s ambivalence that Kapurch describes in her analysis of the postfeminist maternal melodrama. Towards the end, however, when *Lady Bird* leaves, the camera stays with the mother, recognizing her perspective and her misgivings, eventually allowing *Lady Bird* herself to “hear” her mother (through discarded letters that the father has rescued, thereby reversing the classic melodramatic trope of the undelivered letter). In re-staging the mother-

daughter relationship as one with potential for connection and mutual recognition, in recovering “female genealogy” (Stone, 2023), the film accords the viewer the same distance from tired tropes of maternal denigration that the flight away to New York also allows Christine/Lady Bird.

The Italian context has offered some thought-provoking contributions to this turn towards the mother-daughter connection, receiving acclaim outside of Italy. In Maggie Gyllenhaal’s pandemic adaptation of another Elena Ferrante novel, *The Lost Daughter* (US, 2021), the film foregrounds a mother’s mixed feelings about how her two (now adult) daughters affected her own academic career as she watches another mother and her young daughter on her solitary beach holiday. Even more recently Paola Cortellesi’s *C’è ancora domani / There’s Still Tomorrow* (Italy, 2023) surprised everyone by beating Gerwig’s *Barbie* at the Italian box office. Cortellesi’s film starts with a distance between mother and teenage daughter, confirming Adrienne Rich’s thinking that in a matrophobic culture “with adolescence we find ourselves moving away from our natural mothers” (Rich, 1976). Daughter, Marcella, has begun to blame her mother, Delia, for not fighting back against her abusive father, and Marcella gets engaged herself, largely to escape the violent, impoverished family home. The daughter’s engagement, in which Delia sees the implosion of her own youthful romantic dreams about to reconfigure, is the trigger this mother needs. She prevents the marriage and redirects the money saved for her daughter’s wedding dress into her daughter’s education;⁶ in return her daughter sees Delia’s struggle and helps her to vote in the first Italian elections to include women, telling her it is not too late for her either. What all these films have in common is a strong move towards mutual recognition between mother and daughter. This is not mirroring, which oppresses subjectivity, but the recognition of both connection and difference that Jessica Benjamin has argued is fundamental to avoiding matrophobia itself:

Unless mother’s external subjectivity is registered there is no reassurance against fantasies (her own or the child’s) of her omnipotence, her seduction, or her control: the fantasies of the mother’s body as overwhelming or invasive are not countered by an experience of mutual recognition. (Benjamin, 1995, p.195)

Broken Mothers?

There is a final shift in representations of the maternal to this analysis, related to the emergence of a socially hidden representation of motherhood: what we can call the ‘sick mother’. Over the last two decades media content has started to represent mental health issues, partially due to the diversification mantra emerging in the media market. This has also opened a space for female depression, very often related to motherhood or a factor in experiences of motherhood: from cinema (the documentary by Alina Marazzi *Un’ora sola ti vorrei* to *L’immensità*, the autobiographical movie by Crialese or *Il mio compleanno* by Christian Filippi) to literature (the novel *La più amata* by Teresa Ciabatti and, more recently, *Quello che so di te* by Nadia Terranova and *Meraviglia* by Viola Ardone). All these narratives

are focused on the representation of a motherhood that was trapped, denied and frozen in time, where, due to psychological fragility or excessive exuberance, young mothers end up in clinics for months on end, undergoing sleep therapy or psychiatric rehabilitation, even in mental hospitals. This is a reality that isn't chronologically linked to the 2000s, but spans the last century, and only since the 2000s has it gained visibility in media culture and, concurrently, in public debate. Whilst it resonates with the absence or fragility of mothers in Italian screen narratives, it also reflects an aspect of a broader recognition that the demands of 'new Momism' are simply too much, evident in a new feminist cinema of 'crushing motherhood' (Landry, 2025).

From this perspective we can again refer to Muraro when she explains female hysteria as a pathological attachment to the mother that many women experience in their life, exactly because of the lack in the mother-daughter relationship:

Alla potenza materna è mancata e ancora manca, nella cultura tradizionale, la genealogia femminile. Le è mancato cioè il modo appropriato di esprimersi ed esercitarsi. [...] il fatto della nostra fissazione alla madre finisce così per essere riguardato come qualcosa di patologico; anzi finisce per diventarlo effettivamente, come capita del reale che, non trovando traduzione simbolica, ci fa ammalare (Muraro 2021, p. 70).⁷

In other words the impossibility of loving the mother leads women to get sick because they cannot articulate love but only the separation imposed by the symbolic order of patriarchy.

The Mother-Daughter relationship in Teen-Targeted Media: The Netflix Effect

In the light of these recent shifts, it is perhaps all the more surprising that most teen-oriented media, particularly television series, continue to depict mothers as absent or negatively. However, it is worth remembering that this is in part related to one of the primary ways in which teen television distinguished itself as a new genre when it first emerged in the US. Prior to the arrival of US shows dedicated to teens like *Beverly Hills 90210* (1990-2000) or *Dawson's Creek* (1998–2003 USA), teens tended to appear in generational, family-oriented shows. As Stephania Marghitu argues, this shift away from the purview of parental supervision was also marked by a shift in environment: "The family sitcom encouraged teens to conform to their parents' ideologies, while teen series shifted towards adapting to the rules of high school in order to survive the social landscape" (Marghitu, 2024, p. 78).

This kind of peer-oriented teen media has spread rapidly over the last decade, with the proliferation of online streaming platforms, recognizing the global power of teen audiences. Indeed a 'youthification' of television is considered a fundamental aspect of the so-called 'Netflix effect'. This has accorded a new centrality to adolescents and the emergence of a new teen television through controversial hit series from streaming services like *Thirteen Reasons Why* (2017-2020), *Stranger Things* (2016-2025), *Sex Education* (2019-2023), and *Euphoria* (2019-). As recently documented by Barra et al. (2025), this has triggered an explosion of teen television in other countries as well. In Italy the establishment of Netflix Italy in 2015 led to the production of some of the first teen series, *Baby* (2018-2020) and *Summertime* (2020-2022), complemented by the transnational, transmedia webseries

SKAM, that in turn stimulated public broadcasters to produce their own versions, including the phenomenally popular juvenile prison drama *Mare fuori* (Rai/Netflix, 2020-)

A striking element is that most of these narratives have in common a kind of estrangement between parents and children. A couple of notable exceptions can be found in *Ginny & Georgia* (2021-) and in *Sex Education* (a UK show spontaneously mentioned by one quarter of our participants, making it the second most popular non-Italian show). Otherwise parental invisibility can be seen as a "deafening absence"⁸) while peer group and sisterhood have a compensatory social function. Within this scenario, particularly in the Italian teen context, the old spectre of matrophobia resurfaces and mothers in particular are represented mostly as "absent, inadequate and toxic" (Rebecca Feasey, 2012) as we may see in different case studies where mothers are represented as inadequate, because of lack of culture or social pressures (*L'amica geniale/My Brilliant Friend* and *La vita bugiarda degli adulti*); or integrated into the patriarchal/criminal system, or in the case of the lead teen mother, killed off at the beginning of season 2 (*Mare Fuori*); or judgmental, frustrated, struggling to show respect and empathy (*Dolcissime*); or empathetic but atypical, still problematic (*L'immensità*); or finally fragile, irrelevant or even negative in their inability to exercise their motherhood (*Baby*).

In all these representations it seems that the pact that provides for mutual recognition between mothers and daughters has been broken, preventing the creation of new figurations of life: the relationship between the daughter and her mother, who is none other than the woman who precedes every woman, is severed. There is little or no empathy between the two: each one elaborates as best she can an egoistic way of thinking and self-representing, denying the link with the origin that, precisely, fades and becomes difficult to trace.

Voices from Daughterhood

These representations, as we noted at the outset of the article, provide a strong contrast with the stories about mothers and daughters narrated in the ethnographic interviews that were conducted for *A Girls'-Eye View: Italian Girlhood on Screen Since the 1950s* (funded by the AHRC, UK, 2021-2024) by Danielle Hipkins, Romana Andò, Maria Elena Alampi, and Leonardo Campagna. Our project involved interviewing over 100 girls from diverse schools across Italy, thus including participants from a wide range of different class, regional, and ethnic backgrounds. We began with individual interviews, asking questions about and discussing film and television consumption in the wider context of adolescent life, before moving on to screenings, focus groups and video-essay workshops. As anticipated in the Introduction, the girls' accounts analysed in what follows are not offered as a results section confirming the theoretical framework outlined above, but as an autonomous empirical source, whose function is to counterpoint, and in several respects to complicate, the media representations just discussed.

Part of each interview was dedicated to investigating the role of women in girls' familial and social context (i.e. teachers, psychotherapists, sports trainers, etc. as well as mothers,

sisters, aunts and grandmothers) in the construction of girlhood and in relation to the process of one's becoming a woman. What immediately struck us was that, contrary to the majority of media representations mentioned by the girls when they connect to characters they like (where, as we noticed, mothers are absent or problematic), our interviewees almost always mentioned their mothers as the most important female figure in their life. Moreover, the mothers were mostly depicted by the girls as always present, someone to confide in, and admired for their ability to manage a life in constant balance between work and family. In short, mothers were both friends and role models, whose strength and courage were amply praised:

My mom is always close to me, I tell her everything. When I come back from school, I tell her things that some girls tend not to say to their parents because they're ashamed, and I tell her everything because she often gives me advice when there are arguments and things like that (14 year-old girl, Rome).

These girls' mothers are portrayed as strong, courageous women, aspirational figures who have developed resilience and versatility to manage an increasingly complex life: "My mum is very strong, in my opinion. And brave, let's say, empathetic, kind, cheerful" (17 year-old girl, Rome), or:

No-one could mend my car, but she did. She can turn her hand to anything [...] that is to say she's always strong, because she seen some highs and lows in her life. But she's always been strong and never burdened me with her problems: she's always stayed silent about them. Sometimes I would see she was a bit down, but she'd reassure me because obviously I think every mother wants their child not to worry (17 year-old girl, Sicily).

When asked to describe their mothers, girls clearly attempted to solicit the woman in the mother. Following Irigaray, looking for women in the mothers means giving value to a process of knowledge, based on "getting out of roles", precisely avoiding those roles in which the relationships established with other women are based on jealousy or resentment. In other words, recognizing the woman in the mother means recognizing the mother as a "subject" in her own right, with her own lineage and symbolic value. Irigaray argues that mother-daughter relationships have historically been subordinated to male power (patriarchy). The mother should not be a mere instrument of reproduction for the paternal order. And this seems to be the perspective adopted by our interviewees.

Here alongside admiration, we find understanding and empathy that draw on gender (and self-) awareness of matrophobia:

My mother has always had a lot of courage in raising two daughters with a husband that worked all the time. [...] And because, raising two daughters... daughters always resent their mothers. At least I've noticed this, because being the only ones, me and my sister are the only girls because the others are all male cousins. [...] So I see boys that have a beautiful relationship with their mother. Us girls instead, from eight or ten years of age already, we start being mad at our mothers for the slightest thing. So it takes courage to raise a daughter (18 year-old girl, Calabria).

These qualities of admiration and understanding also make space for girls to identify with the mother, and to recognize themselves in her, defining themselves much more often in terms of continuity, rather than difference. This means establishing a genealogy of women (mother-daughter) that is essential to building an independent female identity, transcending identification with the masculine:

My main point of reference, that is the person that I want to be like, it's my mother because I mean, me and mum are very much alike in our personalities and I would really like to become like her because she has become strong, she's beautiful and I hope to become like her (15 year-old girl, Abruzzo).

In *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978) Chodorow argued that for girls (unlike boys who have to differentiate a gender identity that is not female) gender identity is built on unity and continuity, not in separation. In other words, a girl's identity is formed not in opposition to her first object love (mother), but in continuity with it.

As suggested by some of the examples in the girls' accounts of their media reception, to which we will turn to next, they do identify some elements, where they are available, of continuity, which are still linked to the reproduction of mothering itself. What we notice is largely absent from these accounts of mothers who work, who support and manage, is the possibility of fun or leisure in adult femininity. Indeed, if these girls find the woman in the mother with relative ease, we very rarely hear about the girl in the mother, an observation we shall return to in our conclusion.

Mothers and Daughters in Film and Television

These positive accounts of mother-daughter relations hint at the lingering impact of shows like *Gilmore Girls* and *Jane the Virgin* that paid attention to the nuances of the mother-daughter relationship. Even if they are not mentioned by many of our respondents (only 2 and 5 respectively), it is worth remembering that the shows emerged around the time that our interviewees' mothers were becoming mothers themselves, and reflect a Zeitgeist that clearly influenced their modelling of the mother-daughter relationship. This looking towards the mother, and recognizing oneself in her, inflects girls' interpretation of film and television. Whilst positive depictions of mothers, and mother-daughter relations, are largely absent from teen media, they are still mentioned by the interviewees.

An appreciation of motherhood is something some girls are actively looking for, as this comment on *Jane the Virgin* confirms: "It is always beautiful, in fact, to see how a woman can love her child, which I think is sometimes missing even in TV series because they rarely focus on motherhood" (18 year-old girl, Lombardy). The show *Ginny & Georgia* is mentioned by one eighth of our participants: from over 30 non-Italian TV series mentioned spontaneously, it ranks tenth. Comments about this series often focus on sympathy and admiration for single mother, Georgia, rather than her fifteen year-old daughter:

Oh God, I don't really like the protagonist that much, I prefer the mother because she is more... I don't know, she always has a quick answer, let's say [...] she is an independent woman who more or less knows how to handle herself in situations... I mean, she never seems to be in difficulty or at least she doesn't show it. (16 year-old girl, Rome)

In *Ginny and Georgia*, Ginny's mother had to face a terrible life because her father took advantage of her sister, and she had to run away from home at the age of 17, having associated with bad people. She had Ginny when she was very young, just 16 years old, so she found herself with a newborn baby at 16, having to face everything all alone without anyone. Therefore, Georgia is also a woman I admire a lot. [17 year-old girl, Sicily]

Girls' admiration for mother figures often bridges the professional and personal spheres. This 18 year-old from Calabria connects her love of enterprising women in film and television to her admiration for her mother and grandmothers:

I really like entrepreneurial women precisely because, as I said before, it was also somewhat instilled in me from family, and my grandmothers, my mother, although they didn't reach great heights, have always made their way on their own.

She then extends this to her viewing preferences:

My favorite movie is *Wonder* (Chbosky, US, 2017). Alice is an important female figure who is the mother. You can really see the strength of being a mother, of trying to make her child happy in every way, of helping him understand that his differences are just an added value.

Maternal strength is configured by this interviewee as one that bridges both the professional and personal environments.

Conclusions

How should we read these girls' discourses about their mothers? It is quite possible, as we mentioned above, that their mothers really are trying to model new mother-daughter relations. It is also possible that some of the statements of our interviewees are gender and role performances, that is, they declare what they have internalized on an aspirational level through models like *Gilmore Girls*, etc., and want to portray their mothers as ideal even if they are not. Either way, why is it that when teen girls are actively looking to understand and empathise with mothers in real life and onscreen, teen media persists in excluding and othering them? Our study does at least suggest that positive ideas about mothers are reaching them through other media forms. Whilst it is very probable that the girls' individualized consumption is more focused on teen content, in which girls may well be focussing on identifying with daughters, collective consumption of more general content survives in everyday experience⁹. In this context, we might hypothesize that some kinds of family drama prevail that offer more sympathetic insight into mothers' lives.

The fact remains that when teen media content mostly indulges in representing mothers as negative characters, or even invisible persona, this representation does not help young women to move beyond so-called “time panic”. Diane Negra first identified this trope as one arising from postfeminist pressure to meet certain traditional targets by a certain age (marriage, motherhood etc). As Susan Pickard argues “negative views of the mid-life woman further reinforce time panic in the Girl as do the paucity of alternative roles to that of wife/mother in mid-life” (Pickard, 2018, p. 8). While we don’t encounter negative views of mid-life women in our interviews (admittedly most of the team was made up of mid-life women!), we can trace a sense of overwhelm in the girls’ “carpe diem” attitude towards adolescence, regarding the need to enjoy life now because being an adult woman/mother is a demanding prospect. Indeed, they are not wrong: motherhood in Italy is notoriously difficult, thanks to a lack of state support, and labour regulations that make part-time work difficult (Saraceno, 2017). The country’s notoriously low birth-rate is in part attributable to the high regard in which mothering as a vocation is held, and the lack of practical support in which to make that a reality.

More work needs to be done to excavate that missing link between the girlhood of the mother and the daughter, grounded not only in shared trauma, but also shared fun and creativity. What role can the media industry itself play in representing motherhood and daughterhood to support societal transformation? We have detected a real appetite for mother-daughter focussed teen drama: the vision of their own mothers brought by these girls, real or not, is still something positive to invest in to promote that female genealogy we so desperately need to maintain feminist gains from one generation to the next. Producers could give girls and their mothers more, and teen female audiences are more than ready for it.

Biographical Notes

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Notes

¹ Finding the mother means giving a further depth to the feminine, originating a deeper fidelity to one's own sex, re-translating relationships with other women and with the present world, realizing freedom in difference so that Antigone's fate is not repeated.

² "suddenly I realize that the beginning I have been seeking is right in front of me: it is knowing how to love the mother. [...] this alone, in fact, breaks the vicious circle and leads me out of the trap of a culture which, by not teaching me to love my mother, has also deprived me of the strength necessary to change her, leaving me only the strength to complain, indefinitely" (Muraro, 2021, p. 13; authors' translation).

³ With the interesting exception of depictions of Mary as daughter with her mother Ann. See Alison Stone (2016) on this.

⁴ "Before the politics of women, between maternal power on the one hand and my own needs on the other, I lacked the passage of love and gratitude. [...] I felt and acted as though the woman who brought me into the world were the enemy of my symbolic independence. [...] it is not accurate to call it a thinking; it is rather an implicit assumption, almost a pattern underlying an entire way of feeling and acting, which nothing from the outside comes to refute, when it concerns a woman, as if it were natural for her to detest her mother and to believe herself detested by her. It is in reality a terrible symbolic disorder" (Muraro, 2021, p. 10; authors' translation).

⁵ <https://leggendaria.it/prodotto/leggendaria-135/>

⁶ The motif of the mother re-directing money originally intended for a dress towards her daughter's independence is also seen in the first Saudi Arabian feature film, *Wadjda* (Haifa Al-Mansour, 2012), in which the mother spends the money originally intended for a dress so seductive as to keep her husband from taking a second wife, on a bicycle for her 12 year-old daughter instead.

⁷ "In traditional culture, maternal power has lacked, and still lacks, the female genealogy. That is to say, it has lacked the appropriate way of expressing and exercising itself. [...] the fact of our fixation on the mother thus ends up being regarded as something pathological; indeed, it ends up actually becoming so, as happens with the real which, finding no symbolic translation, makes us ill" (Muraro, 2021, p. 70; authors' translation).

⁸ <https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/serialit/ruolo-dei-genitori-nel-teen-drama-presenza-ingombrante-o-2125370.html>

⁹ As the research conducted between 2013 and 2018 by Osservatorio Social TV showed, familiar consumption of television especially at lunch and dinner time is still dominant, even if personalized practices continue to emerge among young generations.