



# The Empowerment of the Visual Media Technology for the Intellectual House Owner's Rights Protection

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**Abstract.** To explore the brand-new form of social resistance, this study takes one of the famous performative resistance case, the Zhengzhou's Yongwei & Jinqiao Real Estate Project, as the research object and adopts semiotic analysis combined with rhetorical analysis method to analyze the icon, index, symbol and rhetoric of this image event. Findings show that with the empowerment of visual media technology, the traditional social resistance has generated brand-new forms, among which the most representative one is the performative resistance with “image politics” as its core logic. And the intellectual group with high media literacy are more likely to take advantage of the media technology to create image events so as to protect their rights. Since the image can generate more prominent public effects than the text with the use of symbol and rhetoric to achieve argument and identification, the visual media technology possesses great potential for various social groups to carry out social resistance in a more legal, rational and effective way.

**Keywords:** performative resistance · image event · image politics · semiotic analysis

## 1 Introduction

In recent years, the media have been nurturing the performative resistance in the form of “image”, such as kneeling, playing, parading, dancing, etc. With the popularity of digital media technology, this new form of resistance, the online performative resistance emerges in the spectrum of resistance practices, which has become the main approach for the intellectual to protect their rights. Unlike the mass events directly resorting to violence, the online performative resistance of the intellectual takes advantage of the public opinion to convey a gentler, safer, and more discursively intelligent form of resistance. Specifically, performative resistance aims to create a performative, visual, and dramatic “image event”, that is, producing dramatic visual images that are sad, humorous or satirical in order to draw public attention. In summary, the symbolic logic of performative resistance is “visual resistance”, and its deep mechanism is “emotional resistance”. In contrast to the traditional ways of social resistance, performative resistance not only creates the symbolic landscape of the resistance in the visual sense, but

also weaves the discursive wisdom of resistance in the dramatic form. On this basis, the online performative resistance can be interpreted as a new practice of resistance, and also an action program and political practice that express the demands of resistance by creating dramatic, consuming and participatory performance with the empowerment of visual media.

The Zhengzhou's Yongwei & Jinqiao Real Estate Project, located in Zhengzhou City, Henan Province, raised concerns due to the suspension of construction. Among the owners of this project, there are 189 doctoral graduates, 481 masters, and 246 people enjoying the talent subsidy in Zhengzhou. However, the construction of Yongwei Jinqiao Xitang has been stopped for more than 7 months since December 2021. The owners have been trying to coordinate with all parties to promote the resumption of work, and the news "670 master's and doctoral owners of Zhengzhou suffering the rotten building" has become the hotspot of all media platforms. With all owners' efforts, this suspended project can be recovered, which success gives credit to the intellectual owners' strategic resistance. For the intellectual group with high media literacy, they know better how to make use of the media technology to arouse public attention, empathy, sympathy and identification to protect their rights. Therefore, the intellectual's rights protection movements are more likely to succeed compared to the lower class. This research will combine the semiotic analysis and rhetorical analysis to explore the empowerment of visual media technology for the intellectual's rights of real estate transactions in the form of online performative resistance.

## 2 Literature Review

Performative resistance is presented through the performance of the "body". The appearance of the body in performative resistance practices is always accompanied by production practice in specific spatial form, and performance provides a spatial practice that leads to the body politics [1]. The main purpose of the body's appearance is to create visual spectacle and then to trigger social spectacle, thus achieving emotional mobilization or communal mobilization during the process of opinion generation. In fact, the body has become a medium of expression and a symbol of struggle, often in relation to a specific spatial form and the way that body is represented in the spatial dimension. According to Le Breton, the body, as a symbol of resistance entering the political arena, cannot be separated from a specific spatial practice [2]. In the spatial practice of performative resistance, the dramatic discourse required for the generation of "image events" is produced due to the spectacle of the body. Thus, the act of performance implies a spotlight-like technique of visible production, which accelerates the flow and convergence of the so-called "emotional energy" of public space and ultimately presents a dramatic image politics.

The performative resistance is actually a form of image politics, emphasizing the use of visual images for social mobilization and the production practices that weave resistance discourses in the image dimension. Deluca considers image events as a new rhetorical concept of new social movements [3]. With the "image turn" in current society, the construction of social issues and the generation of public opinion are increasingly resorting to image events [4]. The advantage of image in social mobilization is mainly

reflected in their ability to construct arguments and identification compared to words. Because of the presence of image, the arguments are endowed with dramatic features, which is perfectly in line with the narrative logic of issue construction in the era of visual culture [5].

Specifically, the ideational system of images has greater uncertainty compared to language and words, and different groups can assign certain meanings to image symbols according to their pre-determined discursive positions, and then engage in the practice of contesting legitimacy in the rhetorical system created by images. Because of its powerful ability to construct arguments, the image has become a rhetorical resource to construct the public sphere, with the result that the image is pushed to the center of issue generation. In light of that the rhetorical product of images is “imagery” and the “imagery” appeals directly to people’s unconsciousness, the image event works more on the emotional dimension of their identity system, thus conveying a more persuasive form of discourse. To sum up, in the context of visual culture, as images and their deeper visual features dominate the cultural logic of the current era, the image event implies an emerging rhetorical practice of social resistance, which emphasizes the production of resistance discourse in the visual rhetorical dimension, so as to achieve the discursive purpose of public issue construction by means of images. When images become the symbol of argument or identity, and act as a dominant symbolic discourse in the mobilization structure of the social system, image politics serve as a realistic political concept and practice. Although the “image politics” is not the unique “language” of a certain class, the elite represented by the intellectual that possess more abundant image resources are more likely to realize the construction of argument and identity, to legitimize their own discourse, and to protect their rights with the visualization of power discourse.

### 3 Methodology

Symbol is the smallest unit of image text. With the popularity of visual media technology, the ongoing communication revolution has reinforced the dimension of symbolic signification [6]. Individual tends to incorporate typical symbol into his or her own practice in the presence of others, which symbols dramatically highlight and vividly outline definite facts [7]. In other words, individuals will make use of the power of symbols if they are to influence others through their actions; therefore, image composed of various symbols is an important sign of visual persuasion; that is, people may be able to influence the cognition or behavior of others through using symbols strategically [8].

On this basis, this research will adopt the semiotic analysis combined with rhetorical analysis to explore the symbols and rhetorical path of image events of the intellectual’s rights protection movements in the representative case of Yongwei & Jinqiao Real Estate Project where the house owners are generally highly-educated, coming from all walks of life, including professors, civil servants, highly skilled engineers, etc., and succeeded in protecting their rights through performative resistance with the empowerment of the visual media technology.

The Western semiotics originates from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and has been constructed by Saussure, Peirce and Cassir from the perspective of structuralist linguistics, logics, cultural philosophy and aesthetics respectively. Among them, Peirce’s semiotic

theory has generated the most profound influence on later semiotic research, especially focusing on the interpretation of the symbolic meaning. According to the relationship with the object, Peirce's semiotic trichotomy divides symbols into three main categories: icon, index, and symbol [9]. In this paper, we follow the analysis path of image rhetoric and symbolic motives to construct a rhetorical interpretation model of image ideation in three aspects, the icon of the online image, the index of the text and the symbol of the image as the motive and analyze their rhetorical trajectories to explain the deeper image ideation.

## 4 Findings

In this image event, the subjects of rights protection resort to various social media platforms, such as Weibo, WeChat, Douyin (see Fig. 1), to narrate their experiences and express their interest demands in the form of video. Particularly, this group of intellectuals also made use of their professional competency to write and publish the related academic papers on CNKI (see Fig. 1), which also attracted great attention from the academia and further expanded this influence to the industry. On the platforms involving Douyin, Weibo, Wechat and CNKI (see Fig. 1), in addition to the interested subjects, the accounts of scholars, journalists, media organizations, local governments and other KOL also express their opinions about this event. What's more, no matter from which form of resistance is viewed, they all contain the element of image. And the symbols also take on various types, such as person, place, object and so on (see Fig. 1).

Let  $P(G)$  be the probability of success of protecting rights and  $P(B)$  be the probability of failure of legal defense, satisfying  $P(B) = 1 - P(G)$ .  $P(g|B)$  be the probability of success of the collective resistance under the condition of failure of legal defense, and  $P(b|B)$  be the probability of failure of the collective resistance under the condition of failure of legal defense, satisfying  $P(b|B) = 1 - P(g|B)$ .  $r$  is the individual's resistance to fight and claim and  $c$  is the cost incurred by an individual or the group. The following proposition can be obtained from the decision tree in Fig. 2. In the case of failed legal advocacy, if the cost of adopting the collective forms is large and the probability of success is small, it is not advisable to choose the collective strategy. On the contrary, if the cost of adopting the collective form is small or the probability of success is large, the collective strategy can be chosen in the second decision (Fig. 3).

$$\begin{aligned}\pi_{\alpha}(I) &= [2P(G) - 1] r - c \\ \pi_{\alpha}(II) &= [2P(g|B)P(B) + 2P(G) - 1] r - c - P(B)c\end{aligned}$$

The preliminary frame of the video is composed of considerable profile of all the house owners, which has caused a great visual impact to the audience, made the audience sense the seriousness of this event and further aroused more public attention. Moreover, the icon of the mask signifies the impact of COVID-19 that may deteriorate their situation and the icon of glass signifies their social identity as the well-educated group (see Fig. 4).

When individuals consider their own individual action, they will be influenced by the collective groups in the process of economic benefits.

$$\pi_{\alpha} = [2P(g|B)P(B) + 2P(G) - 1] r - c - P(B)c$$

Online Platform	Account Type	Resistance forms	Symbols		
			person	place	object
Douyin	interested subjects	article with image	female	interested building	mask
Weibo	scholar	narrative video	doctor	street	glass
Wechat	journalist	opera	professor	construction site	clothes
Zhihu	Official account of media organizations	book	graduate	company	book
CNKI	official account of government	academic paper	scholar	Government sector	costume

Fig. 1. Elements Involved (self-drawing)

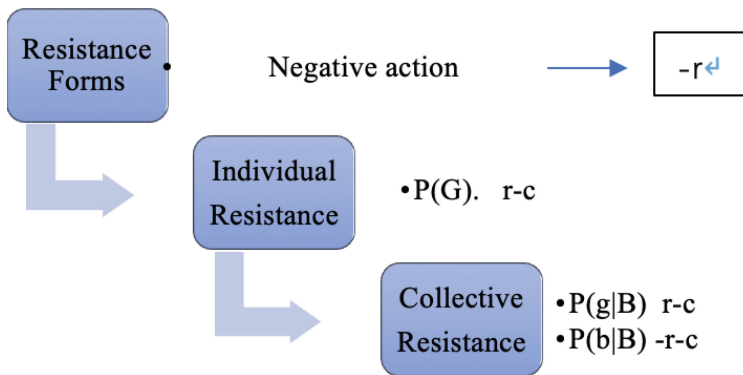


Fig. 2. Diagram of Rights Protection (self-drawing)

As these subjects of rights protection gather, they will deliberately leave space for the empty blind sidewalks and maintain a safe against-epidemic distance, without gathering and impeding other pedestrians (see Fig. 4). Unlike traditional forms of mass incident,

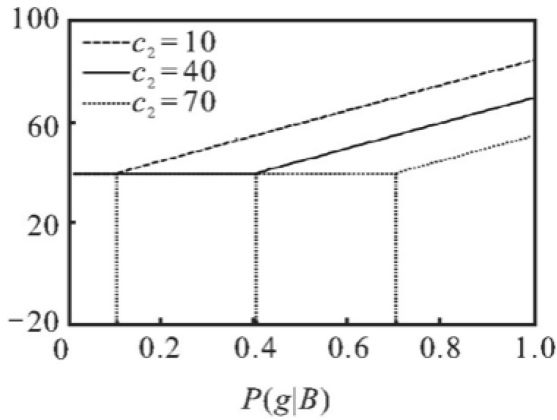


Fig. 3. The Expected Cost of the Collective Form [10]



Fig. 4. The Collective Resistance Forms

this orderly movement deconstructs public stereotype against the mass incident that is always irrational, violent and destructive. The use of the visual media technology succeeded in transforming the offline mass incident into the online mass incident, which mainly contain two aspects. One is the live of the offline movement, another is gathering in various network settings (see Fig. 4). The offline activities involve the evening running where the subjects wear the same uniform labeling the information related to this event, and the publication of the opera script named *The Script of Two Thousand Authors* that contains more than seventy thousand words. In addition, since the COVID-19 has great influence on the gathering in the real life, the house owners are distinctly aware of that

the netizens are more likely to produce the effects of public opinion than the onlookers. Therefore, they record the evening running with the camera and play this drama as the actor, and then launch the video on various social media platforms.

The expected payoff under the individual performative resistance (i.e., action  $\alpha$ ) is influenced by the outcome of the second decision (see Fig. 6).

$$\begin{aligned} \text{If } 2P(g|B) r < c_2, \pi_\alpha &= [2P(G) - 1]r - c_1 \\ \text{If } 2P(g|B) r > c_2, \pi_\alpha &= [2P(g|B)P(B) + 2P(G) - 1]r - c_1 - P(B)c_2. \end{aligned}$$

Similar to the text, the production, communication and consumption of the image also contain the rhetorical strategy that mainly concentrate on the argument and identity. The house owners' orderly rights-protection movement make a distinct contrast with the



Fig. 5. Resistance Forms of the Female Individual

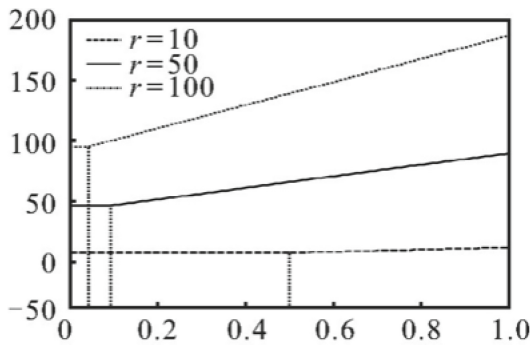


Fig. 6. The Expected Cost of the Individual Form

property developers' illegal actions. And this contrast also exists between this performative resistance and traditional mass incident, since this movement has been carried out within the boundary of law, regulation and morality. In addition, the house owners don't appear as the elite who show a sense of distance for the public but the underprivileged group easy to stimulate the public sympathy. When a pregnant female narrates her experience of suffering from this event in the video (see Fig. 5), the audience with the same social identity, the mother and the female, show great empathy with her. The rhetorical strategy of the image event mainly functions at the emotional level of the audience, while that of the words and language focuses on the expression itself. In conclusion, the rhetoric in this image event can be divided into three types, identification by antithesis, identification by empathy and identification by sympathy.

## 5 Conclusion

This study sheds light on the new form of social resistance in recent years, the performative resistance, which is a type of image event in essence. Given its appeal for interests, it can be analyzed following the framework of image politics. The public's common interests are the psychological basis for the formation of online performative resistance, the public's great concern about how public power participates in the adjustment of social interests is the subjective factor for the formation of online performative resistance, and the development of visual media technology is the realistic basis for the formation of online performative resistance. With the empowerment of visual media technology, the group with high media literacy don't need to resort to violence but can make use of the public opinion to create empathy, sympathy and identification to protect their rights successfully. The success of the online rights-protection movement cannot be isolated from the symbol and rhetoric in the image production, communication and consumption, which have generated more identification compared to the pure text.

Since this paper takes the intellectual as the research object, the future research may concentrate on the empowerment of the visual media technology for the minority group, such as the elderly, the people with disabilities, the migrant workers and so on.

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