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Visuality and Infrastructure: the case of the Belt and Road Initiative

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Abstract

The Belt and Road Initiative has become the largest infrastructure program in history, and has become a symbol in itself of growing significance of China and its power. This chapter aims to analyze visual representations of the BRI and will focus on the visual politics of the spatial imaginary of the BRI. Considering BRI as a representational discourse (Sykes and Shaw, 2013) the paper will interrogate the immediate materiality of the OBOR and symbolism of its "spectacle".
The chapter will fill the existing gap by focusing on the visualization of OBOR, identifiying iconic elements, narratives and putting them to a visual sociological scrutiny. The chapter uses the existing visual material (photos, drawings and documentary films as well as promotional material as the sources of data.

Keywords: infrastructure, visual analysis, symbolism, connectivity discourse

1.Introduction

The Belt and Road initiative (BRI) has become the largest infrastructure program in history, and has become a symbol in itself of growing significance of China and its (soft) power. Schindler et al (2021) go as far as calling BRI a "meta megaproject", which consists of multiple initiatives, which in itself is emblematic of contemporary megaprojects and their sublime nature (see Flyvberg, 2014). "Reading" or translating the politics, or indeed "technopolitics" of infrastructure (Larkin, 2013) is not an easy task, as larger logics and *infra* politics behind visible materiality of the technological objects should be uncovered. These entanglements of materiality and "technopolitics" are directly linked to human affect, fantasy and desire. The important part of the infrastructural political address is the representation of the possibility to become and be modern.

At the same time, massive infrastructural projects may be used to represent state power to the citizens (Harvey, 2012) or project that representation of state power to the citizens of other nations. BRI is an important element of the Chinese global imaginary, where different ideas related to global connectivity and prosperity, "inclusive globalization" (Liu and Dunford, 2016), Chinese leadership and modernity, "global entrepreneurship", and a missionary role of Chinese capital and knowledge in civilizing and modernizing (the backward) rurality are articulated. To

some extent, China defines its external politics and "going out" via BRI. As an imaginary it is constituted of significations and desires (Castoriadis, 1975) that make up an ideational (policy) superstructure of the BRI, whereas its material realizations of the infrastructure remain on the visible surface as rational, functional production of these ideas/policies.

How can we see the nuanced superstructure of the imaginary of the BRI? This chapter aims to address this question and via exploratory analysis of visual representations of the BRI and will attempt to bring more light on the politics of the spatial imaginary of the Belt and Road Initiative. Considering BRI as a *representational discourse* (Sykes and Shaw, 2013) the chapter will interrogate the immediate materiality of the BRI and symbolism or "spectacular" promise of its multiple infrastructure projects. Being a multivalent formation, BRI needs to be considered discursively (Wong 2021), where particular attention needs to be paid to the "construction, framing, maintenance and dissemination of the sign systems that enable them" (ibid, 711).

The symbolism and imaginary of the BRI has received relatively scarce attention of the scholars. At the same time, BRI itself received a huge amount of attention, and most of the coverage has been positive (Liu and Dunford, 2019). However, here and there one encounters imagery that indicates at BRI and this visual dimension creates its own discourse about BRI. Due to ambivalence of images, the reading of the meanings can be multiple and this chapter will fill the existing gap by focusing on the visualization of BRI, identifiying iconic elements (successes and failures) and putting them to a visual sociological scrutiny (Zuev and Bratchford, 2020).

BRI is a unique mega-infrastructure and an economic collaboration project launched by China in 2013 that aims to connect China with multiple (primarily) Eurasian and African countries along ancient trade routes via infrastructure building. It has received an immense attention already from scholars in security and international relations (Pechlaner et al. 2020) and political geography (Han and Webber, 2019, Liu et al. 2016, Bennett, 2020) but also increasingly from anthropologists (see multi-sited ethnographic study on trade by Rippa, 2020). However, still many aspects of BRI remain understudied, for instance little research has been done on "Digital Silk Road", and impact of infrastructure on the local communities of the partner countries (Fung et al. 2018, Shen, 2018).

Very few studies interrogated Belt and Road Initiative from visual perspective, as a collection of representations or a social imaginary. Which is even more surprising, considering that the discipline of international relations has clearly embraced the importance of insights stemming from visual analysis and visual communication (Crilley et al. 2020) as part of a larger aesthetic turn. And it is also surprising considering the importance of visual communication in promoting such a "brand" as Belt and Road. Thus, this study for the first time will present and analyse primary visual data that will reveal the complexity of visual representation of BRI. These are

the visuals found within the printed media (The Economist magazine) and visual imagery within the multimodal media (documentary films in YouTube). The images chosen for the empirical case study come from various sources, both non-Chinese and Chinese media and have no definite time range (but mostly since 2018), and rather have been sampled purposefully by the researcher aiming to show the variety and diversity of representations.

In this chapter it will be argued that we need to delve deeper into the multiple visual narratives of BRI, and thus seeing it as a visual phenomenon that will help better understand its visual political messages and complex discourse which in its turn allows uncovering hidden mechanisms of power.

The structure of the chapter is as follows: to follow the introduction is the literature review on infrastructure, which will be followed by the section on methodology of visual interrogation and specifically, visual analysis of the infrastructure. After that the section on the visual communication regarding BRI will follow by two instances of empirical analysis (vignettes) that better illustrate how BRI can be approached visually.

2.BRI and enchantment of infrastructure

While BRI is not only about infrastructure (bridges, flyovers, digital corridors and port terminals), but also cooperation, investment, security, trade, and symbolic production of civilizational cultural exchanges, it is the very materiality of the built environment that will be the subject in this chapter as it is the infrastructure that most often becomes the visual object in media representations of BRI. To follow is a brief overview of some literature regarding the "promises of infrastructure", which will help to contextualize the object of this study.

Building upon literature of the aesthetic turn and visual sociology, as well as studies of infrastructure (Anand et al. 2018, Larkin, 2013, Schindler et al. 2020, Zuev and Habeck, 2020) this study approaches the visual dimension of BRI with a much more focus on the actual visual communication as has been done by previous (few) scholars.

BRI no doubt is a unique project of planetary scale and remains a "seductive" and hot research subject. While it has its own value to the scholars of international relations, security and political) studies, it is also fascinating for the study of mobility and connectivity, that this initiative implies. Belt and Road Initiative is an interesting example of what Penny and Knox (2012) in their analysis of roads as infrastructure call "enchantment of infrastructure". Infrastructure is not only a "grand project" of the state, it is also a fundamental element for social cohesion, availability of which and limit the range of lifestyles (Zuev and Habeck, 2019). Following Bennett (2001), Penny and Knox (2012) argued against a notion, that the post-enlightenment world

has been characterised by a process of disenchantment (Weber 1958, Blumenberg 1983).

Peter Schweitzer et al (2017) remind us that in the study of infrastructure it is the deep structures beyond the observable that really matter and should constitute the task of the researcher. Schweitzer et al (2017) also warn us about the danger of neglecting the *infra* in the infrastructure, and simply focusing on the infrastructure as materials, practices and meanings. The authors believe that anthropologists should explore the materiality of the built environment along with its becoming, consumption and entanglement with politics, historical contexts and globalisation.

Part of the politics of the infrastructure is the social promises, which in the case of the BRI are related to technological modernity and sociotechnical imaginary. In the latter the key narrative is of China as a potent agent of technological modernization of the already existing infrastructure or the creator of the new, desired one. It is exactly this narrative of technological leadership that China assumes in shaping the "built environment" and appearance of technoscapes that causes concerns among other leading Western and Asian nations, dubious about the intentionality of the Chinese technological endeavour. A major factor in this is the debate surrounding the claims that China engages in debt-trap diplomacy through the BRI, ensnaring developing countries with debt dependence and then translating that dependence into geopolitical influence. China's actions in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Malaysia are central to the debt trap debates. The Center for Global Development classifies eight countries as having a "particular risk of debt distress" as a result of their involvement in China's BRI.

Infrastructure is an important concept for understanding not only the changing relationship between humans and nature, but what is of most relevance in this chapter – understanding the changing notion of the human-nature interaction in the modern Chinese culture. As Larkin suggested, "infrastructures are matter that enable the movement of other matter" (2013, 329) and it can be centred on built things, knowledge things or people things. Not all the elements of infrastructure are however appropriate subjects for the visual analysis, but visual analysis can allow to elucidate on the changing social practices and politics related to specific socio-material assemblages (Zuev, 2018). However, as Collier suggested (2011), we can see infrastructures as significations of the "biopolitical" ordering, a mixture of political rationality, administrative techniques and material systems that can tell us a lot about and see better the practices of government. Decaying or ruined infrastructure facilities can at the same time signify the lack of political cohesion and become the source of unending sadness for the population (Walker, 2012).

Until now very few efforts have been made in applying visual analysis to the transforming built environment and sociotechnical assemblages. However, this has been changing with technological advances and specifically with the availability of drone technologies, that facilitated optical analysis of the spaces, landscapes, and

vast *hyperobjects* (Fish, 2020). Visuality and analysis of infrastructure and technologies nevertheless remains a rather untouched domain (see Sinclair, 2017, Zuev, 2018).

In the following section the focus is on the relationship between infrastructure and specifically BRI and its social visuality. As I will show further the visuality of the BRI is constituted by various visual data: cartographic, satellite imagery as well as visual media discourses in popular magazines and films.

3.Seeing the infrastructure-induced changes along the BRI

In this section I wish to review several studies that can be a starting point for analysis of the visual dimension of BRI. The visual dimension in this sense means not only analysis of representations and visual communication, but also the visual data-knowledge assemblage that relates to discourse on BRI. The visual data can be cartographic or satellite imagery, but also observations of the researchers collected over time via "slow ethnographies" with dispersed mode of inquiry and thus diversity of ways of seeing (Woodwarth and Joniak-Luthi 2021).

Interestingly, a project involving multiple countries and territories – BRI still lacks an official cartographic representation with areas, routes and projects (Narins & Agnew, 2019). As Bennett suggests (2020) – the seduction of the initiative might be flowing from its "amorphous and ever-changing scope" (Oliveira et al. 2020). While cartographic imagery is scarce, Chinese government is increasingly relying on aerial imagery, which provides "rational" representation.
Mia Bennett (2020) used nightlight imagery to see the differences in development along the BRI. By locating emerging hot and cold spots of development between along the border of China and other nations one can see the actual reality and not the "imaginary" impact of the BRI. The study suggests that hot spots indicate clusters of high values, which may signal increases in socioeconomic activity. And emerging cold spots are spatially significant clusters of low values, potentially indicating the decrease of economic activity. According to Bennett (ibid.), despite the much fanfare Pakistan-Chinese border is represented by a cold spot, while less known in public activity in the North-East (Near Russian Far East and North Korea) borders is a hot spot.

While aerial imagery allows to "rationally" assess the activity along the borders and thus see impact of BRI-induced change, for the large audience BRI remains a multi-territorial project, which is promoted by means of maps (used and seen by scholars and lay public) showing the ambition and connectivity delivered by the BRI. An insightful study by Galen Murton (2021) shows that the maps of BRI are characterized by "invisibility" and presence of blank spaces. Murton identifies cartographic invisibility of particular Chinese regions (Tibetan Plateau and Himalayan valleys) as a distinct form of visual argument to assert that what goes missing from the map reflects power. The "cartographic silence" of conspicuously

missing Tibetan Plateau and Himalayan valleys from large-scale cartographic representations of the BRI indexes that such "omissions" may obscure the specificities of the place or render the regions invisible, where certain social issues (such as human rights) are conspicuous (Murton, 2021). Interestingly, BRI maps leave blanks not only in the sensitive internal regions in China, but also beyond its borders, where many projects related to BRI are underway (such as "Sky Train extension").

Carolijn van Noort (2020) in one of the few studies that deal with the visual dimension of strategic narratives related to BRI explores visual narratives of the Maritime Silk Road at MSRI portal. She presents her findings (in a surprisingly non-visual way) as follows: the visual communication is much less about the projects, but the "political figures" behind them. Infrastructure projects are implied and not directly shown. Importantly, the image of Xi Jinping connotes the continuity as stability of the BRI, as he is the person who embodies the vision of the BRI. Van Noort (2020) reminds us that in the digital age it is imperative to analyse the intersection of strategic narratives and visual media, primarily as visual media are omnipresent. Her study shows how infrastructure is associated with key political actors (Xi Jinping), especially as they appear in public (raising a toast or depicted on a group photo in the centre).

This section includes review of several works that are important in bringing in BRI as a visual phenomenon. These are diverse aspects of the visuality of BRI: (in)visibility, and strategic visualization, the next section will review some methodological issues related to the analysis of actual visual representations of the BRI.

4. Visual Analysis: some methodological notes

The stories emanating from different news channels constantly remind us that we are living in an ever-increasingly digital hyper-visual world awash with antagonistic ideologies and ideological movements. These movements are laden with images, image-events and politically charged symbols and emblems that contribute to the gradual 'symbolic thickening' (Kotwas and Kubik, 2019) of public culture through the intensification of national and religious visual displays and social performance.

While this chapter is exploratory and does not aim at systematic or full (or quantitative) analysis of imagery related to BRI, it will present and analyse several images qualitatively that will allow to show the complexity of visual representation of BRI – the illustrations in The Economist and the visual imagery within the multimodal media, such as documentary films in YouTube. The images chosen for the empirical case study come from various sources, both non-Chinese and Chinese media.

Another important point is that sole visuals have never been considered as a single

type of data in visual studies (Zuev and Bratchford, 2020), instead visuals help to elicit information, and also require a wide sociohistorical context. While images do not speak for themselves, they can allow to approach the issue at stake from a different perspective and identify "in-between invisibilities" that allow to pose questions: why peculiar images have been chosen and others have been omitted? Why a particular sequence of images has been presented?

G. Rose, introduced three types of modalities suitable for the study of visual texts: social, compositional and technological (2001). 'Social modality' referring to the economic, social and political relations and practices, that surround the image and through which it is seen and used, 'technological modality' – how the image is made, and 'compositional modality' which relates to the material qualities, as well as content and composition in the visual text (Rose 2001, p.17). The three modalities matter in the area of the 'site(s) of the production of an image, the site of the image itself, and the site(s) where it is seen by various audiences' (Ibid., p.16). Researchers can structure their analysis using one or more modalities to study how meaning is constituted in the production of the image, the image itself, and through its interpretation by various audiences.

A visual methodology is best approached as a multimodal perspective, where the visual is but one feature along with auditory and textual ones that allow the holistic understanding of visual data and materiality (Pauwels, 2012). Following the view that visuality is communicated through mixed media, it is important to analyse the relations of the 'verbal text with photographs, images, drawings and/or graphs'. Documentaries unlike photographs or drawings should be approached as multimodal texts, as they use historical imagery, drawings, graphs and combine musical and textual narrative, they also blend special effects for a more artistic portrayal.

As van Noort (2020) suggested as methodological caveats in her study mentioned above, an analysis of strategic narrative success (or failure) needs to consider several variables, such as image selection (why a particular image depicting or representing an infrastructure project and not another), juxtaposition (choosing one image or a selection of carefully framed images), and the medium (from traditional to digital platforms).

The following section will draw on these methodological suggestions and present two cases of the visual analysis related to printed media and documentary films.

5.Visual Analysis Case 1: *The Economist* representations of the BRI

While we may think that the same medium can give the same illumination of a social issue, by looking at selected images of the Economist journal we can discover, that depiction of the New Silk Road or BRI is far from being unilaterally negative or positive. The Economist can be considered as an elite media platform that offers insightful information on developments across the world with perhaps a skewed or

more than critical reflection in non-Western nations. The key images in this chapter are the graphic illustrations by European artists, which are associated with texts. While we tend to pay attention more to the text, these illustrations however are important visual accompaniment of the messages. Each image represents a "'plot". The following "plots" found in several images of *The Economist* may be a useful exploratory launching point for deconstructing the key tensions and anxieties behind the BRI. While the images can be ambivalent, they offer a rather insightful and fresh perspective on what kind of narratives cause key suspicion and should be countered by the authorities in their further "re-branding" or promotion of the BRI.

One of the common ingredient of representation is the image of the planet Earth or a map (terrain) suggesting the significance (impact) and the scale of the project to the planet.

Plot 1:*China gets rich.*

For instance, in the drawing by Jac Depczyk for The Economist[1], BRI is depicted as a new silk road with the flow of goods and money. Where there is no indication of the "infrastructural promise" of the BRI, but rather a metaphoric suspicion or anxiety about one-way enrichment for China. A sort of incisive depiction of the Chinese "threat by infrastructure", and implications of impoverishment of the local population. At the same time, small heaps of coins represent the local treasures (resources), that are being carried away by boats and trucks. The camels depicted may be iconic animals of the Silk Road, an idealization that helps to sell BRI and promote it as a rejuvenated old trade route. At the same time, the roads are depicted as fragments, with projected ones connecting these bits and this projectification is one of the positive connotations of the drawing. The map here representing geographical terrain is the ground of turbulent trade and construction that is implied by the infrastructure built-up.

Insert Figure 1 Here. Image By Jac Depczyk.

Plot 2:*Planetary Infrastructure.*

The image by Luca D'Urbino appeared on the cover of *The Economist* with the title Planet China[2], and is a more metaphoric and caricature reference to the promise of the planetary infrastructurization. Indeed, the Earth is depicted as Saturn with its rings, where the roads – symbol of infrastructure are circling the Earth. The image is suggesting the scale of the ambition and the scale of the venture. The ring with

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[1] Will the China's Belt and Road Initiative outdo the Marshall Plan? *The Economist.* https://www.economist.com/finance-and-economics/2018/03/08/will-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-outdo-the-marshall-plan. (Accessed 10 January, 2022)
[2] Planet China: What to make of the Belt and Road Initiative. *The Economist.* https://www.economist.com/weeklyedition/2018-07-28 (Accessed 10 January, 2022)

the characters 中国 （*China*） however may be interpreted ambivalently as control or leadership, and at the same time can be a simple reference to the builder, as an ancient marker of the builder that was often left on the edifice. This image also suggests the linearity of the road – not a rhizomatic network, that serves different purposes and destinations, but rather a principal line – two lane-traffic, serving just in one principal direction.

Plot 3: *Perpendicular mutuality and Complexity of transactions.*

The image by Sebastian Thibault （Figure 2） provides a reference to the common icon of the BRI – the highway (railway) bridge. In this drawing the road construction equipment is positioned on two different levels that may stand for the receiving party and the construction party. As was mentioned earlier, the incongruences between the parties involved lead to the common plot of the BRI discussions – the lack of mutuality between China and the receiving countries. The common mutuality or mutual agreement would be depicted with a handshake, however here the bridge is connected in a less, also suggesting unanticipated tensions and disagreements. The image is a metaphor of the transactions in the BRI or any other meta projects, which are characterized by a   complicated geometric conditions of power, non-linearity and relationality (depicted here by two hands which could also represent two geometrical or (power) planes).

Related to this plot is an important sub-narrative of the infrastructure as a "debt-trap". BRI represents two opposites in the development of infrastructure - the nightmare of a debt-trap and the dream of connectivity. Importantly, the connectivity in BRI is a dream for the two parties engaged (the recipient country and the executor (China). The same applies to the "debt-trap" nightmare (Lai et al. 2020) – which works against the positive image of BRI and the discourse that China is increasingly working to counter (Murton and Lord, 2020) and the debt as an economic turmoil for the recipient country (and its current government).

Related to this plot is a concrete case of the recent tensions over the highway in Podgorica. One of the images that has circulated widely recently has been that of the new highway bridge near Podgorica in Montenegro. An image of a brand new, shining piece of road engineering is presented as a "luxury", that the customer can not pay for. While the discussion involves the previous government that explicitly suggests that this decision was the mistake of the Montenegro government and not Chinese, the highway becomes a visual reminder of unaffordability of infrastructure and megaprojects (see Flyvbjerg, 2014). Indeed, any unpaid for project within BRI becomes a luxury product bought with an average salary and concern of not having enough money to use and maintain it.

Insert Figure 2 Here. Author: Sebastien Thibault.

Plot 4: *Prosperity for all brought by China.*

The centrepiece of the illustration by Nathalie Lees[3] is the paper lantern in the shape of the globe and central position of China on it. The graphic illustration in red and yellow colours on the black background is based on a popular symbol of "Chineseness", especially in the West – the paper lantern 灯笼 (denglong), often associated with Chinatowns in the Western cities or popular Lunar New Year celebrations. The paper lanterns are common symbols of vitality and good luck (fortune), thus the wealth here is brought by the BRI to the whole world (depicted on the lantern). The red lanterns here can be illuminating and giving light (via creation of essential infrastructure), but also symbols of Chinese (aesthetic) or technical standard imposition, a sort of "paper lantern colonialism". They can also symbolize "red lights" – as in the red light district, connoting invisibility, secrecy of transactions and hidden outcomes. Launching lanterns into the sky during Lantern Festival is an important part of the Lunar Year celebration, which is a family reunion holiday, and indeed an important solidarity ritual. Thus, the illustration to some extent also echoes the one by Luca D'Urbino on the Chinese central (planetary) role in the global map.

Plot 5: *BRI as Digital Control Room.*

In the image that would represent plot 5 is again by Nathalie Lees[4], and we can see a less celebratory, "prosperity for all" vision of BRI via a centralized control space (CCTV surveillance room). The illustration depicts a graphic setting of one human figure in white shirt and black hair, looking at five screens showing different pieces of the world map. The image represents BRI as a digital surveillance control room with one supervising "key operator" in the manager's chair overlooking the movements on multiple screens between various dots related to important projects and hubs along the BRI, with the central screen showing the big picture of China and Beijing. While one supervisor control room suggests that there is a powerful singularity behind the project, it also makes us think - about the sustainability of the project beyond the "great supervisor" – will it cease to exist or it will be upheld by a follower? The pandemic crisis suggests that while thinking strategically is still valid, we are really living in one day and such future projections are no longer valid.

As a summary for these five images one could suggest the far from univocal representation of the BRI and the New Silk road even in one particular medium (The Economist magazine). The multiple images show the variety and wide range of

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[3] China Wants to Put itself back in the centre of the World. The Economist. https://www.economist.com/special-report/2020/02/06/china-wants-to-put-itself-back-at-the-centre-of-the-world (Accessed 10, January, 2022)
[4] The Digital Side of the Belt and Road Initiative is growing. The Economist. https://www.economist.com/special-report/2020/02/06/the-digital-side-of-the-belt-and-road-initiative-is-growing. (Accessed 12 January, 2022).

connotations regarding the BRI by different authors – from visions of dystopian space of exploitation and surveillance to the visions of prosperity and planetary infrastructure, with hybrid visions of conflicting but connecting partnerships, led by China and thus slightly awkward ways of coping. The images may be alluding to different problems or content of the program and thus it can be instrumental in decoding them as texts. The sets of symbols incorporated in them can be very simple but capable to symbolize visions and counter-visions of a particular project or an issue at hand.

While images are drawn by individual (mostly European artists) they circulate far and wide via global networks of the media distribution and have a powerful impact on the reception of BRI among a general public (in this case English speaking, Western, educated elite).

As a method for reflection images allow us to further conceptualize the features of the BRI – as a vision of prosperity and planetary infrastructure but at the same time of "perpendicular mutuality" and one supervisor control room.

6.Visual Analysis Case 2: Infrastructure and connectivity discourse in documentaries.

In this second instance the focus is on the imaginary presented in the official CCTV documentary *One Belt One Road, "Common Destiny"*, [5], the first documentary about BRI as a made in China "collaboration model" (合作模式) for "creating a brand new Asia". The narrative line starts with the historical references to the world mapmaking and resulting human endeavour to connect via trade routes, nourished by the imagination of unknown territories and the thirst for discovery, wealth and sea trade. Throughout the video politicians from some participating countries (majority European and Chinese, with only one leader of a North African country) share their positive visions of participating in the BRI.

The dynamic storyline is supported by the 55 minutes of epic music connoting a heroic undertaking, while the visual syntax of the documentary is highly relaying on the aerial views providing the bird's eyeview perspective through a kaleidoscope of urban landscapes, industrial sites and largely showing the transformation of the emptyscapes with the new built environment features.

Some of the common signifiers of this dynamic narrative are rhythmically edited with insertions of the winding roads with the two CCTV crew cars and the rushing high-speed rail trains, as well as with another frequent image of the seaports with containers and cargo cranes. The documentary finishes with the sequence of images

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[5] One Belt One Road, part 1, "Common Destiny", 共同命运。
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YgUJX5X_xNE (Accessed 10. January, 2022)

of yet unconquered nature – mountains, valleys and the ocean reminding that the common destiny is the "common dream" of commanding the resources of the planet. The documentary is a glamorous or more romantic presentation of the Chinese "thinking big" in terms of metaphors of "common dream" or "common destiny", but at the same time careful reminder that this is a rejuvenation of a century old exchanges along the Silk road, which are now revived and led by an innovative "platform vision" from China. At the same time, the BRI in the documentary is depicted as a transformation outside China beyond its borders and gives little reference to the changes domestically. Several distinctive groups of images (visuals) convey the message of the documentary, these are the images of the rationalistic planning and management (e.g. graphs and maps), important people (politicians), who symbolize international endorsement of the project, the images of operatives and construction workers indicate the reality and tangible outcomes (e.g. railway) behind the policies, the final group of images refers to the future – the images of nature represent the work at the edge, future horizons and resources to be tapped and taken advantage of along with the future prospects of development (represented by the global night time light map) (**see Figure 3**).

BRI is not merely a political platform or ambition, but is an important cultural product and signifier of the modern Chinese culture – the symbol of going beyond the borders and effort of active exchange with the West. It also symbolically combats the cultural trauma of being dependent on the Western technologies, and reverts from China being the object of globalization to China being the main subject of globalization via technological domination and leadership. It is also a revision of the postcolonial imaginary and reminds the visual narratives of the 50s where Soviet engineers were shown on the posters of the Sino-Soviet collaboration as teachers (**see Figure 4**), where posters glorified the Soviet Union's advanced economy to build up Chinese nation.

In the documentary Common Destiny – it is the implied that a Chinese 大哥 (big brother, both as "surveiler" and a "knowledgeble expert" or consultant) that becomes the key operative agente in the execution of the planetary connectivity dream. But in the CCTV documentary the BRI is portrayed as a highly-efficient techno-dream stimulated by the visual grammer of time-lapse shots of the urban landscapes and characterized by the automation and powerful machines, that manage the scale and natural challenges. The human dimension is reduced to the acceptance of the initiative by the national leaders as well as Chinese and western experts, the only ones who are given voice in the vídeo.

Figure 3. Common destiny. Collage of Screenshots from the Documentary "Common Destiny". Author.

Figure 4. "*Study the Soviet Union's advanced economy to build up our nation". Artist: Ding Hao. 1953.*
Source: Landsberger Collection. **www.chineseposters.net**

A very different and much more critical vision is given in the *Deutsche Welle* documentary *One Belt One Road*[6], which travels along the Maritime Silk Road and the Overland Silk Road to show complexity of the undertaking. The key message in the German documentary is a less glamorous depiction of the "perpendicular mutuality" in the BRI, where the receiving countries lacking their own resources for modernization need China but are unable to fully take advantage of this. Unlike CCTV documentary, the DW film uses insertions with the down-to earth characters – farmers, artisans, Chinese construction workers - the new kind of "missionaries" far away from their homeland.

7.Conclusions

The objective of this chapter was to underline some points crucial for understanding the visual communication surrounding the BRI and thus see BRI as a unique discursive domain, where different producers set parameters around the presentation of particular social or cultural bodies. Visual analysis has not been the key dimension in the understanding of BRI, however it is crucial to deconstruct and contextualize the meanings and iconicity brought and promoted via official visual representations, and counter-representations of the BRI. The study of the visual representations of the BRI allows us better examine not only the intricate relationships between China and the countries involved and affected by the politics of infrastructure but to see the visual communications about the grand project of China-led "inclusive globalization" (Liu, 2019), or globalization with Chinese characteristics.

Following from previous studies on the aerial visibilities (Bratchford and Zuev, 2020) in this paper it is stressed that some technologies are becoming important not only as they provide a new vision from above, adding a poetic touch to the "boring" infrastructure, but they also remind us that visibilities are controlled in order to gain wider acceptance among the public.

The two cases of the Economist magazine illustrations and the documentaries demonstrate that we can uncover much deeper discursive tensions that the visuals allow us to see. Western representations are far from being critical or diminishing of the BRI, while perhaps touching upon multiple facets and latent symbolism of the BRI – its promise of prosperity and connectivity via planetary infrastructure, but also hidden tensions in the concept of mutuality – who eventually becomes the winner and looser in the partnership.

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[6] The New Silk Road, Part 1: From China to Pakistan. DW Documentary.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cUxw9Re-Z-E&t=18s (Accessed 10. January, 2022)

While the BRI is the subject of various scholarly discourses it is crucial that further interrogations embrace the affordances of visual media to provide a multifaceted, more complex imaginary of the BRI not as a given-truth reality, but as a project as much in imagination and dreams as a collage of diverse visions and images. It is also essential for both the receiving parties and China to see how these imaginaries embrace different symbolic and expressive meanings, some enabled by new technologies (remote sensing or drones).

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