Lingering imprints of imperial pedagogy in Euroamerican visual representations of ‘China’ as a ‘threat’

Abstract

This paper positions popular visual representations as a co-existing yet under-researched source in the making of ‘China’ as a ‘spy’ and ‘security threat’ in Euroamerican contexts. To this end, I demonstrate how covers of Der Spiegel (Germany), Time Magazine (US) and The Economist (UK) are illustrative sites of colonial knowledge-reproduction, through which contemporary political, economic, sexual and racial relations are played out. I approach the text-image composition on news magazine covers as a meaning-making apparatus, dictating the way the broader audience is able, allowed or made to view a particular kind of ‘China’. I deploy a social semiotic reading, examining the tactics and means embedded in these visual representational practices. I argue that the visuality of ‘China’ engenders a feminized, racialized and illusive vision of ‘otherness’ with implicit reference to colonial tropes and metaphors, translated into a contemporary setting. The discursive stratification needs addressing, for it produces pedagogical effects towards the viewer. Instead of the civilizing missions abroad from past imperial lessons, I further uncover, how the visuality of ‘China’ securitizes ‘Chinese people’ as intimate enemies at the home front, thus governing perceptions and behavior in encounters with Chinese diaspora in Western countries.

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Introduction: Euroamerican visual media representations of China and visual IR

The importance of visual media representations of China

How do we see ‘China’ as a ‘threat’? Instigated by this mundane question, I postulate visual representations of China in the Euroamerican imagination as a site which consolidates particular meanings of ‘Self’ and ‘Other’ in contemporary international relations. Visual media representations of the most sold weekly news magazines in the US, UK and Germany give evidence to condemnatory strands of popular discourses on China. Especially the problematisation of China’s malpractice of espionage is a recurring topic across Western democracies. Nevertheless, the visualization of China as a ‘spy’ and therefore a ‘security threat’ demand further exploration.

My concern is initiated by the resonance of this particular issue of Der Spiegel\(^1\), problematizing as it does China’s practice of industrial espionage in Germany. Soon after its publication, the Vereinigung Chinesischer Akademiker und Studentischer Gesellschaften in Deutschland e. V. (CASD) (English translation: association of Chinese academics and student societies in Germany) issued an indictment against the authors of the title story based on charges of defamation (§185 StGB), incitement (§130 StGB), infringement of flags and national emblems of foreign states (§104 StGB) and others. A demonstration was organized in front of the headquarters of Der Spiegel in Hamburg on 10 November 2007. By the 29 November, the public prosecution service of the Hanseatic City of Hamburg received 33 indictments of equivalence (CASD, 2007).

Despite local upheavals related to protests and legal charges, this incident was not a concern for international relations and economic developments between Germany and China. The official website of the Federal Foreign Office as well as academic treatises render a radically different narrative about German-Sino relationship. Ever since the re-establishment of diplomatic relations in 1972, the story of Germany and China can be summarized as one of partnership, mutual benefits and growing interdependence (Gill and Walker, 2005; Kundnani and Parello-Plesner, 2012).

One could easily dismiss the local incident by arguing that elite political discourse and media representations belong to compartmentalized spheres of society. Consequently for the study of IR, domestic incidents or media assessments are of secondary importance (if at all), compared to international and politically elite encounters between states. However, this argument is flawed. Political and media discourses are made public to a broader audience in order to make sense of the German-Sino relationship in this particular case and of relationships with China in Euroamerican contexts more generally. Policy practices of political elites and media representations might be constructed as belonging to different spheres of society, but they are both embedded in the same ‘broader cultural repertoire of

\(^{1}\) A detailed exploration of the cover of this particular issue follows in the course of the paper.
available meanings’ (Weldes, 2006: 178). They necessarily draw from this repertoire, because a certain ‘community of interpretations’ requires a shared basis to make sense of the world. This ‘cultural repertoire’ is further needed to comprehend one’s place in society as well as to communicate and interact with others.

Thus, they are both meaningful towards the broader audience and I view them as of equal worth and relevance in the process of making sense of the construction of China as a threat in Euroamerican contexts. Furthermore, marginalizing the meaningfulness of media representations only leads to complete ignorance of these cases of popular unrest. Thus, from a broader perspective of political meaning-making, I identify media portrayal of China as a coexisting interpretation of international relations with China, rendering it a relevant yet under-researched source of political meaning-making about ‘Self’ and ‘Other’.

The political salience of visuality

The ‘Aesthetic Turn’ coined by Roland Bleiker (2001) marks an often cited intellectual point of departure within IR pertaining to matters of aesthetic representations. The ‘double poetics of the image’ captured by Rancière (2007) as ‘blocs of visibility’ and a ‘legible testimony of an historical narrative written on faces or objects’ (11); the ‘layering of meaning’ of ‘denotation’ and ‘connotation’, as elaborated by Roland Barthes (van Leeuwen, 2001: 94); or the enigma of communication to overcome the ‘radical non-communicability of the lived experience as lived’ (Riceour, 1976: 16) are, to cite a few, engagements with discourse, representations and surplus of meaning. I interpret a commonality in the sense that these writers converge upon the peculiarity of the gap between material appearance and meaning, the tension between the idea and its empirical representation (Bleiker, 2001).

I understand this peculiarity as inherently political, understood as a process in which the boundaries for constituting meanings and values are constructed (Shapiro, 1989). To explore visual representational practices is thus to trace the artificial ways through which boundaries of the ‘intelligible’ are drawn between the radical alterity that is ‘China’, and the allegedly homogenous and superior ‘West’. Furthermore, I understand representations as the result of this political process, a form that can never obtain the presentation it tries to re-present (Laclau, 2012: 392). Consequently, I explore cover pictures depicting China as both - materialized evidence as well as the (re)production and (re)enforcement of social relations and understandings. I view representations of China as core in the constitution of political identities for the US, UK and Germany, because they embody the ‘moment of externality’ inevitable in the process of identification (Laclau, 2012: 392).

The ascendance of visual media renders the exploration of visual artifacts an ‘interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary and sometimes counter-disciplinary field’, eclectic in methods and material of study (Mirzoeff, 1998). This is best documented in the growing body of literature within IR converging upon images of 9/11. Unquestionably insightful for
my research however, various engagements with visual artifacts exist and the multiplicity of available visual genres complicates any methodological transferability.

Nevertheless, I agree in broader terms with the argument that visual artifacts are more than just ‘raw’ evidence of people, places or events. Images connect with their audiences, because they rest on the epistemic status of bringing the audience closer to the event in an authentic manner (Hansen, 2011: 6). The visual bears the status of ‘natural and visible signs’ (Amoore, 2007: 217), crediting itself with legibility and the status of reality (Butler, 2009: 958). While it is certainly debatable whether or why visuality has come to be ‘the superior, most reliable’ of all the senses (Amoore, 2007: 217), one cannot disavow the sensual immediacy or emotive responses that visual imagery evokes. Moreover, these studies demonstrate an ‘aesthetic sensibility’ (Moore and Shepherd, 2010: 300; Bleiker, 2001), exploring visual artifacts not merely as an artistically materialized display, but as ‘an apparatus, through which political, economic, sexual and racial debates are played out’ (Finney, 2001: 6; Rose 2007).

A spectacular display of ‘China Threat’

The purpose of my paper is to explore what kind of ‘China’ we see, ‘how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing and the unseeing therein’ (Foster, 1988: ix). I made use of the concept of the spectacle to capture co-constitutive processes of visualization, identification and securitization, so as to explore how a particular visuality (Rose, 2007: 2) of ‘China’ enables the securitization of a particular identity for ‘China’ and the ‘self’ (US, UK, Germany) (Buzan and Hansen, 2009: 217; Möller, 2007: 181). In other words, I explore how visual representations of China in mass media facilitate a process of visual securitization, rendering a particular self-imagination of these supposedly Western protagonists.

My argument goes as follow. In order to portray China as a radical alterity, visual representations of China in the US, UK and Germany retrieve highly racialized and gendered tropes in order to consolidate a first glance of difference. Visual practices of ‘otherness’ are presented so blatantly on the covers under investigation that I do not doubt the capacity of the viewer to recognize these as a simplistic abstraction and exaggeration. Nevertheless they fulfil a self-referential role. On the one hand they are effectively displayed to aggrandize ‘otherness’ in order to visualize the sense of ‘threat’. Yet at the same time, this obvious racist and sexist deployment of the visual element is rendered acceptable by the more severe sense of ‘threat’ they are conveying.

By visualizing China as a mixture of both - a concrete, observable practice of industrial espionage intermingled with the more imaginative conceptions of a threatening mass - the cover reveals flexibility and indecision about what China stands for, providing a decoy for all possible constructions and meanings of threat. In addition, visual practices condense the
differentiated historicities between individual ‘Western’ protagonist and their past encounters with China by playfully deploying colonial tropes and metaphors in a contemporary setting, as if the colonial pasts with China are a myth with no actual relevance. Thus, most subtly, the visual construction of ‘China’ as a radical alterity propels a parallel configuration of ‘chain of equivalence’ (Laclau and Mouffe) between differentiated ‘Western’ protagonists, reinforcing their similarity and strengthening the superiority and homogeneity of an artificially constructed ‘Western Self’.

My paper aims to contribute towards the study of Self/Other conceptions in Anglophone IR broadly, and vis-à-vis China in particular. Little has been said about the discursive stratifications deployed in visual media representations, or the pedagogical affects these representations enact upon the broader viewership. By doing so, I emphasize the political salience of visualities of ‘China’ in Euroamerican contexts so to make comprehensible, that social exclusion is not only a perceived reality for Chinese diasporic subjects, but an increasingly lived experience across institutional settings.

To qualify my purpose, my focus on media representation does not imply a more authentic or truer understanding of China within Western interpretive spheres. Weekly news magazines, such as Time Magazine, The Economist or Der Spiegel are particularly ambiguous media, because their persuasiveness rest upon their reputation of conducting ‘investigative journalism’ to reveal political misconduct and societal problems. There is an equally problematic tendency to take reports by news magazines as more true or revealing than political articulations. Thus, I do not take this particular representation as a better or more ‘objective’ way of meaning making.

Nevertheless, I argue that media representations with their deployment of visual artefacts reveal a different kind of representational practice, rendering a spectacle of the ‘Chinese threat’ which is highly effective in shaping public perceptions and opinions about China. It underpins encounters between Western liberal democracies and China on the domestic level. At the same time, I see it as a potential source of conveying specific actions and decisions on an international level as legitimate or non-legitimate.

I. Theoretical and methodological framework

Semiotic reading of a spectacular text

In order to go beyond the visible exteriority of cover pictures, I deploy a semiotic reading of visual discourses. I understand discourses as ‘systematically organized sets of statements which give expression to the meanings and values of an institution. Beyond that they define, describe and delimit what it is possible to say and not to say’ (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006: 85; Howarth, 2000; Benwell and Stokoe, 2006). This Foucauldian understanding of discourse
allows me to understand visual representations as a discourse which performs disciplinary power in a dual sense. It is constructive on the one hand, for it places individual subjects into regimented system, allowing a particular subjectivity to arise. In this sense, visual representations are meaningful, for they allow a particular audience to have an understanding of China and/in relation to themselves (Debrix, 2003: 16, Gregory, 1989: xxi) However, it subjugates the audience under an established ‘regime of truth’ conveyed through the visual representations, rendering these very representations natural or normal (Gregory, 1989: xxi). Bearing this dual characteristic of discourses in mind, I explore how language and visual cues are strategically ordered to enact meanings and produce certain effects.

To study discourses is not limited to the study of texts in their written or oral materialization. I align my understanding of writing with Derrida as ‘...all that gives rise to an inscription in general whether it is literal or not and even if what is distributed in space or time is alien to the order of the voice; cinema, photography, choreography, of course, but also pictorial, musical, sculptural “writing”.’ (Derrida 1998: 9 as cited in Campbell, 1998: 271). Consequently, I understand ‘text’ not only as materialized and perceptible evidence (Der Derian and Shapiro, 1989), but the inscription of these various discursive practices (Debrix, 2003: 16; Grosz, 1995).

Each cover picture depicts written words and visual elements. Human bodies are portrayed and inscribed with meanings. Thus this constitutes an embodiment of a different kind. On the one hand, the cover pictures under investigation offer a rich source for exploration and exemplify the interplay between articulations in written, visual and embodied forms (Finney, 2006; Hansen, 2011). On the other hand, these require even more attention and rigor throughout the analysis. I acknowledge that each medium is particular in its own way. Each medium performs in such a distinct way that it in turn shapes the discourse differently. Yet instead of advocating the superiority of one medium over another, I see their value for exploration as of equal worth, especially since various media appear at the same time in interconnection to each other on every cover (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996; Barthes, 1977; Alexander, 2001). They all convey knowledges and meanings, resting upon the same ‘interpretive repertoire’ and articulated towards the same ‘interpretive community’ (Weldes, 2006: 178).

**The Spectacle as textual evidence and pedagogical apparatus**

Campbell and Shapiro have argued to view the saturation of visual representations in terms of a spectacle which marks ‘the contours of our geopolitical era’ (Campbell and Shapiro, 2007: 131). Furthermore, ‘economic conquests and religious conflicts are combined with a modern (if not hypermodern) apparatus that produces and circulates appearances’

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(Campbell and Shapiro, 2007: 131). Although they wrote this assessment in reference to visual interventions into security and military studies of the post-9/11 world, I see certain potential to apply the concept of the ‘spectacle’ for investigating visual representations of China. More specifically, I apply the ‘spectacle’ in a dual sense - as textual evidence and a pedagogical apparatus.

**The spectacle as ‘Text’**

Etymologically speaking, a spectacle refers to an event or scene exhibited to view as a visually striking performance or display. Following the broader definition of the word ‘spectacle’, I approach visual representations of ‘China’ as textual evidence - as that which is presented for viewing by a broader public, within a spatially bounded community through a certain time and context (van Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2001). The cover of each issue displays a pre-selected incident of topical importance with visual elements, intending to strike the viewer as a memorable experience for the appearance it creates (Finney, 2006; Dauphinée, 2007; Lyford and Payne, 2005).

I understand ‘text’ as the perceptible inscription of any kind of discursive practices, ‘whether poetic, literary, philosophical, scientific, visual, tactile, or performative’ (Grosz, 1995: 11). In other words I investigate the cover picture as a tangible composition of signs, exhibiting a ‘grammar’ (Kress and van Leewen, 2006; Rose 2007), which is deployed by and meaningful in a given interpretive sphere, existing within as well as across national boundaries. In approaching the cover as my first analytical step, I apply a visual semiotic reading (Rose, 2007: 74; Jewitt and Oyama, 2001: 134) to interrogate the visible exterior. I describe compositional and contextual aspects of the cover, referring hereby to the content (things, people, and places), spatial organization of certain elements, colour use and written captions depicted on the cover itself. This allows me to investigate both the representational (denotative) as well as symbolic (connotative) meanings (van Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2001; Barthes, 2009) of the items, people or places depicted on the cover. However, I see the spectacle not simply as ‘eye-catching’ material evidence of how industrial espionage is uncovered.

**The ‘spectacle’ as a pedagogical apparatus**

I further position the notion of the ‘spectacle’ because of its intellectual association with Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle* (1967) in order to expose the naturalizing and pedagogical effects of visual media representations to convey a particular vision of China as reality, truth and actuality (Debrix, 2008:6), veiling ‘the interior, ideological significance’ (Hight and Sampson, 2002: 10). Debord’s treatise of the ‘spectacle’, and more so its deployment in literature about 9/11 as a spectacle of fear and terror (Evans, 2013; Giroux, 2007; Kellner, 2003) offers a salient framework in which to investigate effects and functions of the ‘spectacle’ as not merely the domination of appearances in an image-mediated society.
In accordance with the literature mentioned previously, I understand the ‘spectacle’ as a powerful apparatus which executes disciplinary and pedagogical functions to submit social life to its influence. Following Debord’s treatise, the spectacle is detached from every aspect of life and replaces genuine human interaction with images (Kersten and Abbott, 2012; Kosović, 2011). Within the literature of 9/11, the audiovisual magnitude and intensity of ‘seeing’ death, violence and war does certainly monopolize the means, which engenders a society of fear and terror, behind which the politics of consent and submission is hidden (Kosović, 2011). Underlying this is the assumption that the spectacle is not a collection of images anymore, but produces and enforces social relationships between people (Campbell and Shapiro, 2007: 132). However, I do not see this disciplinary force and ability exclusively in images of death, violence and war.

As Douglas Kellner has argued, the spectacle is an omnipresent ‘phenomenon of media culture that embodies contemporary society’s basic values, serves to initiate individuals into its way of life, and dramatizes its controversies and struggles, as well as its modes of conflict resolution’ (2003: 2). Applied to the covers under exploration, which displays a different visual genre in a different context, I explore how a first glance of ‘otherness’ is visualized through simplification, classification and essentialization. I further demonstrate how colonial myths and narratives are deployed and substantiated through the visual cues, so as to create consent for the rhetorical ‘security over democracy’ (Kosović, 2011: 22), thus arguing that the abstracted totality depicted on this cover engenders a ready source of omnipresent threat and danger, demanding counter-measures.

Finally, I see media representations as the most perceptible, yet deceitful manifestation of the spectacle. Mass media seem to invade society in the shape of a simple apparatus of information dissemination. But this ‘neutrality’ answers precisely to the internal dynamics of the spectacle (Kosović, 2011: 19) to discipline and confuse the broader audience. I argue that within the spectacle of the ‘Chinese threat’ presented on this cover, the ‘obviousness’ of racist and sexist visual cues excuses its very deployment through the prioritization of a security issue. However this feeds only into the logic of the spectacle, for it renders the securitization of China as a threat as naturally more important than the contemplation of the ideological implications that such a visual representation espouses.
II. A first glance of ‘otherness’ – visualizing difference

The first cover background depicts a window blind. It is painted over in red with five yellow stars to resemble the national flag of the People’s Republic of China. A person pulls down the window blind leaving a gap, just wide enough to reveal a pair of almond shaped eyes and red varnished fingernails. The visible markers of racial distinction and femininity portray a titillating spectacle of a young woman of Asian origin in action (Hight and Sampson, 2002). The head is slightly turned to the right, yet her gaze is frontal. The darkness behind her, combined with pictorial blurriness towards the left and right intensifies the loci of the picture – her eyes. The second and third covers display a similar visual genre. In both covers, the eye marks the loci of the picture, albeit framed with different items. On the cover of the Economist, a feminine eye gazes towards the viewership from a mobile phone, while in the cover of Time Magazine, a supposedly masculine eye peaks through a key hole.

Showing ‘real’ people or items marks a naturalistic modality, which creates a ‘reality’ effect (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006: 159; Sturken and Cartwright, 2001; Perlmutter, 2007). The viewer, eventually aware of the artificial staging of this picture, can nevertheless ascribe certain credibility to this image because the elements are not fantasies, caricatures, cartoons or other genres of visual display.

The viewer does not ask who she/he is, what she/he does or where she/he is from. Instead, the visual composition of a national symbol, physiological traits and indicators of femininity/masculinity implies a classificational process (Kress and van Leewen, 2006: 79) through which these elements are related to each other. The ordering in the image itself produces the relationship, encouraging the viewer to know that what is depicted is a portrayal of a young Chinese person, gazing towards the viewer.

This supposedly ‘objective’ portrayal is further heightened by the saturation of the cover with the colour red. Culturally specific connotations with ‘red’ are employed here to produce not only an ‘eye-catching’ magazine cover, but to ensure the viewer’s recognition of these
elements in relation to China. Visual cues of color differentiation and modulation (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006: 160) render a visual display of pictorial detail, in which the background context is deliberately kept simple. Shades and brightness are adjusted so as to achieve maximum attention to the center of the cover.

Predicated on the assumption that image can verify and authenticate identity (Amoore, 2007: 218; Sturken and Cartwright, 2001: 19), the viewer is able to identify him/herself according to the marked signifiers of race and gender. The active social process of ‘looking’ and the culturally specific form of ‘visuality’ (Lister and Wells, 2001: 64, Rose, 2007: 2) exemplified in this picture allows a process of identification. Yet recognition of the young person in the picture as well as the identification of the viewer as the subject of ‘looking’ is dictated by pre-scripted markers of nationality, ethnicity and gender as classificatory variables to access the ‘other’ and the ‘self’ (Hight and Sampson, 2002: 11; Jackson and Penrose, 1994). While this particular scopic regime produces particular kinds of knowledge and subjects, it simultaneously normalizes the overt markers (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001: 96), veiling the artificiality of ‘nationality’, ‘ethnicity’ and ‘gender’. Consequently, the first glance allows the viewer to solidify his/her embodiment of a particular way of being and belonging. However, it does so upon encoded relations of power, enacted around issues of gender, race, class, space and time (Lister and Wells, 2001: 62).