

# When Gods Visit the Sins of the Fathers Upon Their Children: The Italian Crime Teen Drama as a Dark Coming-of-Age Story

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## Abstract

“Coming-of-age stories are linked to the concepts of rite of passage and boundary experience” (Driscoll 2011). Adolescence can be outlined as a developmental crisis, a fracture of the unconscious in which the search for one’s identity necessarily passes through a collision with the parental imago. If contemporary teen dramas seem to have neutralized the conflict between parents and children, parental figures — and in particular the father figure — emerge as an instance to symbolize inherited guilt or a prescribed destiny in crime series starring young misfit anti-heroes. This paper aims to offer an investigation of two contemporary Italian coming-of-age crime dramas, *Suburra. The series* (Netflix, 2017-2020) and *Bang Bang Baby* (Prime Video, 2022), which explore the transition from adolescence to adulthood of young heirs of Italian criminal organizations, Darwinially condemned to their own descent into the underworld due to the guilt inherited from their fathers. The investigation aims to combine interplaying methodologies: Murray Smith’s (1995) three-level cognitive paradigm of engagement; the mechanism of engagement with antiheroes playing lead characters (Blanchet and Vaage 2012) as well as the developmental psychopathology approach to adolescence (Ammaniti 2010; Lingiardi and McWilliams 2008).

**Keywords:** Inherited Guilt; Coming of Age; Ndrangheta; Father; Teen Drama.

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“Crimes like lands/are not inherited” (Shakespeare 1605)

## Introduction: Inherited Guilt

In *Timon of Athens* (Shakespeare 1605), the captain of the military brigade Alcibiades utters the famous sentence denying the inheritance of criminal guilt in an attempt to make Timon cease the desire for vengeance he would like to inflict on every Athenian. In Greek tragedy, unfortunate descendants are punished for the sins of their fathers, although presented as innocent in themselves. Inherited guilt establishes the architecture of the story. It shapes the emotional construction of the characters in ancient Greek plays such as *Septem contra Thebas* (Aeschylus 467 BC), where Antigone, Ismene, Eteocles and Polynices are portrayed as the ‘cursed’ children of Oedipus, condemned to serve their father’s guilt by being forced to turn against each other.

This essay aims to investigate two contemporary Italian coming-of-age crime dramas, *Suburra. The series* (Netflix, 2017-2020) and *Bang Bang Baby* (Prime Video, 2022) which explore the transition from adolescence to adulthood of young heirs of Italian criminal organisations, Darwinially (or historically) condemned to their descent into the criminal underworld due to the guilt inherited from their fathers.

To do so, the article first relates the theoretical framework guiding the analysis: Murray Smith’s (1995) cognitive paradigm of three levels of engagement and the mechanism of engagement with antiheroes playing lead characters (Blanchet and Vaage 2012). The two coming-of-age series will also be observed under the magnifying glass of the developmental psychopathology approach to adolescence (Ammaniti 2010; Lingiardi and McWilliams 2008).

In the second part, the essay will focus on analysing the two case studies. Particular emphasis will be placed on the storylining process and constructing the protagonists’ identity instead of the paternal instance. Finally, the essay offers some defining conclusions about how the hybridisation of different genres (crime, teen drama, gangster movies) contributes to a more multifaceted construction of teen characters building their own identity, offering the public male and female youth models, as well as queer models.

## 1 Are teen criminals as anti-heroes destroying their parental imago?

The principle of Historical Nemesis, whereby the sins of the fathers fall on the sons over three generations, is not only a recurring theme in Greek tragedy but marks the birth, in V century democratic Athens ruled by Pericles, of the tragic hero, whose conflict hinges on the theme of guilt, as opposed to the epic hero of Homeric times, whose actions were the effect of a divine plan, and whose dominant theme was that of shame (*aidōs*). The tragic hero possesses “his moral sense, his idea of what is right; he is an inheritor of a blighted past that ensures his demise” (Sewell-Rutter 2007: 28). The protagonists of the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, or Euripides embody values of freedom and responsibility, but above all they have to face up to the sins of their fathers, stained with blood: the murky genealogy of the Atrides and the sins that from Agamemnon will fall on his children — Orestes, Electra and Iphigenia — dealt with in Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*, or the curse that descends from Oedipus that turns siblings against each other afterwards recounted in the saga of the Labdacids. “O our family, the house of Oedipus, all lamentable; alas! Now, indeed, are my father’s curses finding accomplishment”, states Eteocles with despair when it is announced that Polyneices is to stand at the seventh gate in the tragedy *Septem contra Thebas* (653-5).

Inherited guilt is a recurring theme in crime series, with a specific focus on mob-centred series, which depict conflicts within families arising from the need to gain power and maintain it across generations. In series like *Gomorra* (Sky, 2014-2021), the hereditary guilt thread is called into question through the clash between a genetic inheritance — that of Genny Savastano, son of the Don Pietro, initially reluctant, as the arc of the series “reflects his growth from immature slacker to ruthless gangster” (Russo 2017: 16) — and an inheritance won through a Siberian Education in the rules of the criminal world — that of Ciro Di Marzio. Nevertheless, what happens when the leading characters of this criminal rise are teenagers, like the 16-year-old Alice Barone, the female heroine of the teen series *Bang Bang Baby*, or young adults like Aureliano and Spadino, anti-heroes, eager to break their clans’ rules, in the underground, nocturnal Rome of *Suburra*?

In her book *Teen Film* (2011: 66), Cathrine Driscoll points out two concepts about coming of age: rite of passage and experience of limits.

The rite of passage operates in two ways for teen film. The first is as a ritual marking passage between different social states, like graduation ceremonies, or indicating an immanent change of this kind, like 'the prom'. Moreover, the second does not depend on any literal 'rite' and might be more appropriately called an 'experience of limits'. The former is always a cultural rather than merely a personal marker. However, the critical difference lies in whether the rite of passage belongs to one of teen film's principal narrative structures, 'coming of age'.

A much-debated question revolves around whether adolescence or teenage can be considered, from the *developmental psychopathology* point of view (Ammaniti 2010; Lingardi and McWilliams 2008), a moment of transition, according to a paradigm of continuity or, on the contrary, as a break with the past. Authors such as Palmonari (1997) lean towards the hypothesis of adolescence as a break with the past, considering the adolescent's anger as a destructive rage, masking a demand for containment from the parent. The experience of the limit thus becomes disintegrative: in the re-elaboration of the conflict with the parental figures of the past, particularly the paternal one, the adolescent feels a sense of loss, fragmentation and inability to construct a new identity. According to this approach, adolescence can be described as a developmental crisis, a fracture of the unconscious where the definition of the self necessarily passes through the collision with the idealised *parental image* (Kohut 1996) and the overcoming of old, often fragmented and non-integrated internal objects of childhood.

On the opposite pole, authors such as Bloss (1979) and Cahn (1991) suggest a vision of the passage from childhood to adulthood under the sign of continuity. In Cahn's opinion, adolescence represents a 'second birth', understood as a process of 'Subjectivation'. In his work *Du Sujet* (1991), Cahn defines 'subjectivation' as a process of differentiation that starts from the internal need to have one's thoughts, appropriation of one's own sexual body (e.g. Spadino in *Suburra*), finding a new name to define oneself, just like at birth (e.g. Alice Giannatempo who becomes Alice Barone in *Bang Bang Baby*): subjectivation "implies self-creation, becoming the subject of one's existence, structuring oneself, disalienating oneself from the power of the parents and disengaging oneself from the other's expectation and gaze" (Cahn 1991: 123). In other words, the adolescent becomes the subject of the world, his world.

Following this perspective, a core task of adolescence is to develop a coherent and stable sense of identity, thanks also to the maturation of the frontal lobes, the section of the brain responsible for judgement and impulse control and the ability to plan events and make decisions. Identity comprises self-image, self-esteem, individuality, self-reflection, and self-awareness. It implies both continuity ("subjective self") and coherence of personal experience ("definitory self") (Lingardi and McWilliams 2017).

If contemporary Italian teen movies and drama series seem to have neutralised the conflict between parents and children — e.g. *Skam* (2018-) or *Prisma* (2022-), or the crude portrait painted in *La paranza dei bambini* by Claudio Giovanni (2019), where 14-year-olds move against the background, as accurate as rarefied, of a contemporary Naples in which they play at being adults, among toys and guns, in the total absence of parents — parental figures, and in particular fathers, emerge on the contrary as a symbolic instance of original guilt or a prescribed destiny within teen crime series starring young misfits—the three young protagonists of *Suburra. The series* — Aureliano, Spadino and Lele — as well as the very young heiress of the 'Ndrangheta, Alice, embody models of contemporary tragic heroes because the conflict on which they are built appeals to classical tragedy, that of heroes free to think and act out their destiny, but condemned to answer for the sins of which their fathers are stained. Their criminal achievement, chosen or inflicted, however, places them on a further plane: that of the antihero, described as "one who lacks the attributes of the traditional protagonist or hero, such as courage, honesty or grace", according to Amanda Lotz (2014: 63). "Dark men in dark times doing dark things" wrote Van Der Werff (2013), referring the ambivalent morality of the antihero to external causes. Dostoevskij first applied the antihero designation in *Memoirs from the Underground* (1864) to denote the character who pursues humiliation and self-destruction in an extreme attempt at rebellion against the real world around him. From a biological or evolutionary point of view, not only *nature*, the DNA — the patriarchal line — that determines the evolution of the antihero, but also the environmental context, the nurture. Following these definitions, which come closest to describing the starting condition of the leading characters of *Suburra. The*

*series* and *Bang Bang Baby*, it is possible to embrace the perspective offered by Margrethe Bruun Vaage in her book *The Antihero in American Television*, who refers to the antihero notion “to a morally flawed main character whom the spectator is nonetheless encouraged to feel with, like and root for” (2015: XVI).

This essay's second methodological assumption refers to the cognitive theories of character engagement (Blanchet and Vaage 2012). The moral evaluation of the antihero by the audience does not take place in a rational form but instead on emotionality and intuition. The serial format, which allows the construction of a sense of familiarity with characters, is a fundamental requirement for the viewer's engagement mechanism with antiheroes. Retrieving the reflection introduced by David Bordwell on the ‘friendship’ power of television (1993), the authors argue that “familiar characters are powerful tools to get the spectator hooked. Furthermore, by generating an impression of a shared history, television series activate mental mechanisms similar to those activated by friendship in real life” (Blanchet and Vaage 2012: 2). Vaage identifies two internal devices within the narrative construction of a story that enables the process of engagement with antiheroes: the “reality check”, which consists of the comparison between the events described in fiction and the reference reality of the spectator, and the “fictional relief”, e.g. the adrenalised feeling offered by the screen of actually experiencing the narrated events, but without suffering the negative consequences they would have in real life.

Finally, the analysis of the construction of the figures of antiheroic young Italian criminals in the two-mentioned series will be enriched by the reflections of Murray Smith, who speaks of “perverse allegiances”, and by the application of his paradigm of the three levels of involvement: *recognition*, *alignment* and *allegiance*. According to Murray, engaging with controversial and perverse characters is made possible by “a group of undesirable traits is linked with more desirable ones, and this has the effect of enhancing the severity of our judgement of the character” (1995: 209). Murray’s “perverse allegiances” can be linked to the notion of “sympathetic perpetrators” coined by Dana Renga, referring to the representation of “mafiosi, gangsters, criminals, and corrupt legislators or industrialists” in contemporary Italian television and platforms: these “bad guys who are depicted as glamorous, attractive, sympathetic, and redeemed or redeemable” are “defined by their ordinariness” (2019: 21). In particular, Renga emphasises how the portrayal of the family allows the audience to experience the antiheroes in a different setting or assists in explaining why men do bad things, as we are granted a window into their private lives: this familiarisation process helps viewers forgive sympathetic perpetrators for their atrocious acts.

## 2 *Suburra*. First Commandment: Kill the father (but not your own)

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the etymology of “patrimony” relates to “social organisation defined by male dominance or relationship through the male line”. The idea of a blood lineage running through the male heirs of criminal organisations is at the heart of the Italian series *Suburra*. *The series* was dubbed, in its debut, the “Italian answer to *Narcos*” (Nguyen 2017). “In *Suburra*. *The series*, male power and patrilineal succession are front and centre, regardless of who is looking at, and liking, which”, states Renga in his work on ‘sympathetic perpetrators’ in Italian contemporary series (2019: 250).

Prequel to the 2015 movie by Stefano Sollima, Italy’s first made-for-Netflix series, quickly became a Franchise IP to the point that the platform released its sequel *Suburraeterna* in November 2023. *Suburra*. *The series* is based on the novel of the same name by Giovanni De Cataldo and Carlo Bonini, which chronicles the real Church, State, and Mafia *affaire* in a corrupt deal that took place in 2008 to turn Ostia and its port into the Sicilian Mafia’s primary gateway to the capital. Leading anti-hero Aureliano Adami is a peroxide blond thug whose father, Tullio, is a semi-potent man in Ostia, who carries out the orders given by Samurai, a mysterious and dim figure roaming the streets of Rome on his scooter, inspired by the criminal boss and former terrorist Massimo Carminati, arrested in December 2014 as part of the *Mafia Capitale* investigation. *Suburra*. *The series* opens with a classic ticking clock: Samurai has only 21 days to finalise the purchase of some land on the Ostia seafront, partly owned by the Vatican and partly by the Adami family, and get the Building Commission to approve the amalgamation of this land into a single lot: this is a preliminary step to the construction of Ostia harbour and the closing of the deal with the Mafia. Aureliano, determined to oppose Samurai’s plan and therefore in open conflict with his father Tullio, will be joined by two young men of the same age: Alberto

'Spadino' Anacleti, the son of a gangster family referred to as 'gipsies', and privileged Gabriele 'Lele' Marchilli, a middle-class son of a cop, who provides MDMA and other drugs in the Roman nightlife, and, unbeknownst to him, also in the gym run by Samurai's men.

Placing charismatic and attractive anti-heroes at the centre of Italian history (or history in the making) gives substance to what Vivian Sobchack, in her essay *History Happens* discusses as a "hunger for history" (2013: 6), meaning this expression of a new self-awareness of history and the audience's desire to be part of the unfolding of history in the present. Moreover, these three alluring young men contribute to the narrative of Italy's traumatic history in pleasing terms, satisfying what Catherine O'Rawe defines as "Italian cinema's current obsession with a return to a recent past" (2014: 140).

Although they both embody the younger generation of the Roman underworld and come from rival clans, Aureliano and Spadino are given a narrative treatment that is totally at odds with their supposed roles. The impetus that drives both of their paths in the series is "the endeavour to take his (their) father's place so that he (they) can come-of-age in the streets on his (their) own terms" (Renga 2016: 70). From the very first scenes of the series, both are portrayed as being marginalised by their own family: Aureliano has an open conflict with his father Tullio, who prefers his sister Livia in running the criminal business, relegating him to petty dealing; Spadino, as it is shown in Episode 1 (*21 Days*), is forced to accept the arranged marriage with Angelica and cannot reveal his actual sexual orientation because, as his Sinti mother tells him, "whatever you are, you cannot be that here, in this house, in this family. You cannot". The choice to introduce the two young characters by immediately placing them in their home environment, as dysfunctional vertices of family relationships driven by self-interest and the perpetration of criminal positions of power, produces an immediate effect in the viewer, generating 'recognition' and 'alignment', as they are described by Murray Smith "complete access to what that character knows, thinks, feels, and perceives" (1995: 144). Proceeding step by step, the essay will first focus on the construction of Aureliano's character in the first season of the series, analysing his growth path both from the point of view of developmental psychopathology and how it is intertwined with the construction of the antihero and his "allegiance" (1995: 62) with the spectator.

Aureliano enters into the series in Episode 1 amid an argument with his father, Tullio, who rejects in hasty and humiliating tones his proposal to turn the family's seaside cabin — initially owned by his mother — into a nightclub. The following scene immediately reveals the hallmark characterising his path: an uncontrollable, atavistic rage unafraid of consequences. Aureliano alerted that a 'gipsy' is dealing in front of his club, catches up with him and hits him with a head butt. The same blind rage that will lead him to kill Boris, the drug-dealing gipsy, at the end of the pilot, after his father had intimated to him to apologise to him to avoid starting a war between the Adami and Anacleti clans. Rage appears as a hallmark trait in the transition from adolescence to adulthood, partly due to the lack of maturation of the frontal lobes and partly due to the lack of emotional self-regulation, which may result in *Oppositional-Provocative Disorder* or an *Antisocial Personality Disorder* (Lingiardi and McWilliams 2017). However, rage directed toward the outside world also has a clear developmental function: turning it outward, through *acting out*, keeps the adolescent's inner world 'sheltered' so that he can introject non-destructive rage that can be contained.

Conversely, his inner world would become terrorising, like that of psychotics. Aureliano is marked by a lack of 'containment' due, as the viewers would later discover, to the absence of a mother figure — a 'good enough mother' — capable of fulfilling the function of 'Holding' (Winnicott 1957), which consists in mediating the emotions that overflow from the outside world into consciousness, to prevent the child from being overwhelmed by them. The conflict with the father is also structured from the loss of his mother, who died to give birth to Aureliano: on one hand, generating Tullio's unconscious rage toward his son, and, on the other, preventing the protagonist from ridding himself of the "lost and fragmented objects of his childhood" (Winnicott 1957: 148) reified in the Ostia seaside cabin, which acquires in Aureliano's mind the meaning of a 'transitional object' to mediate the absence of maternal attachment. The feeling of uncontrollable rage is counterbalanced in the pilot by an action that reveals a sense of pity: Aureliano decides to take care of Boris's dog after killing its owner, even though he makes him vulnerable as it ties him to the murder. In this unexpected action, it is possible to trace an initial level of 'allegiance' between the anti-hero and the viewer.

The father-son struggle finds its core in Episode 4 (*Enjoy your meal*). After Spadino spared Aureliano from the vengeance ordered by his clan, the Anacleti (Episode 3), Tullio appears concerned for his son's fate and

determined to repay the ‘gipsy’ in the same coin: “me dovevano sparà perché ti accorgessi di me?” (“Did I need to be shot for you to notice me?”) Aureliano replies in a sarcastic tone. Fatherhood is emphasised later during the visit of Samurai, who orders Tullio not to avenge Aureliano. “Che cosa avresti fatto se fosse stato tuo figlio” (“What would you have done if it was your son?”), Tullio asks the boss — “Per questo non li ho fatti” (“That’s why I don’t have them”). Samurai replies, who in the last scene will be shown killing his horse, the most precious affection he possesses, at the riding stables. The result is a clash between father and son: Aureliano accuses Tullio of not rebelling against Samurai’s orders, including surrendering his mother’s cabin to him to close the Ostia harbour deal. Aureliano makes explicit his father’s anger: “da quando sono nato che non mi puoi vedere perché pensi che mamma è morta per colpa mia” (“since I was born you can’t see me because you think mum died because of me”). Original guilt is grafted onto the father-son relationship, almost determining Tullio’s choice to exclude Aureliano from the central criminal businesses. Nevertheless, Aureliano’s claims and regrets collide with a precipitous turn of events: at the end of the episode, Lele kills Tullio, as ordered by Samurai, who had threatened him that he would kill his father as well if he did not. Tullio’s death marks a point of no return: “E’ come quando odi qualcuno / E all’improvviso non ce sta più/ Ti accorgi che te manca / Perché non lo puoi manco più odià” (“It’s like when you hate somebody / And suddenly he’s gone / You realise that you miss him / Because you can’t hate him any more”) states Aureliano. For the leading character, this authentic, physical death marks the end of youth and the transition into adulthood, but also a ‘second birth’, as staged by the nude bath that Aureliano takes in Ostia’s sea at the beginning of Episode 5 (*She-Wolf*). Through the process of “subjectivisation” (Cahn 1991), understood as becoming the subject of one’s existence, Aureliano can finally decide to become the leader of his world, but above all, of his father’s underworld of criminal business. In the episode’s finale, he brings Lele and Spadino together in an iconic location, his mother’s seaside cabin, pronouncing the sentence “chiudiamo con le famiglie e se ripigliamo la vita nostra” (“we close with families and resume our lives”). Aureliano gives rise to an unprecedented ‘band of brothers’, which subverts the rules of the classic gangster movie because it establishes an alliance whose members belong to opposing or rival clans or, in Lele’s case, to the son of a policeman. From a narrative point of view, Episode 5 marks the midpoint of the series: the rise of a new alliance and the acceptance of a mission by the three leading characters, i.e. the fight against the common antagonist, Samurai. For this reason, the midpoint also constitutes the climax at which the greatest ‘allegiance’ occurs between the anti-hero Aureliano and the viewer: audiences can “morally evaluate” his character because they feel they have “reliable access to the character’s state of mind” (Smith 1995: 77) and understand what led to character to act as he does.

The reversal of the stylistic features of the classic gangster hero is the matrix on which Spadino’s character is also built. Robert Warshaw, in his essay *The Gangster as a Tragic Hero* (1948: 243), establishes the mechanism behind the narrative construction of the tragic criminal hero:

On another level, the quality of irrational brutality and rational enterprise become one. Since we do not see the rational and routine aspects of the gangster’s behaviour, the practice of brutality — the quality of unmixing criminality — becomes the totality of his career.

In *Suburra. The series*, the narrative matrix is developed according to an inverted model: “Aureliano and Spadino are constantly humanised thanks to diegetic contributions that are uncorrelated with their status, or which actively help to deconstruct it” (Canto 2022: 6).

Spadino is a “sui generis queer protagonist” (Renga 2016: 71); he represents the second gay gangster character in a Netflix production, after the powerful drug trafficker Helmer “Pacho” Herrera in *Narcos*, who has “revolutionised what it means to be a powerful gay man” (Friedlander 2017). Unlike Aureliano and Lele, in Spadino’s family, the father is absent — albeit secondary, there is the mother — but he is replaced by the merciless and unsympathetic character of his brother Manfredi, the bearer of antiquated and violent patriarchal values (also towards Spadino’s future wife, Angelica). The clash with Manfredi’s character, a worse villain, and the sudden revelation of his sexual identity in Episode 1, underlined even more by the obligation of an arranged marriage from which he cannot escape, allow an immediate ‘alignment’ with Spadino in the viewer, unlike in the film *Suburra*, where his character was portrayed as an unmanageable teenage thug, who played at threatening politicians, in *Suburra*. In the series, Spadino is portrayed as a profoundly compassionate tragic hero whose *fatal flaw* is planted. Contrary to Aureliano and Lele, Spadino does not commit murder during the series and refuses to be a man, in the sense embraced by Manfredi — iconic is the opening scene in which he

initiates Spadino to kill a sheep — “instead preferring to spend his time playing and plotting with his friends, or in his club dancing” (Renga 2016: 72). His path of revelation (McKee 1999) is constructed following the stylistic features of a ‘bromance’ (De Angelis 2014), that with Aureliano, which finds its climax in Episode 9 (*Pitch Black*): after having finally stood up to his brother Manfredi, exalted to have broken with his family of origin, Spadino runs to Aureliano, and kisses him in the rush of euphoria. Aureliano, shocked, rejects and insults him with homophobic slurs. Spadino’s *coming out* is placed at a crucial moment in the dramaturgy of the series: the second act climax, which closes the second act, symbolises the moment when the three leading characters are furthest from achieving their goal. Second act climax usually pushes the plot in a new direction and leads the story into the final act: Lele has betrayed the two friends by ambushing them in Episode 8, Aureliano rejects Spadino’s love and insults him for his sexual orientation in Episode 9: the ‘band of brothers’ seems irremediably broken.

This dramatic placement emphasises, even more, the tragic nature of Spadino’s revelation to Aureliano: according to McKee, “true character is revealed in the choices a human being makes under pressure — the greater the pressure, the deeper the revelation” (1999: 56). At the same time, Spadino’s coming out allows the ‘allegiance’ between viewer and anti-hero to be sealed: for Smith ‘allegiance’ overlaps with the ‘level of engagement’ in which audiences can “morally evaluate” characters because they feel they have “reliable access to character’s state of mind” and understand what led to characters to act as they do (Smith 1995:84).

From the perspective of developmental psychopathology, the discovery and definition of one’s gender identity and sexual orientation represent an essential developmental task which finds its focus in adolescence and early adulthood. In many cases, the subjective experience of one’s sexed body, a body that is still unknown and yet to be explored, opens up to possible *dysmorphia*, *gender dysphoria*, or *gender identity disorders* (Lingiardi and McWilliams 2008: 263). Thus, it looks compelling how Spadino’s coming-out is placed in the immediacy of the rejection of the patriarchal family bond: Spadino does not literally kill Manfredi — it will be Aureliano who shoots him in the season finale — but denies his authority, keeping himself in a liminal zone, by agreeing to marry Angelica. Spadino stands as an unprecedented and profoundly tragic antihero who opposes the “brutal masculinity” (Albrecht 2015: 74) that had always typified the crime genre, bringing to the stage a queer identity resulting in “the reshaping of bodies through the enjoyment of what or who has been barred [...], creating the possibility of social forms that are not constrained by the form of the heterosexual couple” (Ahmed 2014: 165).

A strength of *Suburra. The series* is the ‘triangulation of the killing of fathers’: none of the three main characters is tainted by the murder of their father. Lele cold-bloodedly kills Tullio on Samurai’s orders to save his own father; Aureliano unknowingly shoots Lele’s policeman father during the ambush at Isola Tiberina. Spadino is the only one who is never guilty of murder (at least in season one): Aureliano will hit Manfredi at the gym. Thus, the killing of the father appears to be linked to an external, higher will or fortune, leaving the antiheroes free from any taint but conscious bearers of inherited guilt. The feeling that pervades them is a will to rebel against this inherited guilt, against the fate in their DNA. However, in their revolution against archaic forms of paternalism, their atavistic rage always consubstantiates in the same underworld of criminality with no escape.

If fathers die, mothers do not even appear in the series. Except for Adelaide, Spadino’s mother, Aureliano’s mother, died giving birth to him, while Lele’s mother fled when he was too young to remember her. Not even their names are revealed. The female figures that shore up the series’ intentionally masculine universe are a femme fatale, Sara Monaschi; the innocent betrothed Angelica, and Livia, Aureliano’s plucky sister, one of the first “Mafia Women” (Buonanno 2017: 25), anti-heroine drug dealers and underworld businesswomen, the same ones who take centre stage in *Bang Bang Baby*.

### 3 *Bang Bang Baby*. “My father, I will not kill you.”

“Padre mio, non ti ucciderò  
Fino a dove posso spingermi per amore.  
Sono ancora ad aspettare tra giocattoli e pistole  
E mille mila volti, non mi riconosco più  
Sono ancora ad ascoltare tra i rumori e le parole  
Io non fuggirò”

(*L'eccezione*, Madame 2022)

“Bang Bang Baby: vous allez prendre une gifle devant cette série sur une ado en quête d’amour paternel” wrote Kalindi Ramphul, at the release of Prime Video’s series in France. *Bang Bang Baby* tells the tale of Alice Gianmatteo’s descent into the underworld of the ‘Ndrangheta in the 1980s ‘da bere’ Milan. Alice is a 16-years-old teenager who lives with her mother in Bussolengo, a small town in the Milanese hinterland: her life is turned upside down when she accidentally discovers that her father, Santo, whom she believed to be dead after an ambush at the amusement park before her eyes, is actually still alive and has been arrested as a powerful Mafia boss.

The series is loosely based on the autobiographical novel *L’Intoccabile* by Marisa Merico (2022), niece of the ruthless Maria Serraino, the leading woman of the ‘Ndrangheta gang of Reggio Calabria; however, unlike *Suburra. The series*, the literary property, becomes only the weak starting point to give shape to a hyper-realistic and sleek coming-of-age, a modern black tale painted through the neon tones of 1980s night clubs and vintage advertising signs, populated by a gallery of grotesque characters, such as Nereo Ferrau, an ultra-violent boss but also a boy scout leader by profession, mad about George Michael. Unlike the Sicilian Mafia and Camorra, the narrative of the ‘Ndrangheta has found little space in Italian cinema and series, except Jonas Carpignano’s *A Chiara* (2021), which once again focuses on a teenage female protagonist in search of her father, Francesco Munzi’s film *Black souls (Anime nere)*, 2014), and the British-Italian co-production TV series *The Good Mothers* (Disney+, 2023).

In the absence of established imagery, as in *Gomorra*, *Bang Bang Baby* has the virtue of bringing to life an unprecedented visual and narrative universe. It is a grim gangster movie rich in symbolic elements—just like the mafia affiliation—and iconographic divertissements that invoke our *fauxstalgia* (the nostalgia for something one has not experienced or which never existed) for the 1980s.

The series opens as an archetypical coming-of-age story, echoing the stylistic features of the ‘hero’s journey’ (Vogel 2007): Alice, just like *Alice in Wonderland*, after discovering that her father is alive from a newspaper clipping, pays him a visit in prison — with the help of her grandmother Lina, Grandma Heroine — and, after a brief initial reluctance, accepts his call. Suddenly, in Episode 2 (*Casa Barone*), the sullen and always self-defensive teenager who was bullied at her school desks in the pilot carries out the mission her father assigned her: to torch in the open countryside the body of U’ Damerino, a politician and grey eminence of the ‘Ndrangheta in Milan, who was supposed to facilitate the Malpensa deal for the Barone family. Santo, Alice’s father, had killed him by mistake during a scuffle after being caught in bed with his wife. Coldly and determinedly, Alice makes the corpse disappear from the murder flat — also mocking Nonna Lina, who is on the man’s trail — drives the car at night and then sets fire to the body without any apparent remorse, unlike *Suburra. The series*, Alice’s sudden criminal actions, from school desks to burning corpses, still does not allow the viewer to appeal to ‘alignment’ with her feelings and actions.

The first part of the series traces Alice’s transformation, step by step, from a bullied teenager to a daring young woman: the makeover — with the help of the hairdresser Giuseppina, U’ Damerino’s widow, and thanks to the Monclear gifted by her father for the accomplished mission — allows her to be spotted by the most popular classmate finally; the change of her last name from Gianmatteo to Barone, her father’s surname, is not only a tangible sign of her belonging to the crime family but of her choice to be a new self; the gun pulled out in the school bathroom reveals that Alice now knows how to defend herself against yet another bullying attempt. Episode 4 (*Scherzi del destino*) opens and ends with an inner monologue of the anti-heroine on the value of predestination: Alice argues that “il destino è qualcosa che ti scorre nelle vene” (“fate is something that runs



through your veins”), something you cannot escape, like an inherited guilt, but equally fate “ti illude dicendoti che le cose possono cambiare, mentre non cambiano mai” (“Fate is something that runs through your veins, fooling you into believing that things may change when they never do”). In Episode 5 (*Game Over*), events spiral out of control, and Alice's father reveals his true nature. After the police discover the charred remains of 'U Damerino's corpse, Santo proposes that Alice should flee with him. Before they leave, Santo murders his ex-lover Giuseppina in cold blood in front of Alice. This act shatters Alice's expectations of her father. The young girl feels betrayed and pulls a gun against her father: the gesture coincides with the midpoint of the series, in which the protagonist is at the furthest point from achieving her goal. Santo is not the father she had imagined and relied upon: Alice is forced to come to terms with abandoning the idealised *parental imago* that still lived in her consciousness as a child. When her father is shot, Alice seems to re-experience the trauma of her childhood — the ambush at the amusement park — and something in her is shattered: she decides to help her father again, whom from now on she will no longer call 'Dad' but only 'Santo'.

The physical makeover, the appropriation of the name 'Barone', as well as the abandonment of the idealised *parental imago* — in the meaning proposed by Kohut as “a narcissistic configuration that arises from the child's attribution of former, lost narcissistic perfection to an admired and omnipotent self-object. The baby attempts to maintain the original perfection and omnipotence by imbuing the rudimentary you, the adult, with absolute power and perfection” (1966: 246) — these are crucial milestones in the transition from adolescence to adulthood, according to *developmental psychopathology*.

The ambivalent, fragmented, irresolute relationship with her father, Santo, guides the entire second part of the series: *plot* and *story* overlap. At the same time, criminal events are affected by Alice's internal and external conflict with her father. If Alice's goal is to save her father from the sentence imposed on him by Santa — a 'Ndrangheta syndicate — for the killing of 'U Damerino, the anti-heroine constantly seems to shirk this inherited guilt for a fault that is not her own, but at the same time, she is unable to abandon the idea of a father who is still idealised. Santo enters her teenage life like an “atomic bomb” — as Alice will call him in Episode 8 (*Angeli*), which symbolically opens with the final scene of *The Day After* (1983) — marking a before and after, condemning her to the loss of innocence, the abandonment of fairy tales (“Non sono più la principessa di papà”, whose literal translation: “I am no longer Daddy's little princess”) and the confrontation with the destiny written in one's DNA when one is heir to a criminal family. The “unfreezing of the ancient objects of one's childhood” (Carbone Tirelli 2010) occurs in a deeply touching sequence in Episode 9 (*Fa' la cosa giusta*). After having escaped again, Santo kidnaps Alice and takes her to the abandoned amusement park where he had been ambushed 10 years earlier when Alice was only 6 years old. The sight of the merry-go-round from where she and her mother had witnessed Santo's shooting during a moment of nostalgic family happiness forces Alice to ‘unfreeze’ that absolute, frozen time of trauma, that foundational and unresolved event of her childhood that has prevented her from entering adulthood.

In the bizarre series finale, after choosing to enter the witness protection programme with her father, renouncing her child life forever, Alice ambushes her father in a witty sequence in the caruggi of Genoa: she shoots him straight in the chest to the notes of the song *L'eccezione* by Madame, after calling him 'dad' one last time. Alice finally killed her father, freeing herself of the guilt she inherited, but perhaps also chose? The unexpected reversal of the series finale reveals that Santo is not dead; it was just a set-up for Santa to believe him dead, to finally set him free. Alice accomplished her mission; she saved her father. However, perhaps for Alice, finally, that cumbersome, lying but so madly loved father did die to make way for her criminal rise in the 'Ndrangheta.

## 4 Conclusions

This essay aims to closely analyse how the inherited guilt of fathers influences the development of the main characters and the narrative plots in the series. It explores how this shaping of the characters affects the viewers' engagement with these “sympathetic perpetrators” (Renga 2019). Moreover, it will examine how the blending of different genres (crime and teen) contributes to a more complex portrayal of the characters, providing role models for male, female, and queer youth.

In *Suburra. The series* investigation focused only on the first season because it stands for the ‘foundation of the antiheroes’. Aureliano, Lele and Spadino are freed from family law by the death of their fathers — although

Manfredi, Spadino's putative father, is not dead. However, his presumed death becomes the planting for the pay-off of his natural death in season 3. The father's death seems to turn the three antiheroes into creators of their destiny, acting as the definitive transition from adolescence to adulthood. Aureliano will be driven by his *hybris* of conquest and desire to destroy Samurai. At the same time, Spadino will only compromise with Angelica — pregnancy — in order to remain head of the Anacleti clan. However, this illusory emancipation conceals a desire to remain firmly anchored to the fate inherited from their fathers: Aureliano is driven by a craving for revenge against Samurai for what he did to his family, Spadino is unable to free himself and his queer nature from the obligations imposed by the Sinti dynasty. The real tragic hero is Lele, who does not come from the criminal world. However, he is spiralled out into it: the killing of his father marks a tragic *fatal flaw* that will lead him, after his initial decision to become a policeman, following his father's path, to commit suicide at the beginning of season 3, unable to endure such a fate. The conflict with one's fathers and their consequences have the advantage in the series of shaping up believable, nuanced antiheroes with whom the audience can form a true 'allegiance'. Crime series starring teen or very young characters like *Suburra*. *The series* allows us to "consider the criminal figure through the prism of the ethical dimension, which the spectator must grasp to understand the fundamentally complex phenomenon of organised crime" (Canto 2022: 9).

Alice, the teenage anti-heroine of *Bang Bang Baby*, undoubtedly emerges as a unique female model on the contemporary national scene: Alice stands "beyond the often one-dimensional 'strong female character' or 'ass-kicking babe' stereotypes, and equally past the necessity for criminal women on-screen to be 'good'" (Buonanno 2017: 11). Nevertheless, her character does not allow for a true 'allegiance' with the viewer: when we embark on our adventure in Alice's Underworld it is required to embrace a *suspension of disbelief* that prevents us from the 'alignment' with Alice's emotions and feeling. The *grotesque* tone continually alienates: Alice turning into the Incredible Hulk, the Japanese manga-inspired ending in which the anti-heroine transforms into a cartoon, as well as the cinematography that often indulges in crafting a hyper-sleek aesthetic, continues to push the viewer out of real empathy (and sympathy) with her character. After all, being a criminal is just a game 'between toys and guns'. Her poignant love for Santo creates a mitigating factor in her descent into criminal hell. Santo embodies a father who constantly escapes but whom, at the same time, Alice would kill for the pain he has inflicted on her — the original trauma and its overcoming through candy binges — but who remains the key driver of Alice's transformation from child to young criminal female anti-heroine.

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