

# An infinite spectrum of colours 1

Teaching gender issues through *Prisma*

**Arianna Vergari**

*is a Research Fellow at Link Campus University of Rome and a member of the PRIN 2020 project "The Atlas of Italian 'Giallo': Media History and Popular Culture (1954–2020)" and the PRIN 2022 PNRR project "WokeIt: Investigating Representation, Inclusivity, and Social Responsibility in Rai's Fiction Audiovisual Productions (2015–2022)." She also works as a filmmaker and visual education operator in schools.*

**M. Elena D'Amelio**

*is Associate Professor in the Department of Humanities at the University of San Marino. Her main research interests focus on Italian stardom and celebrity, gender and motherhood studies, transnational cinema and serial dramas, memory and media. She is the author of La Diva Madre (Meltemi 2024).*

**Valentina Re**

*(<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2267-819X>) is Professor of Film and Media Studies at Link Campus University. She is the PI of the research project "The Atlas of Italian 'Giallo': Media History and Popular Culture (1954-2020)" funded by the Italian Ministry of University and Research, and WP leader of the CERV project "GEMINI. Gender Equality through Media Investigation and New Training Insights".*

**Gianluigi Rossini**

*is Assistant Professor in Tenure Track in Film and Media Studies at Universitas Mercatorum. He worked as a post-doc researcher for the CERV project "GEMINI. Gender Equality through Media Investigation and New Training Insights" and for the PRIN-PNRR project "CineAb—Rediscovering and promoting the film and audiovisual heritage in the Abruzzo Region.*

## Abstract

This article presents the research underpinning the video essay *An Infinite Spectrum of Colours: Teaching Gender Issues through Prisma* (also included in this special issue) and aims to explore the value of serial dramas as tools for discussing gender issues and enhancing media literacy in high school students.

Through interviews with industry professionals, textual analysis and analysis of promotional materials, this work explores *Prisma* (2022-2024), an Italian coming-of-age series co-produced by Amazon Prime Video and Cross Productions. *Prisma* builds on the “SKAM methodology,” which includes in-depth research, youth interviews, and consultant advice to engage viewers with authentic narratives around gender, identity, inclusivity, and disability. Its thoughtful and educational approach to gender-related topics makes it a valuable case study. In particular, the article focuses on the “coming out” theme, examining it through three lenses: a) narrative techniques that challenge stereotypes by subverting the viewers’ expectations; b) media literacy, comparing coming out scenes from other series; and c) gender insights, exploring how this theme resonates with non-binary and fluid identities.

**Keywords:** Italian serial dramas, coming out, gender identities, non-binarism, media literacy

## Introduction

This article presents the research underpinning the video essay *An Infinite Spectrum of Colours: Teaching Gender Issues through Prisma* (also included in this special issue). Together, the article and the video essay propose an audiovisual pedagogical approach that employs serial dramas as a means to foster critical discussions on gender issues and to strengthen media literacy skills among high school students.

Drawing on interviews with industry professionals—including Ludovico Bessegato (*Prisma*’s screenwriter and director) and Maddalena Rinaldo (Head of Content for Cross Productions)—as well as promotional materials (e.g., pressbooks, press releases), publicly accessible resources from desktop production studies, and textual analysis, this contribution focuses on the Italian coming-of-age drama *Prisma* (Amazon Prime Video, 2022-2024). The article is

structured into four sections. The first situates *Prisma* within the broader landscape of Italian teen dramas, tracing its connections to *SKAM Italia* and examining the production methodology that informed its creation. The second section offers a close reading of a key “coming out” scene, highlighting how the series subverts viewer expectations and challenges gender stereotypes through specific narrative and stylistic choices. The third section expands the analysis by comparing *Prisma*’s coming out narrative to those found in other recent television dramas, thereby situating it within a broader audiovisual context. Finally, the fourth section explores the pedagogical potential of *Prisma* in high school education, discussing how the series can be used to foster critical thinking about gender representation and to enhance media literacy among students.

### **Prism Generation: From *SKAM Italia* to *Prisma***

*Prisma* is a coming-of-age serial drama co-produced by Amazon Prime Video with Cross Productions, the production company behind *SKAM Italia* (TIMVision 2018-19, Netflix 2020-2024), the Italian adaptation of the popular Norwegian (Sundet 2020; Antonioni et al. 2021) format, cowritten and codirected by Ludovico Bessegato—who is also the creator of *Prisma*. From season 2, Beta Film handles international sales in all international territories outside Italy—where the show is available exclusively on Amazon Prime Video (Vivarelli 2023).

As stated by Maddalena Rinaldo, *Prisma* adopted the methodology used both by the original *SKAM* and by the Italian adaptation, which means to extract themes, plots and dialogues of the series from research conducted on real teenagers: “we had to conduct thousands of interviews with young people, we had to have consultants, we had to go right into schools and observe” (Rinaldo 2023). The aim of this process is to convey a genuine portrayal of youth experiences and their engagement with gender, identity, inclusivity, and disability. Applying this methodology to original content, *Prisma* is a good example of an Italian production directly addressing gender issues by narrating the lives of a group of adolescents in a provincial town. Bessegato explains:

I had the opportunity to tell stories about people younger than I am, mentored by Norwegian showrunner [and

Skam creator] Julie Andem. [...] After five years on this journey, I felt the need to take everything I learned and try to do something that is completely ours [...]. Something that started from our observation of reality; of our context. Something that showed that we weren't just good adapters, but were able to offer our own perspective on that world. A new narrative, which brings together years of study and observation of that world with our personal idea of cinema and our aesthetics. (Vivarelli 2022)

TV series targeted specifically at a young audience are, with some exceptions, a quite recent phenomenon in Italy, mostly introduced in the late 1990s through US imports (Fornasari 2021), but the growth of locally produced young adult/adolescent serial dramas has been boosted in the last five years both by the entry of private SVOD operators into the Italian market and by the response of the public broadcaster Rai through its online portal RaiPlay (Barra 2023). In this context, the new locally produced teen dramas draw many of their tropes from US models and are often compared to the same US models by their viewers: *Prisma* was, in fact, often compared to series like *Transparent* (2014-2019) and *Euphoria* (2019-), despite its close relationship with *SKAM*.

*Prisma* tells the story of identical teenage twins, Andrea and Marco, and their community of friends, who, in their daily lives, explore gender identities and roles, push the boundaries of sexual orientation, and struggle with discrimination and stereotypes in a small town, Latina, located a few kilometres from the sea and about sixty kilometres from Rome. "Generation Prisma", reads an Italian interview with Bessegato, who talks about a "generation that seems to live and choose the spaces in between in the broadest possible sense":

A generation and a world in which the very concept of diversity seems to no longer suffice to describe reality. [...] Only an infinity of unique existences. We borrowed the image of the optical prism, which manages to break down light, only apparently white, into the infinite spectrum of colors that composes it. (Vivarelli 2022)

On September 11, 2024, Ludovico Bessegato emotionally announced on Instagram that Amazon Prime would not renew *Prisma* for a third season.

This cancellation sparked a wave of disappointment on social media, raising concerns about media representation and streaming platforms' shift towards mainstream content. Fans argue that this trend undermines niche, high-quality series and reduces diversity. Criticism also extends to global media companies, accusing them of sidelining their diversity rhetoric for financial gain.

In response, *Prisma*'s fans have launched an online petition<sup>1</sup> urging Amazon to reconsider its decision, stressing the series' role in addressing taboo topics and promoting critical social issues, particularly around the LGBTQ+ community. The petition calls for a third season to ensure the continuation of *Prisma*'s impact in challenging stereotypes and fostering public dialogue. In September 2025, one year later, the public broadcaster RAI announced that it had acquired the free-to-air linear television rights for the first two seasons (Rocco 2024).

### **How *Prisma* defies expectations and challenges gender stereotypes: The coming out narrative**

One of the most compelling aspects of *Prisma* is its ability to challenge gender stereotypes. Through the mise en scene, dialogues, and narrative choices, the show questions perceived social expectations of gender roles and gendered behaviours and encourages us to adopt a different perspective on what it means to be socially constructed in binary terms. The show defies our expectations about social behaviours, surprises us, and encourages us to see things from different perspectives. Breaking down gender stereotypes and defying our expectations is at the core of the drama's main plot. The twins attend the same high school, but while Andrea is self-assured and popular, Marco is shy and gloomy and does not befriend others easily. The narrative reverses viewer expectations since the one who turns out to have a "secret life" and explores gender fluidity is Andrea, who cross-dresses as a woman in the basement and as a woman flirts online with Daniele, a boy from the same school.

In this article, we focus on a specific scene from *Prisma*'s first season<sup>2</sup> to illustrate how TV series can challenge stereotypes and over-

turn viewers' expectations through specific narrative techniques, with particular reference to the theme of "coming out".

As we mentioned, throughout the series Andrea explores their gender identity, and in the penultimate episode, during a night out in Rome, they finally dress as a woman in public. Andrea's gender identity remains fluid until the end of the series. However, in the season 1 finale (S01E08), advised by the volunteer of an LGBTQ+ helpline, they decide to finally come out by telling that they are not the otherwise expected cisgendered, heterosexual boy.<sup>3</sup>

Driving with their father, they openly take out women's clothing and makeup from their backpack. Andrea's father is portrayed as a rather traditional man who has lived his entire life in Latina, a small city near Rome, founded during fascism and still widely associated with far-right ideology. When he asks about the clothes, Andrea asks him to pull over, clearly intending to come out and reveal their fluid gender identity.

The camera briefly tracks the car before stopping, allowing the vehicle to continue on its own into a rural clearing where it eventually comes to a rest. Remaining motionless, the camera holds a long shot of the car, while the accompanying music also fades into silence. The characters remain unseen until the father exits the vehicle to light a cigarette; only at that moment does the camera frame Andrea, still seated inside the car and visibly shaken.

What stands out most in this scene is that Andrea's coming out takes place off-screen—or more precisely, through what Rondolino and Tomasi (2023: 130) define as an "internal off-screen space," that is, the expressive use of a portion of space that, while within the frame, is concealed from the viewer's gaze by an element of *mise-en-scène* (in this case, the car, whose interior remains hidden). Through this stylistic choice, the moment is not over-dramatised but instead rendered as too intimate and delicate to be visually exposed.

Andrea eventually gets out of the car and joins their father, who offers a cigarette without saying a word. Then, as the music resumes, the father breaks the silence with an ironic line that eases the tension and defies expectations of an angry or repressive response: "Aren't those shoes uncomfortable?". With this single line, the father conveys both the stereotypes of traditional masculinity (such as the inability to comprehend the discomfort of certain female accessories like high heels) and, at the same time, gently distances

himself from them, drawing closer to his son's sensitivity. Andrea finally smiles. The emotional closeness also becomes physical: all the tension dissipates when the father embraces Andrea, who begins to sob.

### **The coming out narrative beyond *Prisma***

The narrative of coming out in television and cinema evolved into a familiar trope which constructs and simultaneously reveals a recognisable gay subject (Rigoletto 2020, 107). Over time, this "coming out" journey evolved into a familiar trope in cinema and TV. Recently, what could be called the "coming out scene" has become particularly visible in teen drama narratives, not only in the Anglophone productions but also in the Italian ones. Recent examples are Netflix's *Suburra* (2017-2020), HBO's *We Are Who We Are* (2020), and RAI's *Il Professore* (2021-). *Suburra* is a TV drama set in the criminal underbelly of Rome, featuring a queer character named Spadino Anacleto, member of a very traditional Sinti family. Spadino's homosexuality is not accepted in his community nor in the criminal world he lives in, so his coming out is both an act of defiance and rebellion and a form of condemnation. In terms of visual language and narrative, his coming out is depicted with melodramatic tones and a gritty urban nightscape. *We Are Who We Are* is a 2020 teen drama miniseries co-created and directed by Luca Guadagnino for HBO and Sky Atlantic. The miniseries takes place on a fictional U.S. military base in Chioggia, Italy and follows the lives of two American teenagers who live there, exploring their coming of age and their non-binary, fluid sexualities and gender identities. The series does not present a traditional "coming out" moment with a clear-cut scene. Instead, it portrays queer identity as something fluid, constantly evolving and being explored. Finally, *Il Professore* is a Rai serial drama centred on Dante Balestra, a high school teacher, his son Simone and Dante's pupils and Simone's classmates. Simone's coming out to his father takes place in an emotional context—not through a dramatic speech, but rather as a gradual buildup of confrontations with his father. Simone opens up slowly, while his father—a man who tries to be progressive but is also trapped by certain rigidities—goes through his own parallel journey of acceptance.

It became a means to create critical turning points in a plot, often fuelling story arcs about personal growth, especially in coming-of-

age and teen drama genres. In these narratives, the climax often revolves around a poignant, confessional scene, where an LGBTQ+ character reveals a deeply held “secret” to friends, family, or even an entire community. But while these stories usually aim to foster inclusivity, they can also reinforce heteronormative expectations and stereotypes, limiting how gender and sexual identity are represented (De Simone and Guerini Rocco 2020). The very idea of the “confession” implies that the character is revealing a sin or a crime. In *Prisma*, the anticlimactic reversal of the typical coming out narrative, which may involve fights and shouting, aligns with the series’ effort to normalise diversity and represent adolescence as a journey towards self-discovery rather than a path of social or professional self-realisation. Moreover, Andrea’s gender fluidity motivates discussions about non-binarism and the concept of cis-heteronormativity, which is a cultural situation that makes it necessary to “come out” to others.

This sequence from *Prisma*, vehiculating positive values of self-discovery and productive dialogue with parental figures, seems particularly apt for teachers to use in the classroom.

### **Pedagogical use of *Prisma* in high school teaching**

The “coming out scene” as a motif could be the framework in which to discuss narrative strategies, media literacy and gender representation.

Following the pedagogical triangle (Jacobsen and Hansen 2024) for teaching gender issues through serial dramas (Fig. 1), the teacher may motivate students’ comprehension of the narrative by discussing how this particular coming out scene has been orchestrated, and which narrative techniques have been used.

The scene, for example, overturns viewers’ expectations first by keeping the coming out moment off-screen and then with the father’s reaction, calm and affectionate instead of enraged and violent. In this way, the scene’s climax is not the coming out moment but the final hug between the two at the end of the scene, as underlined by the rising extradiegetic music, which is absent in the first part. Teachers may also invite students to imagine other ways in which the coming out scene could be orchestrated on screen, both in the case of these particular characters and in general.

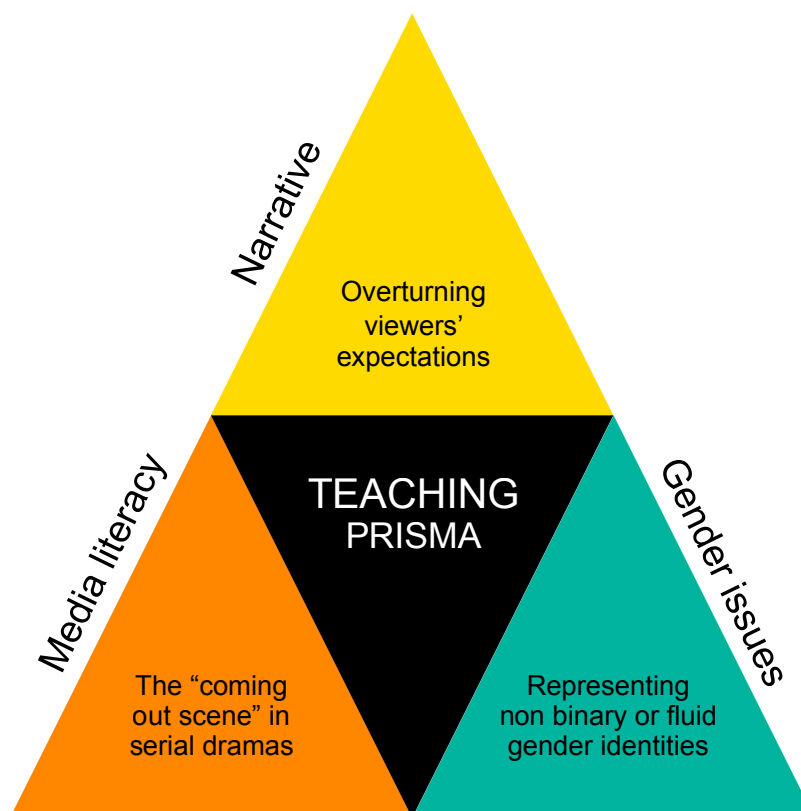


Fig. 1: Pedagogical triangle for teaching gender-related topics through serial dramas.

The discussion about possible alternatives helps shift to a media literacy perspective. First, teachers could introduce the concept of the “coming out” trope in cinema and TV, which is often resolved through a narrative climax involving a dramatic confession in front of an audience.

Following this discussion, the teachers could then compare different coming-out scenes in other TV series and films. Recent serial dramas offer several interesting and nuanced coming-out representations. In *Sex Education*, for instance, several characters’ story arcs focus on their progressive acceptance of their LGBTQ+ identities, such as Eric’s coming out in church and Adam’s acknowledgement of his bisexuality in front of his dad. Moreover, Martino’s coming out in *SKAM Italia*’s second season could be seen as a predecessor of an anti-climactic coming-out scene. Martino, who has been grap-

pling with his identity and the difficulty of coming out, decides to confide in Giovanni, his best friend. The scene takes place in Giovanni's room. While they are playing videogames, Martino quietly opens up about his sexuality, Giovanni listens intently, showing quiet acceptance and unwavering support, which helps Martino feel safe and validated. The scene avoids dramatic tones, opting instead for an understated and intimate conversation.

In conclusion, these examples present numerous opportunities to explore the complex representation of gender identities today. In this context, *Prisma* offers a nuanced portrayal of non-binary identities and emphasises the right to adopt an indefinite and fluid gender identity. The series frequently challenges viewers' expectations, particularly in the coming-out scene, which is part of a broader effort to disrupt prejudices and stereotypes. Educators can engage students in discussions about various ways LGBTQ+ identities are represented in media, ranging from comedy to drama, highlighting the freedom that comes from subverting typical expectations.

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This article, in conjunction with the video essay and the guiding text, is the outcome of a genuinely collaborative effort, with all four authors contributing to the conceptualisation, analysis, and revision of the entire manuscript. For clarity, section 1 was drafted by Maria Elena D'Amelio, section 2 by Valentina Re and sections 3-4 by Gianluigi Rossini.

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## Notes

- 1 The petition is accessible here: <https://www.change.org/p/chiediamo-il-rinnovo-della-serie-tv-prisma-per-una-terza-stagione-su-amazon-prime-video>. Accessed 28 October 2024.
- 2 Transgender activist Jessica Senesi, who served as a consultant for *Prisma*, shared on her social media that this scene was inspired by her own personal experience. In this regard, it is worth noting that the screenplay of *Prisma*, coauthored by Bessegato and Alice Urciolo, also draws inspiration from the life of transgender poet Giovanna Cristina Vivinetto, whose poetry collection *Dolore minimo* (2018) is read by characters within the series. Among the show's consultants is also transgender activist Francesco Cicconetti.
- 3 Nicoletta Marini Maio also focused on this sequence in her presentation titled "Refracting Colors of Prisma: The Therapeutic, Non-Conforming, Desiring Community of a Teen Drama" during the Summer School "Mediating Italy in Global Culture", University of Bologna, Rimini, 19-23 June 2023.