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Studying Abroad Narrative Imaginaries: North and South Europe

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Abstract. Through analysis of 50 autoethnographies I interpret international students' imaginaries of Italy-Florence (South Europe), Finland-Helsinki (North Europe) and what can be called "the cosmopolitan elsewhere". International students' imaginary of Finland-Helsinki is very slight; that of Italy-Florence is richer and variously articulated: media images and narratives shape students' expectations before their arrival in the host country. The Finland-Helsinki country profile is instead associated with a vague idea of Northern Europe and often confused with Scandinavia. The respective autoethnographic passages can be synthetically interpreted as past (Italy) vs. present (Finland). On one side Italy-Florence's image is almost embedded in a cultural past, on the other Finland-Helsinki's image is almost severed from its history and is seen more as a geographical entity: the deep and mysterious north. Analysis of secondary sources connected with studying abroad reveals the absence of a clear-cut narrative of what it means to be an international student. Nevertheless, there is a glimpse of a vague cosmopolitan narrative. This story, constructed on a global scale by different actors and institutions upholds the generic validity of studying abroad for both instrumental and expressive reasons, and sees it as an institutionalized rite of passage towards global citizenship.

Keywords: international students mobility, media images and narratives, autoethnography, Italy and Finland, cosmopolitan imaginaries.

1. INTRODUCTION: INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' NARRATIVE AND BIOGRAPHICAL IMAGINARIES OF THE HOST COUNTRY

Studying abroad has increased to the point of becoming an institutionalized practice at global level, but due to the Coronavirus pandemic 2020-2022 will probably represent a watershed. What does the post-pandemic future hold? Possible answers can be found by questioning the taken for granted and quasi-axiomatic pre-pandemic meanings attributed to this phenomenon, a sort of *mobility dogma* (Birindelli 2023). The results of this study suggest that international students are not going to Finland or to Italy, or to study this or that, they are simply "going": mobility wins over stasis, it is a "per se mobility" stemming from an imagined "elsewhere" (Salazar 2012). And studying abroad is "the right thing to do" for both instrumental and expressive reasons.

In this study the key question is not a quantitative one. It is not about the “how much” of the trend. The crucial question here is “what” and “who”. What meanings do international students give to their study abroad experience? And what is the image of the host country and city before the academic sojourn? The latter is the hermeneutic focus of this article: to interpret international students’ imaginaries of the host countries (in this case Italy and Finland) and of what can be called the “cosmopolitan elsewhere”.

The qualitative and comparative research project *The Cultural Experience of International Students* analyses 50 biographical narratives written by international master students. Prompted by in-depth interviews, I collected partial autobiographies-autoethnographies (autoethnography being the description of self as seen within another culture, Ellis and Bochner 2000). Participants in the research were a group of 25 international master students at the University of Helsinki (Finland, representing Northern Europe) and 25 at the University of Florence (Italy, representing Southern Europe). Overall, I managed to achieve a balance in terms of age (average age 26 at the time of the final draft of the autoethnography), gender, and geographical provenance (all inhabited continents).

The phases of fieldwork were as follows. I began with in-depth interviews (approximately one hour and a half). The full transcription of the interview was given to the participant, who revised, integrated, changed and deleted at will; this transcription then prompted the autobiographic-autoethnographic reflection. All biographical accounts followed a three-section *narrative template* (Birindelli 2023) with sections addressing the three basic phases of travel: departure–transition–arrival. This produces a heuristic overlay with the “three phase architecture” underpinning the study: narrative structure (incipit–ruit–exit); existential time (past–present–future); rites of passage (preliminal–liminal–postliminal); human development (young–young-adult–adult); sense of belonging to a collectivity (national–European–cosmopolitan). The *departure-preliminal* section of the template reconstructs the social and cultural context of the decision to study and live abroad. The *transition-liminal* section addresses actual academic and overall life experience abroad, while the *arrival-postliminal* section explores any human bond with the host culture and/or with a place that became familiar during the stay. Within the *departure-preliminal* section I asked the participants what kind of images they had of the host city/country – asking them to identify the media sources, which could be anything: narratives (fiction and non-fiction), textbooks, movies, documentaries, videos, TV

Table 1. Media sources of the host city-country.

<i>Finland-Helsinki</i>	<i>Italy-Florence</i>
Music	Music
Books	Books
Textbooks (Social Sciences)	Textbooks (Art, History)
Social Media	Social Media
University website and blogs	/
Quality of life Rankings	/
/	Movies

Source: Author’s elaboration.

shows, newspaper and magazine articles, advertising, institutional websites, blogs, social media, music, photographs, guidebooks, etc.

Here I was essentially trying to reconstruct international students’ imaginary of the host city-country, searching for “cultural objects” (Griswold 1994) that might have shaped their expectations of the host society and culture they later experienced first-hand.

The students’ collective imaginary of the host country-city is divided into (Table. 2) *general images* (or general cultural objects) and (Table. 3) more *specific images* (or more specific cultural objects). In both tables erroneous images/cultural objects (that belong/take place in another country) are in bold.

2. HELSINKI-FINLAND: THE PROGRESSIVE AND MYSTERIOUS NATURE OF THE ‘NORTH’

The first noteworthy result stemming from analysis of the autoethnographies is the absence of any kind of

Table 2. General Images / General Cultural Objects representing the host city/country.

<i>Finland-Helsinki</i>	<i>Italy-Florence</i>
Mystery	Exotic
Nature, North, Cold	Culture, Art, Architecture,
Scandinavia	History
Welfare System, Education,	Renaissance
Gender Equality, Freedom	Made in Italy, Fashion
Quality of life rankings	Holiday Destination
(Happiness etc.)	Celebrities
Design	Restaurants, Food, Pizza, Olive
Music (heavy metal/hard rock)	Oil
	Opera
	Catholic Church
	Mafia
	Football
	Italian Latin Lover Womanizer

Source: Author’s elaboration.

Table 3. Specific Images / Specific Cultural Objects representing the host city/country.

	<i>Finland-Helsinki</i>	<i>Italy-Florence</i>
<i>Anime TV</i>	Heidi, Girl of the Alps	/
<i>Brands & Lifestyle</i>	Nokia, Volvo, Sauna	FIAT 500, Vespa, Dolce and Gabbana, Prada
<i>Music</i>	Nightwish, Children of Bodom, Apocalyptica, HIM, Abba, International Noise Conspiracy	'O Sole Mio, Azzurro (Celentano), Mina, De Andrè, Laura Pausini, Nek, Tiziano Ferro, Ramazzotti, De Gregori
<i>Geography</i>	Aurora Boreal, Lapland	/
<i>Surveys</i>	PISA, Quality of Life Rankings	/
<i>Myths</i>	Santa Claus	/
<i>Famous People</i>	Kimi Raikkonen, Gary Litmanen	Marco Polo, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Macchiavelli, Mussolini, Batistuta, Monica Bellucci
<i>Books</i>	Moomin, Gebrauchsanweisung für Finland	Cuore, Va dove ti porta il cuore, Carolina se enamora
<i>Cities</i>	/	Milan, Rome, Florence, Vatican
<i>Writers</i>	/	Federico Moccia
<i>Opera</i>	/	Tosca, La Traviata
<i>Monuments</i>	/	Colosseum
<i>Influencers</i>	/	Chiara Ferragni, Mariano di Vaio
<i>Movies</i>	/	Under the Tuscan Sun (mentioned 3 times), Eat Pray Love (2), LAuberge Espagnol (2), Roman Holiday (2), Letters to Juliet (2), When in Rome, Midnight in Paris, Italian Job, Inferno, Hannibal, Si accettano miracoli, Benvenuti al sud, Perfetti Sconosciuti, L'ultimo bacio, Life is Beautiful, The Best of Youth, Novecento

Source: Author's elaboration.

image or even information about Finland-Helsinki. Several international students knew literally nothing about the future host country-city. «I knew nothing about Finland. I did not even know there is a country called Finland. I had a globe and Russia was there, China... But where is Finland? I never heard about Finland in the news» (BN, female, Helsinki, East Asia).

ZN (f, Central Europe), although European, writes:

I really did not have an idea of the place. I did not read any book, saw movie or being exposed to any other media representations. I had no images about Finland. My imagination of Finland was zero. I've never seen Finland represented in any media narrative. Never. (ZN, f, Central Europe)

In the comparative section of this article we will see that this is one of the most relevant differences between international students' imaginaries of Finland-Helsinki and Italy-Florence. Copious images and media narratives relating to Italy-Florence shape students' expectations before their arrival in the host country. And 'imaginaries' can be conceptualized as "meaning-making devices mediating how people act, cognize and value the world", namely "culturally shared and socially transmitted rep-

resentational assemblages that interact with the personal imagination" (Salazar 2020: 770). But there's more to it than that. We can observe that students applied to the University of Florence because they wanted to experience the Italian lifestyle. For most of these international students academe seems a means toward this end.

Students in the Helsinki group who did not have any image of the host city-country started to search for information once their application was accepted. The void in their biographical imaginary was compensated mainly by short videos found on the University of Helsinki website, other travel vlogs, blogs and social media in general.

I found some videos on YouTube to check how the city looks like. Videos were about Helsinki, Finland, nature, lakes and how is student life in the University of Helsinki. They were all promotional videos. The elements I got out from these videos are snow, cold, nature, richness of resource and darkness» (ZH, m, South Asia).

I believe this is an important semantic dynamic. Over and above the key themes communicated by such videos, it is fundamental to note that the media void of the host city-country was filled essentially by institu-

tional marketing. It is probable that the University of Helsinki commissioned promotional videos from media enterprises and plausibly decided that these were the themes best targeted to boost international students' enrollment. In a certain sense, the imaginary seeds for the Helsinki-Finland experience were rationally selected, sown and brought to fruit in the international students' virgin media-narrative soil, and the increased communicative power of such a media campaign is easy to grasp. As we will see in the next section, the University of Florence does not have promotional videos or the like, and basically simply leverages the centuries-old narrative assets that are essentially part of the "tourism imaginaries" (Salazar 2012) for Italy (Florence-Tuscany).

Apparently, the videos found on Finnish institutional websites did not distort the reality later experienced firsthand: "It was easy to get information from the internet. I was not expecting something different from what I found. I was not surprised" (HH, m, South Asia). Before this search HH's media images were not totally absent but limited to one specific cultural object and another general image: *Nokia* and *Aurora Borealis*. These synthesize two recurrent core symbolic meanings representing Finland in the eyes of international students: technology – expanding on the symbolism: advancement, progressive, etc. – and nature.

Digging deeper into the concept of *nature*, Finland is imagined as "a green country full of forests and lakes" (NS, m, West Asia). NS also "imagined that it was cold. I also had the idea that in the winter it would be totally dark, may be for six months." The absence of a clear collective imaginary and the scattered images of nature, cold, snow, darkness etc. constructs an interesting and appealing Finnish aura in the minds of international students that can be summed up in a single word: *mystery*.

Finland is a big question mark. It's neither west nor east. I did not know anything about the country except for it's fucking cold and people like heavy music. Finland it's a challenge that you want to face because it's unknown (ND, m, Oceania).

In ND's autoethnography we can find a sort of corollary for mysterious Finland: "I knew I would not be with any other *** from my university because it was an unpopular choice. It was just so unknown". Thus, going to Finland represents an element of *distinction* from other common study abroad destinations – a sort of reverse (south-north) exoticism.

Even for HD (f, Central Europe) Finland was a mysterious – melancholic and creative – place. HD's autoethnography reveals that this image was shaped by

a specific cultural object of considerable biographical weight, the Finnish band HIM.

HIM band, they were dressed black, black makeup. The image of Finland was a lot of forests and lakes; people are mysterious and melancholic (HIM music was very melancholic). And when you see images of forests and lakes, along with the other image of Finnish people. So melancholic ... It's like they have more space to think, more creative space... More space. It's not necessarily more happiness. (HD, f, Central Europe)

HD's autoethnography points us in a valuable heuristic direction by mentioning a *rock band* and the word *happiness*. In the autoethnographies the cultural silence about Finland is interrupted by the sound of music. This is probably the most articulated symbolic representation:

I did not really know anything about Finland. I had some familiarity with some of the bands from Finland. I knew that there was a lot of rock and heavy metal. Bands like Nightwish, Children of Bodom, Apocalyptica. These kind of big Finnish export bands, big names. (ND, m, Oceania)

'*Happiness*' is another key word for reconstructing the weak imaginary of Finland. The idea of a happy place does not stem from the narrative of a book, a movie or documentary; this image is the result of indexes found in world rankings.

I wanted to go to the countries that were ranked the happiest in the world according to surveys. All the Nordic countries are pretty high in the happiness ranking. I think because the Nordic countries are so egalitarian, that's why they are the happiest. (NY, f, North America)

We shall shortly see how the thin image stemming from rankings is connected to a thicker idea of the social-democratic, egalitarian Nordic welfare state: namely, a political image. Again apropos the 'ranking' media source, we observe how in some cases the choice of Finland as a studying-abroad destination stems from a specific comparison.

I applied to several places: Britain, Estonia and Amsterdam. I was selected in all the programs, but I decided to come here. I compared rankings, lifestyles, and also the experiences of people I knew had of those countries. And my final choice was Finland. I think people might have the idea that Finland is a rich country, the Scandinavian model. You have high taxes but you get services. But that was just a vague idea. (ZY, m, South America)

Although other international students did not reflect in a similarly thorough manner, their idea of Finland

was still shaped by ranking and statistics: “I read somewhere in a book about the *welfare in Scandinavia*... I also saw statistics, countries from North Europe were always ranked at the top of the quality of life: GDP per person, happiness, safety” (ST, f, East Asia). Interestingly, it’s not the image of Finland but of *North Europe* in general. In the international students’ imaginary Finland is frequently located in *Scandinavia* and when we get down to more precise cultural objects, several of them are wrong. They are either Swedish or arise from a vague idea of Nordic countries.

‘Education’ is another image of Finland found in rankings: “I heard good things from the PISA survey. Although I do not find it as good as it is presented in the media and recounted by teachers (ZN, f, Central Europe)”; “I have seen a video made about Finnish educational system which shows that in Finland students don’t have to study too much but this system is still one of the best in the world” (BN, f, East Asia). Education is definitely a connotation of Finland in the eyes of international students and is not just the result of a quick look at rankings in online articles or similar. Students read about the Finnish educational system in *social science textbooks*.

I remember a small clip about education in Finland. A long time ago. It was on YouTube. It was linked to an article I read about the quality of public elementary schools in Finland. And I read two-three articles about elementary school education in Finland. (SZ, f, Africa)

It’s not just Finnish education that features in social science textbooks but *progressive social policies* in general. Consequently, some students start to imagine the host country as a sort of *ideal, utopic country*.

Finland in study books was always represented as the ideal country for a lot of different policies, in relation to maternity leave, childcare, gender, rights for homosexuals and lot of things like that. So I started to become very curious because Finland was represented as the ideal place for so many things. (PH, f, South Asia)

However, in this case too, the analysis of the collected autoethnographies clearly reveals that most of the international students were not exposed to media images or other narratives focusing precisely on Finland. This interpretation is reinforced even in the case of progressive social policies. Students’ imaginary in this sense is in fact connected to the group of North European countries or Scandinavia rather than Finland. «The picture I had of Finland and North European countries, was that they are super-developed. Socialist states, with very good

social benefits, welfare states, equality. All *** media translate this image» (EP, f, Eurasia).

I had a very limited knowledge about Nordic countries, about Scandinavia. During high school I only learned that they have very high taxes and very happy individual life. But nothing more than that. I wanted to come here and experience North Europe by myself. (ST, f, East Asia)

As we can detect from the above passages and those that follow, even beyond the field of social policies and politics, the imaginary is connected to the generic geographic entity “North Europe”. Furthermore, for several students the idea of Finland is a mere reflection of Sweden, which is considered as a sort of “mother tree” of the North European imaginary. The images of Sweden are fairly banal stereotypes: tall, blonde, sex etc.

*In *** the “Nordic brand” is very successful. When you think of the Nordic countries people think of Norway and Sweden. Especially Sweden ... they are known for things. Norway is rich and Sweden is blonde and they like sex, and there is ABBA. You know, there are these stereotypes. (ND, m, Oceania)*

I did not spend much thinking about how’s Finland. Thinking of northern Europe, we’ve got the Swedish image as the mother tree. Now I know there is a difference between Sweden and Finland. (QS, m, North America)

The identification of Finland with Sweden is also influenced by Swedish cultural objects wrongly attributed to Finland, such as the music band «International Noise Conspiracy ... They looked really Nordic. Tight pants, fashionable but left» (ZW, m, Central Europe). In several other students’ narratives the media mismatch is even more evident. Most of the time they force a vague association of images such as cold-snow onto Finland. For instance when a student mentions an association of ideas between Finland and the Japanese anime television series “Heidi, Girl of the Alps” that she believes takes place in Austria – the setting is the Swiss Alps: a multiple mismatch.

I remember Heidi connected somehow to North Europe, but I do not know if we can consider Austria as North Europe. And the musical The Sound of Music, set in Austria. But nothing connected clearly to Northern Europe (NY, f, North America).

Finland is identified with an imaginary landscape that we can call “The Deep North”, and several students only started to have a better geographic idea of the host country when they did some internet searches

after being accepted on the Master program: «I discovered more researching the internet. I've learned that Finland is Nordic but not Scandinavian. It's closer to Russia, between east and west» (ZY, m, South America). If we search for more precise cultural objects, besides those already mentioned connected with music, social policies and quality-of-life rankings, we find very little: Santa Claus, Jari Litmanen (football player), sauna. QK (m, South Europe) mentions the cartoon *Moomin*, but this is because one of his parents is Finnish.

Frequently the few cultural objects found in the autoethnographies were connected to Finland only after an internet search. Therefore, they were not part of the student's overall biographical imaginary. And this is the case even for students coming from North Europe.

I did a little bit of googling about Finland. I used to be into heavy metal when I was a teenager. But I did not know any of these bands are from Finland. I did not know Nokia was from Finland either. And I did not know sauna was Finnish. (HN, f, North Europe)

EP (f, Eurasia) at first writes that she did not have any specific picture of Finland. However, in another part of the autoethnography she tells us «The first thing I was thinking was ... it's boring, there's nothing. And if I was thinking more, there are lakes, and forest and Lapland». Another passage of EP's narrative allows us to construct an empirical and hermeneutic bridge with the group of students in Italy-Florence and the global imaginary of Italy. EP visited Helsinki before. As we will see in the next section, besides the richer imaginary as compared to Finland-Helsinki, the majority of the international students visited Italy during the holidays, and some of them even several times.

*A couple of years before I moved to *** I came to Helsinki for a short two days visit. A very quiet city, not very tall buildings, greyish. Before that date I knew something about this country, but nothing specific. I would not think that something is booming here, something is happening. Just very plain and boring. I knew about Santa Claus bla bla bla.... If I think about Italy, for instance, I can picture it more vividly: beautiful landscapes, cities like Rome or Milan, cuisine, etc. (EP, f, Eurasia)*

3. FLORENCE-ITALY: THE FASCINATING AND STYLISH CULTURAL PAST

As anticipated in the previous section, compared to the Finland-Helsinki group, analysis of the autoethnographies of international students in Italy-Florence reveals an abundance and diversity of media representations.

We find an image of the host country-city extensively delineated by a range of cultural objects in different thematic fields and in various media sources: textbooks, books, movies, music, advertising, social media etc. The narrative combination of these sources – for several students integrated with direct experience as a holiday destination – constitutes a sort of *Italian and Florentine Dream*: «My dream was to come to Italy» (PW, f, South Europe); «In my opinion Florence is *la più bella città nel mondo* [the most beautiful city on earth]. I love Italy and the Italian language» (ZY, f, South Europe). As one student writes, Italy is 'subconscious': «I always wanted to come here. Maybe because of the movies I was watching and the books I was reading. My subconscious made me want to come here» (WW, f, Eurasia).

An important element stemming from the students' narratives is their strong socialization to the *Made in Italy* brand, mainly linked to *fashion*: «I saw Italy as a brand and Italy to me was fashion. I remember commercials on TV about glasses and fashion, or magazines» (KS, m, East Asia). Lived everyday life in Italy sometimes confirms the idea of the stylish Italian – «Here you always have to be on point, I confirm this idea now» (MU, m, South America) – sometimes it doesn't, albeit validating «Made in Italy & Italian lifestyle» as a crucial element of international students' imaginary.

I always thought about Italian people as very stylish, but in the reality I see that in my university they are not that stylish. I got this idea of stylish Italians from magazines, from the marketing of brands such as Dolce and Gabbana, Prada. All big brands are from Italy. Some say that Italian people 'feel' fashion. But in reality, when you walk in the street is not so much like that. (FP, m, Eurasia)

FP (m, Eurasia) endorses the importance of the Italian lifestyle as a key motivation for studying abroad – «I am here because of the Italian life» – and the familiarity of some students with Italian social media influencers displays the pervasiveness and solidity of fashion and style as central to their imaginary of the host country: «I follow on Instagram a blogger, her name is Chiara Ferragni and a model, Mariano di Vaio» (KS, f, South Europe).

MH (f, Africa) reinforces the Italian image connected with fashion rather than study – which, as we will see, is of secondary importance – and the fact that students were previously exposed to a variety of media in this sense. She also cites the key theme of Italy as a *historic* country, and another fundamental and more recent topic: Italy as *food*.

I thought I am going to a country with a lot of history and fashion. I get these ideas of Italy in TV, movies, social media. Italy was equal to fashion to me. I always thought about fashion or exotic dishes. Italy was never in my mind connected to academy or work. For instance, Italy made me think about shoes. I picked those images in movies. (MH, f, Africa)

KS (m, East Asia) writes «In *** if you want to become a chef you need to know how to cook Italian food». The socialization to the image of food (& wine) does not take place only in the media but also through the worldwide diffusion of Italian restaurants: «We have a couple of Italian restaurants back home, so I had a very good idea of the wine, the food» (VU, m, South America).

Another key theme emerging from students' imaginary is obviously *art*, mostly in the field of *architecture*: «My image of Italy comes from study textbooks: mainly history of art and architecture» (CL, m, South Asia). Here it is important to note that, compared to Helsinki, Florence has a specific and unique place in the international students' imagination. The anticipated "atmosphere of place", which is an essential part of any imaginative travel (Hannam, Sheller and Urry 2006: 14), and the expectations for the host city seem to be fully met during the sojourn: «I like this city because of the art, architecture of Renaissance» (JL, f, East Asia). The main media sources are study textbooks: «History of architecture. We had so many images of Florence and Italy in our textbooks» (EE, f, Eurasia). Artistic cultural objects and images stem from the Renaissance grand narrative. «I had the image of Florence as Renaissance, because I studied it in secondary school: Michelangelo, Leonardo Da Vinci, etc. It was included in the course 'Universal History'. Florence to me was Renaissance» (MH, f, Africa).

The picture of Florence absorbed through textbooks was very clear before the departure: «I had this architecture in mind: narrow streets, big churches. I could imagine myself walking in these streets» (VU, m, South America). In both the specific section and in other parts of the autoethnographies it emerges that several students had already visited Italy, confirming and reinforcing the place of Italy-Florence in the global (especially tourist) imaginary. For several international students in the Florence group, media representations and vacations in Italy are biographically alternated and mixed: «I came here when I was 15 years old. I did a cruise in the Mediterranean. I visited Verona, Venice, Rome. Many of my images of Italy come from that cruise» (MU, m, South America); «I go to Italy every year. I've been in Tuscany when I was 15, to Sicily when I was 19. So I am familiar with Italy» (IT, f, Central Europe).

The interpretation of these narrative passages is quite simple. The students had one or more vacations in Italy and were fascinated by the *Belpaese*. Back home they started to cultivate the idea of going back for a longer period for an in-depth experience of Italy and Italian life: «Last year I was in Italy, in Sicily. After that vacation, I told my mom I need to go back to Italy and study there. I know it's my place» (KH, f, East Europe); «I fell in love with the city. It's amazing; It's beautiful. It's incredible to be here, to walk here. I thought that I should try. Florence was my only option» (NP, f, Eurasia).

A master, especially an international one, is a specialist, career-targeted academic degree. Yet some participants assert that study is not the real motivation for being abroad. EE (f, Eurasia) in her autoethnography bluntly writes: «I am in Florence because I want to enjoy life. I do not want to spend my life eight hours per day in front of a computer». In this case, and for most of the international students in the Florence group, the decision to study abroad is not a means toward the end of finding a specialized job or embarking on an academic career via a PhD. It is instead a combination of studying and traveling, where the former seems an excuse for the latter.

I like travelling and I was in Italy three years ago. A friend of mine was living here and I knew it was not hard coming to Florence and study in a Master degree. I thought I would study to have more opportunities to travel around Italy. (EE, f, Eurasia)

In some cases, the choice of a master program in tourism supports this interpretation of academe as a mere means toward a different end from that institutionally proclaimed: higher education. In sum: they are abroad for an exceptionally long vacation. For RH (f, Eurasia) all of the above is accompanied by the intention to make a break with her previous life at home.

The idea was to combine studying and travelling. I've been a tourist in Italy and I liked the country. I made applications to seven Italian universities who had master programs more or less relevant with my previous studies. I had two positive answers: University of Florence and University of Siena. The master in Siena was about economics. But I thought that if I change my life I have to change it completely. So I picked the master in Florence which is on tourism. (RH, f, Eurasia)

Other students had visited Italy repeatedly over the years before their master sojourn: «I was a tourist in Italy for more than 10 times, than I lost the count. May be is 12, 15, 20» (ON, f, East Europe). For ON Italy became her *elective country*, the place on earth most attuned to her personality, where she was meant to be.

*It was my idea to come here, to live here and to die here; because I feel really good in Italy, even better than in my native country. I do not know why. Even if I do not speak well the language, or even if everybody considers me as a stranger. I thought that this country was created for me or that I was created for this country, and I was born in *** by accident. (ON, f, East Europe).*

We can also reconstruct another hermeneutic itinerary that, especially for students enrolled in the Architectural Design Master, starts with the study of art-architecture at home, the first-hand Italian experience during holidays, and the consequent decision to *live* in Florence. I deliberately wrote ‘live’ rather than ‘study’ in Florence. Besides the already mentioned fascination with the Italian lifestyle, or the intention to study and travel abroad, for several students the main drive for being abroad is their passion for art and the wish to experience the beauty of Florence. Even in this case, the desire to nourish oneself by being exposed to art on a daily basis greatly supersedes any other academic motivation.

I am here because I like art, I am very passionate about art. I find more of myself here in Florence. I am here more for myself than for studying, for my personality. I need to have satisfaction and passion besides academic fulfilment. I found this in Florence. (GL, f, Eurasia)

We might say that these students are abroad for a sort of *cultural and aesthetic self-growth*, or more simply for a life experience rather than to study with a view to a highly specialized job.

The first thing was going to Italy. The second was to choose a city that I like, and I picked Florence. Only at that point I searched for a Master program in the university of Florence. I checked the majors I could apply and found this master. (QO, f, East Asia)

Digging deeper into media representation of Italy-Florence we realize that the international students’ imaginary of Italy has the contours of a *holiday destination*. The sources of Finland’s representations are mainly social media, short videos, university textbooks in social sciences and similar sources where students find rankings of quality of life, education, etc. The sources of Italy’s images are richer and more varied, including several movies that have a potent narrative influence in molding the idea of a country-city. Focusing on movies is crucial. Firstly, because of their power to shape a narrative and evocative representation of the host city-country. Secondly, because while the imaginary of the South Europe group features several movies, the group of students in North Europe never saw a movie representing Finland-

Helsinki. I was expecting at least one movie directed by Aki Kaurismäki, but I found zero filmic representations.

The following autoethnographic passage is emblematic and introduces a key cultural object retrieved from a movie, allowing us to see Italy as a sort of vacation from real life.

*I had the image of coming here and riding a Vespa and riding with the Vespa around Florence, to the seaside, to the market to buy fresh fruit. I think I had this image from Italian restaurants in ***. They decor with images of Vespas. And I remember watching the movie *Under the Tuscan Sun*. (EE, f, Eurasia, Flo).*

EE makes a direct reference to the movie *Under the Tuscan Sun*, which can be seen as the archetypical romantic narrative of Florence and Tuscany (Birindelli 2020a). She also mentions the *Vespa* scooter. This is a recurrent cultural object in foreign movies portraying Italian life, easily linked with visions of a vacation in a fun and, at the same time, sentimental past. In this case the movie-matrix is clearly the famed *Roman Holiday* starring Gregory Peck and Audrey Hepburn. The movie is explicitly mentioned by several international students in Florence as a narrative that shaped their imaginary about Italy, for instance: «I remember *Roman Holiday*, a story about a princess in Roma» (QO, f, East Asia); «That movie where she rides the Vespa close to the Colosseum» (VU, m, South America). MH (f, Africa) reinforces these meanings and makes it clear how her image of Italy was totally disconnected from academe and profoundly tied up with an idea of the host country as a fashionable holiday destination for celebrities.

Italy is always represented as the destinations of celebrities, a holiday destination. So Italy in my head had to be a very exotic place. Most of the movies are American.... Also in reality shows They always mention Italy connected to fashion, models, design. So Italy to me was a place connected with fashion and a fashionable lifestyle. Italy was never connected with academy. (MH, f, Africa)

MH had also an image of Italy connected with the *Catholic Church*. However, even the religious image is imbued with the fantasy of luxury, exclusiveness etc. “Italy was also connected to the catholic church, the Vatican. In my country people think the streets in the Vatican are covered in gold.”

Continuing the focus on the movies mentioned in students’ autoethnographies, because of their power to shape the collective imaginary, we can observe that the most mentioned movies belong to the “rom-com” (romantic-comedy) genre: *Roman Holiday*, *Eat Pray Love*, *Under the Tuscan Sun*, *When in Rome*, *Letters to*

Juliet. The two movies that can be considered more intellectually committed and apt to open a thoughtful cultural door on Italian society and culture, are *Novecento* and *The Best of Youth*. *Novecento* (Twentieth Century) is an epic-historical drama about the lives and friendship of two men set against the background of the fascist-communist political conflicts in Italy in the first half of the 20th century. *The Best of Youth* is a historical drama set in Italy between 1966 and 2003. The saga traces the life of a middle-class family through the major political and social events in post-WWII Italy: the protests of 1968, mafia wars, corruption and terrorism.

These are important narratives because in the international students autoethnographies – and in the general study-abroad discourse – Italian modernity tends to remain in the shadows (Birindelli 2020b). The features that usually make up the Italian *anima locus* are art, wine, olive oil, fashion, dolce vita, passion, etc. All these aspects are certainly part of the Italian identity, but they are by no means all of it: there is more to say. In *Mythologies* (1957/1972), Roland Barthes identifies the “deprivation of history” as a key figure of the rhetoric of myth regarding other people and cultures. Italians are thus ‘deprived’ of (at least) 150 years of their history. As a result, the interpretation of “the Other”, the locals, seems to be trapped in a distant and romanticized past.

Nevertheless, PW (m, Middle East, Flo) at the end writes:

One year before I moved to Florence I saw an Italian movie The Best of Youth, a very long movie about an Italian family saga from the 60s to 2000. In this movie, I got this idea of the Vespa, the small Fiat 500 car. This kind of stuff. This simple Italian life. This movie gave this image of Italy.

It is as if, no matter what they see or experience, a narrative center of gravity (Birindelli 2022) attracts students toward an easy-going, recreational and romantic idea of Italy. In this case studying abroad, rather than fostering openness through real opportunities to meet the Other in the flesh, seems to support an aesthetic “touristic gaze” (Urry and Larsen 2011).

4. ROMANTIC PAST VS. PRAGMATIC FUTURE

We can synthetically interpret the dedicated autoethnographic passages in a comparative way as past (Italy) vs. present (Finland). On one side Italy-Florence’s image is embedded in a cultural past; on the other Finland-Helsinki’s image is severed from its history and is seen more as a geographical entity: the deep north. This is a vague geographical idea; before their arrival sev-

eral students were confusing Finland with Sweden and Norway and believed Finland was part of Scandinavia. Only a few had a clear idea of Finland’s geography, for instance as the western country with the longest border with Russia. Finland is conceived as a mysterious and remote place up north, and this mystery makes the country fascinating.

While Finland is “north”, “cold” and “nature”, Italy is “south”, “warmth” and “culture”. Italy represents a culture of the past while Finland is recognized as a culture of the present and a sort of enlightened and progressive land for the future. Several international students derived this image of Finland as a sort of “educational promised land” from the PISA survey and other international higher education rankings. The idea of Finland is absent in the movies seen by international students, but it is present in music – albeit identified only as hard-rock, metallic music. Other key images of Finland are “quality of life”, “welfare system” and “gender equality”.

By analyzing narrative passages where students recount their actual experience abroad we can dig deeper into the link between expectations fostered by the media and reality experienced firsthand. Part of the *arrival-postliminal* section of the autoethnographic template consists in portraying a bond with the city and with a place that became familiar during the stay.

Helsinki is seen as a functional and livable city, an aspect that is greatly appreciated by most of the international students. IN (m, South America) feels a connection with the city of Helsinki because «It’s a peaceful and safe city. I can walk in the streets without worrying that I can be robbed or mugged or something». ND (m, Oceania) clearly points out the benefits of living in a small capital city.

Helsinki is a capital so you have the benefits of that. But it’s not busy. It’s a small capital, 560000 people. Public transport is good. Parks are good. Quality of life is high. It’s an easy city to live in. That makes Helsinki attractive. If I want to go to the forest, 20 minutes and you can be in nature. You can’t get that with a capital in many countries.

In my interpretation of the narrative passages dedicated to the city of Helsinki I observe a general appreciation of the harmonious mingling between the city and the natural world, cultural vivacity, good public transport and the functionality of the city as a whole. However, what emerges from the narratives is a generic reference to “places by the sea” and none of the students developed any strong affective attachment to a specific place linked either to beauty or a sense of reassurance or comfort. Even in terms of the bond with the city, therefore, one can detect what is almost an antithetical cul-

tural dynamic between Florence and Helsinki. WW (f, Eurasia) writes «I have a strong bond with the city. I love Florence. Even if I am alone, I would still want to live here. In Florence I do not need people, the city is all I need» and MU (m, South America) echoes «I feel connected. I love Florence. I really do love this city». The group of international students fell in love with the city of Florence». OM (f, East Europe) makes an interesting generalization: «All international students have one thing in common: they all love the city of Florence. That is the first reason mentioned by any international student I met»; later in the autoethnography she adds:

«Nobody I met mentions studying as a reason to come to Florence. The only reason is the love for the city».

Only one autoethnographic passage clearly indicates affection for the city of Helsinki (or Finland / Finnish lifestyle) as the chief reason for being abroad – «Because I love it. I am still here because I deeply love this city» – whereas almost half of the students in Florence explicitly stated that they fell in love with the city, country, lifestyle etc. The passion for Florence (Tuscany, Italy) is a confirmed expectation, while the enthusiasm for Helsinki (Finland) appears to develop during the stay, without any preconceptions molded by clear representations and images found in the media (movies, documentaries, books, internet, social media, etc.).

As we have seen, the analysis of the collected autoethnographies reveals how, contrary to what is commonly believed, studying abroad at Master level is not necessarily intimately connected with the acquisition of skills from a career perspective. Only 16 students out of 50 wrote that they were abroad for academic reasons. However, the narrative and comparative approach adopted in this study casts light on the differences between the two study destinations. Eleven of those students were in the Helsinki group.

Beyond comparing numbers, which does not make exceptional sociological sense in a qualitative study, it's the extensive analysis of all the collected narratives that allows us to give hermeneutic weight to the international students in Helsinki, who seem more convincing about education as the key motivation. HV (f, South Asia, Hel) wrote «my whole purpose of being here is education» and elsewhere in her narrative discloses her educational and biographical strategy.

*I was looking for a master's degree to complete my studies. I talked with one of my supervisor and he suggested that if I wanted to study ***. Nordic countries (Norway, Sweden, Finland) are good choices because they have direct collaboration with *** [leading research center, based in Switzerland].*

Although international students did not tend to fall in love with Helsinki, they did see the city, and Finland in general, as a place where they could build their life, their real life. This leads us into the next narrative prompt of the arrival-postliminal section, where the students were also encouraged to reflect on their immediate prospects: returning home, staying in the host country, moving somewhere else.

Even though there were several students who wanted to remain in Finland after the Master, they had reservations about the viability of this choice. The main obstacle was seen as the language There are not that many jobs for English speakers in Finland, especially in the areas I am interested in, which makes it hard to find work experience. But I haven't closed the door to staying in Helsinki just yet» (PW, f, South Asia). In Helsinki the decision to stay or go is clearly tied up with job opportunities.

Many of the students in Florence, on the other hand, would like to remain because of the beauty of the city, the lifestyle etc. However, none of them saw Florence (Italy in general) as a place where they could concretely construct their future life. WZ (m, Africa, Flo) writes: «After the master I will go back home. I would like to stay here but as for job opportunities is better to go back home. Staying here with a master's degree will not make a difference».

Florence seems to represent a liminal phase filled with the colors and sentiments of a vacation from real life. Almost all the students fell in love with the city, and some of them are ready to make compromises to stay, but I tend to interpret their reflections as the desire to “prolong the vacation”. Only one student mentions Milan as a possibility, whereas it seems that none of the others sees Florence or Italy in general as a place for real life, and most importantly a place with job opportunities. Although some students mention the language barrier, in my interpretation this is not the main obstacle: the fact is that they don't see Italy as a viable setting for normal, everyday life in which work is central, but as the perfect place for an extra-ordinary life: a vacation. The length of the stay (two or more years) and their advanced students' status was not enough to sabotage the imaginative potential of the tourist connotation of Italy-Florence. However, at some point along the line they realized that vacations come to an end. RH (f, Eurasia) writes: «Actually, Florence is not a good city to live in. It's good to see museums, art, history, but it is not a city for normal everyday life».

Luzzi (2002: 61, emphasis mine) points out that Italy represents: «A locus of education and self-exploration, at a physical remove from the confines of one's normal life, and of *limited temporal duration*» The “limited temporal

duration” is a crucial point: Italy is, technically, a vacation from everyday life; but all good things come to an end: real life is back home, in the Global North or elsewhere, but not in Italy.

5. CONCLUSIONS: ONE VAGUE COSMOPOLITAN DREAM, TWO DIVERGENT CULTURAL EXPERIENCES

The analysis of the collected autoethnographies reveals that the social, cultural and academic experience in Finland-Helsinki is, so to speak, more connected to the “reality” of ordinary everyday life. Using Freud’s famed cornerstones of humanness, Finland-Helsinki is ‘*arbeit*’, Italy-Florence is more ‘*liebe*’. Studying abroad in the *Belpaese* seems an extra-ordinary experience that goes beyond everyday life. The Italian dream has a limited temporal duration: namely, a vacation. And the Italian sojourn is like a play performed on a well-defined stage and with a clear script made up of articulated and internally consistent images-narratives derived from movies, advertisements, fashion, “Made in Italy” and previous visits during holidays.

However, the divergent cultural experiences have two strong common denominators: one is *pragmatic*, the other is *imaginative* in a transnational, global, cosmopolitan sense. For the former, HV (f, South Asia, Hel) writes: «When I was looking the internet I found that *Finland was tuition free for international students*. That convinced me for Finland because the overall costs of studying abroad would be way less». When I analyzed all the students’ stories, I discovered this key criterion for choosing either Finland or Italy: at the time of the study in both countries they did not have to pay tuition fees.

*The main point is the scholarship. My plan was to study in Finland, but it was hard to find a scholarship and I did not pass the admission. So I started to look for another scholarship to study in a European country. Luckily, I found one from the Italian Embassy in ***. There I found a scholarship promoted by Tuscan Region.* (KS, m, East Asia, Flo)

Moving on to the *imaginative* common denominator, it seems that students were exposed to a kind of academic mobility story that works at a global level. This is a species of global dogma that we can summarize as: better go than stay. This belief transcends the two countries-cities and, to a certain extent, even the educational motivation. International students in their “mobility capsule” (Czerska-Shaw and Krzaklewska 2021) respond to the imperative of ‘going’: mobility wins hands down over stasis. This academic mobility dogma is inserted in a sort of global story that endorses the generic validity

of travelling and living in the “cosmopolitan elsewhere”. And the importance of “elsewhere”, as Appiah (2019) writes, must be preserved in “defense of cosmopolitanism”. Yet, studying abroad in the cosmopolitan elsewhere, as MH (f, Africa, Flo) writes, is “idolized”.

In my hometown living abroad is idolized. Having someone from the family living abroad is associated with a high social status. Europe in particular is associated with class more than other continents. It’s considered a prestigious thing to live or study abroad. Travelling in my hometown is associated with money and prestige. (MH, f, Africa, Flo)

It is not an undistinguished cosmopolitan elsewhere with “abstract worldly outlooks” (Nowicka 2012) but an affluent one: United States, Europe. However, besides this motivation connected with class distinction, the interpretation of the collected narratives suggests another core, and potentially foundational, meaning for the studying abroad experience which I conceptualize as “existential” (Birindelli 2023). This individual and collective cultural significance has a latent but strong explanatory power linked to interrogatives about birthplace and dream place: “I was born here, but is this my place in the world? No, I want to travel and live somewhere else”. International students’ mobility seems to be supported by a sense of “elective belonging” (Savage, Bagnall, and Longhurst 2005); it’s a place without a specific geographical connotation, a construct that resides somewhere in the space of global social imaginaries. It is an “elsewhere” where the young can express their human potential and live a life better suited to their personality and self-identity.

Beyond the quest for a “personal promised land”, this study revealed how studying abroad also embodies a dual transitional passage towards adulthood (Czerska-Shaw and Krzaklewska 2021) and global citizenship (Birindelli 2018). Nevertheless, in this training camp to become cosmopolitan (Hannerz 1990: 2005) it’s not altogether clear what “cosmopolitan student” means, since there are no cosmopolitan stories featuring international students as protagonists. In fact, analysis of the collected autoethnographies – and of secondary scholarly and non-scholarly sources addressing studying abroad – shows that there is no real narrative of what being an international student means. There is hardly a trace of a well-defined script derived from a structured plot in a book or a movie. What we can catch is a glimpse of a vague cosmopolitan narrative. This story upholds the generic validity of studying abroad for both instrumental and expressive reasons. It is constructed on a global scale by different actors and institutions and is partially dislocated from the society and culture of both the host

countries and those of origin. The actual practice constitutes an institutionalized rite of passage towards adulthood and global citizenship (Birindelli 2018).

However the story itself is nebulous, as are the characters, which means that the individual student has to find his or her own heroes and villains (challenges and helpers) along the path to discovering who is a good citizen of the world. At the end of the day, it is not clear what exactly the reward – or the lesson (Campbell 2008; Propp 2010) to be learned from the special “studying abroad world” – is or how it will serve the young person in adult life. I am convinced that this is no minor finding: the difficulty of connecting academic or educational cosmopolitanism with a recognizable narrative inevitably undermines its conceptual clarity and its use within the field of study.

Through a variety of “discourses”, imaginaries of mobility spread globally and can be re-embedded in specific foreign experiences, creating meanings that partially develop on local references (Salazar 2018). Such imaginaries can be considered unspoken schemas of interpretation, rather than explicit ideologies (Salazar 2012: 864) developing “upon implicit understandings that underlie and make possible common practices” (Gaonkar 2002: 4). International students “enact” (Jepperson 1991) on the everyday stage of the studying-abroad play. However, behind any script there is a story. The story has been increasingly standardized, conventionalized and abstracted and, ultimately, reduced to a deeply encoded and resonant set of symbols, icons, cliches, or stereotypes (Slotkin 1986). While the layperson enacts on the basis of scattered images, to interpret these stories in depth the social scientist must de- and re-construct them.

My interpretation of the (quasi-) ritual of studying abroad is as a script without the structured story, such as a book or a movie, that greatly increases the implicit and preconscious meaning of studying abroad. The young person’s self-story has no “center of narrative gravity”, so that he or she is alone both in acting out and recounting his/her epic (Birindelli 2023). As a result, the overall myth-ritual is sabotaged, and even the recognition of the new “cosmopolitan status” by the “community” (institutions, family, peers etc.) is indefinite. It is one thing to enact based on a story, another to enact without one.

The aforementioned quest for a personal “promised land” and the concomitant passage toward an adulthood characterized by the molding of a “cosmopolitan self-identity” follows a different path in Finland and Italy: the forked path of cultural practices and symbols. In my study this double transitional passage towards adulthood and global citizenship takes different shapes: the apparently uncontested global educational meaning of studying abroad is questioned by local and national cultures.

Another finding poses significant questions to both normative and non-normative (cultural) cosmopolitanism: in my study national and local cultures retain their cultural clout. If «developing a cosmopolitan identity is at the core of discourses on educational travels» (Huang 2021: 4), in this study we might simply say that, through two different *bildung* itineraries, the educational and overall life experience in Finland and in Italy shape two different kinds of “cosmopolitan selves” (George 2010): the northern cosmopolitan and the southern cosmopolitan. The former can be seen as someone who acquires a species of *ordinary cultural knowledge* that could later be utilized in the *world of work* and in everyday practices and experiences. The latter has experienced a species of *extra-ordinary cultural knowledge* more closely resembling that of a connoisseur, a worldly, refined person, someone who has good taste, be it in food, wine, fashion or art: an *aesthete*.

The northern and southern cultural experiences are constructed upon a polar meta-narrative, a sort of grand dichotomy: rational and progressive cultures of North Europe (where the *homo fictus* lives, the future fully-fledged new global citizen), versus the irrational, backward society of the south (Italy), inhabited by the southerner *homo naturalis* (Birindelli 2019). In another sense, we can encapsulate Finland as the present and the future of our late modern and globalized “real life”. Italy, instead, is neither the present nor the future, but simply the romanticized past, a sort of “vacation from real life”. In an (apparent) post-modern fragmentation, we are still blocked at the core narrative of full modernity with its epitomic North/South cleavage.

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