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Capstone Issue Vol. 25 2025



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The Amsterdam University College (AUC) Undergraduate Journal of Liberal Arts and Sciences is a biannual, interdisciplinary publication showcasing outstanding undergraduate academic papers. The Journal aims to demonstrate the strength of undergraduate scholarship at AUC, reflect the intellectual diversity of its academic programme, and encourage the development of research and writing skills. As an AUC committee, the editorial board of InPrint strives to facilitate collaboration between students and faculty across the curriculum, and provide students with opportunities to gain experience in academic reviewing, editing and publishing.

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Foreword

I am delighted to present the 25th Volume of Amsterdam University College's *Undergraduate Journal of Liberal Arts and Sciences*!

At the end of their time at AUC, students write a thesis exploring their topic of interest, based on independent research. This provides the students with the opportunity to apply the skills gained during their undergraduate studies to pursue their academic and personal interests and potentially begin their journey into academia. For this issue of InPrint, we have selected excellent theses that span topics ranging from volcanism induced mass-extinctions to the representation of canines in postcolonial literature and from the mobilization of history by right wing populist parties to the potential of aesthetic-driven recommender systems.

The issue begins with Julia Maria Podsiadło's unique Science paper which covers volcanism driven mass extinction events in exoplanets by forming relationships between geological processes and potential life forms beyond the solar system. This is followed by Zoë Sybrich Vriends' paper which focuses instrumental music therapy and its potential applications in treating depression and multiple sclerosis, which forms a bridge between neuroscience, autoimmunity and music.

The Social sciences open with Axl Szyszko's paper examining the role of international criminal law in emancipating Ukraine from Russian oppression, advocating for a Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression as a transitional justice mechanism to foster accountability and reconciliation. Following this is Ema Torcato's critical analysis of the Portuguese right-wing political party CHEGA and its mobilization of Portuguese historical discourse to gain political support. Her research examines the party's selective framing of Portuguese history within the larger pattern of European populism and raises important questions on nationalism and colonial nostalgia in the Portuguese context.

In the Humanities, we start with the very first paper that InPrint is publishing anonymously which analyses how the photographic work of Hengameh Golestan and Yalda Moaiery resists censorship, enforced invisibility and a defined distribution of the sensible. Then we have Kaavya Malhotra's thesis that analyses how the figure of the dog plays an important role in narratives about violence, nationalism, and colonialism. Through close reading the author digs out how the dog is mobilised as an anti-colonial and subversive actor.

Last but not the least, we have River Rain's interdisciplinary paper which explores the effectiveness of aesthetic-driven recommender systems. The author uses a self-designed model and animated movies as a case study to analyse its performance and its potential applications as a contemporary recommendation system.

I want to thank all the authors for submitting their papers, taking time out of their busy schedules to work with us and for their flexibility to make changes. I hope you are all as proud of this issue as the board and I are.

I would be remiss if I did not express my gratitude to the InPrint Board, who worked hard to make this publication possible. Thank you to Natalie, Elena, Bahar and Lara, who were responsive, hardworking, and helped me pick up the slack as I settled into the role of EIC. Thank you to all the new editors, who stepped up, asked questions and were always willing to learn and work hard for the success of InPrint. And of course, thank you to all our returning editors—Mariin, Wilma, Eléna, Cecile and Sara-Lina—who continued to commit their time to the journal and helped guide all our new editors in their new roles. None of this would have been possible without the excellent editing skills of the whole team! I also want to specially thank all the peer reviewers who meticulously assessed each paper to make sure nothing was missed.

It is also important to thank Dr. Joost Krijnen and Dr. Luis Aguilar Suarez, our faculty advisors who continue to support us and provide us with various opportunities to collaborate and extend InPrint's reach.

Finally, thank you to our readers for being the reason that we publish!

Malavika Libish, Editor-in-Chief

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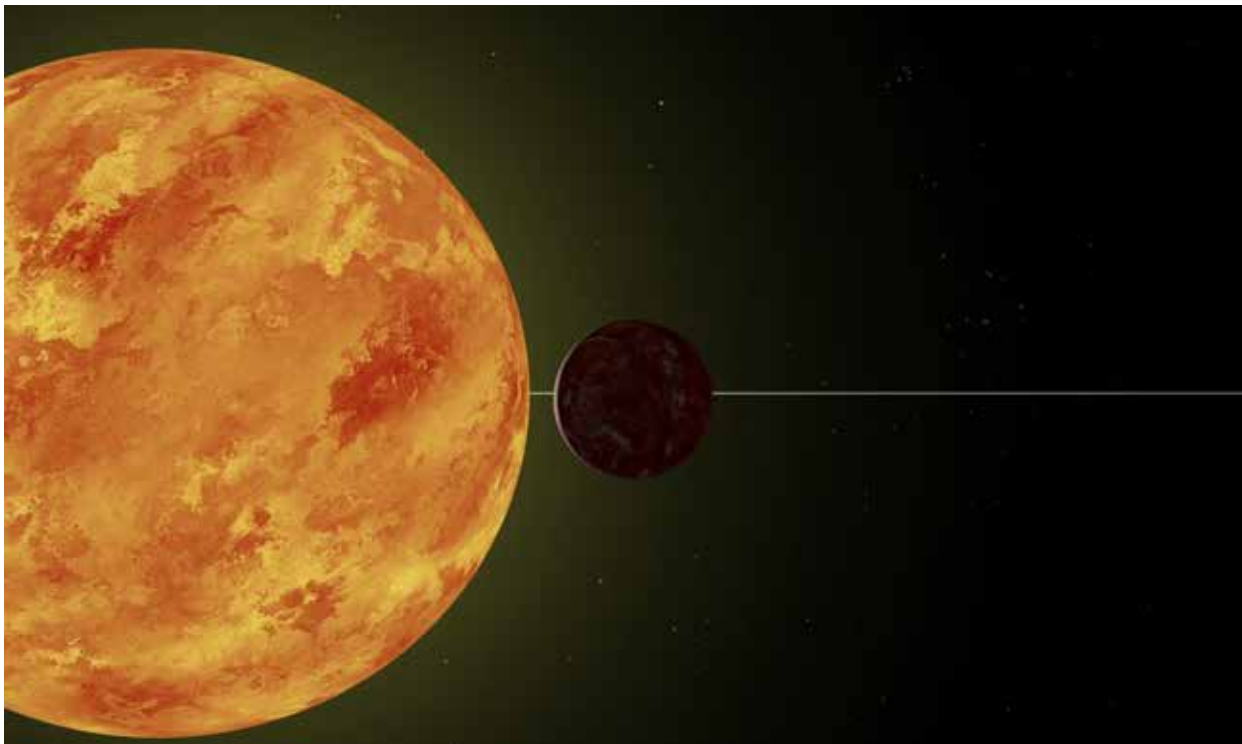
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Hypothetical visualization of the super-Earth 55 Cancri e and its host star 55 Cancri. From NASA Science.

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyze the possible occurrence of volcanism-induced mass extinctions on super-Earths. Using an integrative literature review, the research focuses on establishing the current academic stance on the defining properties of key super-Earth types and on mass extinction drivers. This project engages with three super-Earths as case studies: a Lava Planet, one with speculated active plate tectonics, and lastly, an ice sheet-covered Water World. This study assesses the geological context and the effects of large-volume, short-term volcanic pulses, such as those responsible for Earth's Large Igneous Provinces (LIPs), on life on such planets. Delving into an unresearched topic, this paper strives to offer a unique exploration of super-Earths through the lens of the impending doom of mass extinction.

Keywords and phrases: *Super-Earths, Mass Extinction Drivers, Exoplanets, Volcanism, Habitability*

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Glossary

M_{\oplus} Earth Masses. 5, 8, 9, 11

R_{\oplus} Earth Radii. 4, 8, 9, 11

List of Abbreviations

AU Astronomical Units

JWST James Webb Space Telescope

LIP Large Igneous Provinces

OAE Oceanic Anoxic Events

1 Introduction

Extinction events, whether triggered by catastrophes or gradual shifts, are catalysts of change. Although often considered destructive, they also drive transformation and, at times, new beginnings. Earth has experienced countless extinction events, five of which are recognized as mass extinctions. Our framework for their classification and origins comes from studies of the Earth and its Solar System setting.

Beyond our Solar System, astronomical observations have identified thousands of exoplanets in recent decades, including rocky worlds [1], [2], [3]. An important effort is being made to assess the habitability of these worlds in the search for a 'second Earth' [4]. However, the possibility and drivers of extinctions on such planets have not been addressed to date, and their nature may follow different rules.

Super-Earths are terrestrial exoplanets categorized by their size [5], ranging from 1.25 to 2 R_{\oplus} [6]. The presence, thickness, and composition of an atmosphere on super-Earths can vary [7]. This type of planet makes a viable candidate for habitability because of their size and prevalence in the universe. Moreover, even though exoplanetary science is quite young, researchers have already detected several super-Earths in the habitable zones of their host stars indicating the possible occurrence of liquid water on their surface [4], [8].

While super-Earths may appear promising candidates for life, the history of Earth reminds us that planetary habitability is fragile and can be disrupted by catastrophic events. According to Bond and Grasby [9], there are seven main causes of mass extinction: Large-scale volcanic activity (specifically the formation of Large Igneous Provinces [LIPs]), bolide impacts, global warming, marine anoxia, ocean acidification, acid rain and ozone depletion. Algeo and Shen [10] grouped these causes into three ultimate extinction mechanisms: bolide impacts, LIPs eruptions, and bioevolutionary triggers. These causes were proposed by the analysis of the 'Big Five' mass extinctions on Earth, namely Ordovician-Silurian, Devonian, Permian-Triassic, Triassic-Jurassic, Cretaceous-Tertiary and other large extinction events such as the Cambrian crisis.

In addition to these main causes of extinction, other ones that life on Earth has not (yet) encountered, including stellar gamma-ray bursts [11], large orbital changes [12], and increased solar activity, can all pose valid threats to planets and life. At present, our understanding of extinction drivers is strictly based on Earth. This paper aims to explore the extent to which these processes, in terms of occurrence and/or severity, could contribute to extinction events on super-Earths.

2 Research Context

2.1 Identification and Characteristics of Super-Earths

2.1.1 Discovery and Formation

In 1992, Aleksander Włozzczan and Dale Frail discovered the first two super-Earths orbiting a pulsar¹ PSR B1257+12 [1]. Rivera et al. [2] were the first to locate a super-Earth around a main sequence star² [13]. Furthermore, over the past three decades, observations of exoplanets have raised important new questions on the validity of Solar System-based assessments of planetary formation and dynamics. Haghighipour [13] covers these questions in depth, deducing that a combination of core accumulation processes and planetary migration is likely the most viable mechanism involved in the creation of super-Earths.

In these planet formation scenarios, the Disk-Instability Model³, which explains dwarf novae outbursts via accretion disk instability, does not prove as effective, unless we consider super-Earths as unrealized Gas Giants' cores [15] (due to a photo-evaporated gaseous envelope) that migrated closer to the star after formation. This fails to explain the identification of close-in orbit super-Earths, deeming it unlikely.

Super-Earths appear to be much more common than Earth-like planets [13], although that may be due (in part) to observation bias, as their

¹Pulsars are 'rapidly rotating neutron stars believed to be spun up by accretion of matter from their stellar companions' [1, p. 1].

²Main sequence is a stage of a star's life when hydrogen burning in the core is dominant.

³Disk-Instability Model is a model for the formation of giant planets. According to Boss [14], the model 'forms massive protoplanets quickly, before gaps form in the disk and restrict the subsequent accretion of gas.' [14, p. 367].

large size makes them easier to observe. Their place in the protoplanetary disk during formation suggests gas accretion, and their large mass and correspondingly high escape velocities for gas molecules indicate a possibility of retaining a primary or secondary atmosphere [3]. Super-Earths have been found orbiting K-dwarf [16], M-dwarf [17], Sun-like G-type stars⁴ [18], and many more, as well as the aforementioned pulsar [1]. The first three tend to have a close habitability zone, which would allow the existence of liquid surface water.

2.1.2 Habitability

It is essential to acknowledge that our contemporary understanding of life formation is based on scenarios plausible within the context present on Earth. Earth-like conditions are what are needed to evolve and sustain life within the current biological framework. As this paper focuses on investigating mass extinctions on super-Earths, it is important that we first discuss their habitability.

Haghighipour [13, p. 22] recognizes three significant components of the interior of a super-Earth that 'relate to its possible habitability: its composition, the manifestation of plate tectonics and the presence of a magnetic field'. Determining the planet's mass-radius ratio is a crucial first step in establishing the composition of a super-Earth. Haghighipour [13] assumes that the most likely composition is a combination of iron-rich metallic core, silicate mantles and crust, and water or ice covering (part of) the surface. However, chemical composition cannot be the sole basis for determining its habitability. For example, the presence of liquid water is essential for life as we know it.

Plate tectonics is the second important aspect that drastically influences the potential habitability of a rocky planet [19], [20]. Having established the most likely scenario for super-Earth formation, it is reasonable to assume that the planet's interior initially harbors a large amount of heat from both accretion and the natural radioactive decay of short-lived isotopes such as ²⁶Al. Together with longer-term heat production by more slowly decaying radioactive isotopes of

potassium (K), uranium (U), and thorium (Th), this leads to two possible thermal evolution scenarios expressed through a mobile or a non-mobile convection regime [3]. A stagnant-lid regime would not aid the planet's efficient cooling and would strongly limit the development of a large-scale deep carbon cycle stabilizing surface temperatures. A mobile-lid convection scenario on a super-Earth, on the other hand, would lead to faster cooling and could be accompanied by subduction, facilitating the development of a deep carbon cycle which can stabilize surface temperatures, thus enhancing the planet's habitability. Valencia et al. [21] speculated that rocky planets larger than Earth are likely to have more vigorous convection and weaker lithospheres, which eventually supports the emergence of plate tectonics.

A planet's habitability is enhanced by the presence of an active internally generated magnetic field to ensure radiation protection and prevent non-thermal escape of particles [22]⁵. Such a magnetic field requires the convective flow of liquid iron-rich metal in the planet's core. This flow in turn is driven by convection in the mantle, and is therefore linked to the mantle dynamics regime. Gaidos et al. [24] showed that a planet larger than 2 M_{\oplus} with a stagnant lid is not capable of developing a global magmatic for most of its lifetime—a liquid core in this case would not need to flow to transfer heat to the inefficiently cooling mantle. A mobile lid would allow it to be supported, ensuring generation of a protective magnetic field.

Moreover, an atmosphere enables a super-Earth to extend its habitable zone by allowing water to remain liquid and by preventing the rapid cooling of the planet [25]. There are three ways for a super-Earth to develop an atmosphere: outgassing during formation, later outgassing due to plate tectonics-induced volcanism, or gas accretion from the circumstellar disk (sometimes referred to as ingassing), with the latter leading to a very hydrogen-rich atmosphere [3], [26]. Their atmospheres are predicted to be thin to moderately thick. Their composition will vary depending on initial conditions at formation and the geodynamic history of the planet.

⁵This is also achievable by a thick atmosphere but this is far less efficient [23].

⁴K-dwarf, M-dwarf, and G-type stars are main-sequence stars distinguished by their temperature, mass, and luminosity, with G-type stars being the hottest and most massive, and M-dwarfs the coolest and least massive.

2.2 Mass Extinctions

Over the past 30 years of researching super-Earths, a significant amount of data on 1679 of them has been gathered [27]. How life would look like on one of them has yet to be revealed, but one can consider what catastrophes it could encounter.

Seven significant factors for mass extinctions have been identified [9]. Firstly, Large-scale Volcanic Activity, most specifically LIP eruptions, is extensively discussed by Bond and Grasby [9]. They suggest that LIPs volcanism might be a potential main driver for mass extinctions. The paper draws a temporal link between the deposition of LIPs lava flows and at least half of the Phanerozoic mass extinctions that are visible in the terrestrial fossil record. The Siberian Traps at the end of the Permian and the Central Atlantic Magmatic Province at the end of the Triassic are confirmed factors in the extinctions. Bond and Grasby [9] heavily hint at the same reason for the late Ordovician extinction, although they do not point out a confirmed LIPs culprit. Although adamant that LIPs are the main extinction drivers, the paper makes sure to emphasize that the volume of the magma itself does not determine lethality. Rather, the volume and types of volatiles outgassed from the magma, along with the amount of light material erupted and dispersed globally by atmospheric circulation, play an important role.

The most widely accepted mechanism for the creation of LIPs is an ascent of a mantle plume from deep within the planet's interior [28]. Localized upwelling of mantle material is usually thought to result from the presence, at great depth, of material that is hotter than the average temperature at that depth, or that has a slightly different composition. Either will lead to a buoyancy force that will drive solid material upwards towards the surface [29]. Decompression melting leads to the production of vast amounts of magma. As it rises, the plume and its magma will eventually impact the base of the lithosphere. This interaction would most likely lead to doming and thinning of the crust, eventually creating a zone of weakness. With continued ascent of hot mantle material, the pressure decreases further allowing for even more decompression melting.

Bolide⁶ impacts are a notable cause of the K-

⁶In geology understood as 'a very large impactor'.

Pg Extinction, also known as Cretaceous-Tertiary. This remains the only extinction event with proven direct ties of impact to extinction. Earth is no stranger to impacts. Osiński et al. [30] list 201 impact craters, including 188 hypervelocity impact craters that are still recognizable on the Earth. They vary in size and reach up to 200 kilometers in diameter [10]. Rampino [31] concludes that the impacts of bolides that resulted in a crater with a diameter larger than 100 kilometers have led to a distinct extinction episode.

Bioevolutionary triggers, the third extinction driver category according to Algeo and Shen [10], incorporating the remaining 5 mechanisms [10, p. 9], 'are likely to have played a much larger role in causing biocrises through time than is generally realized'. The evidence for them is generally indirect and emerges mostly in extinction pattern analysis. This shows that most large evolutionary steps (in the organization of the ecosystem or environmental conditions) could be the cause of a large biotic crisis [32].

Algeo and Shen [10] propose a possible fourth extinction mechanism: tectono-oceanic triggers (i.e., latitudinal redistribution of continents and oceans). These would be able to cause large-scale climate changes, becoming secondary causes for the Big Five or primary causes of second-order crises.

Most mass extinctions have a recognized primary cause; however, many researchers still argue that such complex phenomena are seemingly likely to have more than one significant source [29], even though this assumption appears to violate Occam's razor.

3 Methods

This study uses an integrative literature review to investigate extinction events on super-Earths in terms of their occurrence and severity. The review synthesizes planetary science, geology, astrobiology, and geophysics, connecting theoretical and scientific approaches. Spanning multiple disciplines, the integrative nature of the paper allows for a comparative analysis of theoretical events in the absence of direct empirical data. This approach enables continuous incorporation of recent findings in the rapidly evolving field of exoplanetary research. This framework is a visual sum-

mary, adding a few simple quantitative comparisons, tightening the case studies with concrete observables, and fixing small textual repetitions. By synthesizing key findings across physics and geology, this study aims to better understand potential extinction dynamics on super-Earths.

Exploring all three main categories of causes of past mass extinctions [10] would enable a thorough approach to understanding extinction mechanisms of the future. This study, however, focuses exclusively on volcanism as a mass extinction driver. This choice is motivated by both methodological and conceptual considerations.

Bolide impacts, although undeniably significant in Earth's extinction record, are stochastic and inherently difficult to generalize from our own Solar System to exoplanetary systems [30]. Their plausibility likely depends in a non-linear and impossible-to-quantify manner on the planetary system architecture, the existence, extent, and longevity of asteroid belts in such systems, and the complex early migration dynamics of planetary systems. The likelihood of incoming bolides actually reaching the surface would also vary with the atmosphere's thickness. Most of these variables remain essentially unconstrained for even the best-studied exoplanetary systems, making assessment of bolide-driven extinction scenarios highly speculative and therefore not suitable as a focus of this study.

Bioevolutionary triggers, the second of the proposed mass extinction causes, are highly complex and planet-specific. They rely on complex ecological interactions within a biosphere, processes that cannot be assumed to exist in exoplanetary systems, let alone modeled with any degree of accuracy [4]. Applying bioevolutionary extinction models to exoplanets would require an unsustainable number of assumptions, ultimately undermining the reliability and usefulness of the resulting conclusion.

That being the case, volcanism, more specifically LIPs, presents a more generalizable extinction mechanism. Unlike bolide impacts or bioevolutionary triggers, as endogenic phenomena, they originate from the internal thermodynamics and dynamics of the planetary body. Their occurrence can be reasonably derived from comparatively accessible parameters such as mass, bulk composition, and radiogenic heat production.

The generated magma can erupt through fis-

tures in the weakened crust as largely non-explosive flood basalts [28], [29]. Continuous eruption of massive amounts of lava would lead to the creation of topographically elevated volcanic structures, plateaus, on the Earth's surface or seafloor, depending on the tectonic setting [29].

This literature review analyzes the possibility for a massive volcanic episode on three types of super-Earths. Serving as case studies for the thesis, each represents distinct scenarios for a volcanism-driven mass extinction event.

The first example describes properties of exoplanet 55 Cancri e—a so-called lava planet, and one of the exoplanets which the James Webb Space Telescope (JWST) targeted first for recent high-quality observations [33]. Because of its proximity to its host star, 55 Cancri, this exoplanet is thought to be covered on one hemisphere with a massive magma lake or ocean. This could be considered as analogous to a very large LIP albeit that magma in this case is generated through exterior rather than interior energy. As discussed below, this example highlights a fundamental issue with exoplanet observations, namely, observational bias, and demonstrates why the best-observed exoplanets, including those that exhibit active volcanism, may not be ideal examples for discussing volcanism-driven extinctions.

The second example covers Kepler-452b, a super-Earth with speculated water ocean, thick water vapor-rich atmosphere, and active plate tectonics. Its exploration aids the analysis of plate tectonics' influence on volcanism-caused mass extinctions on a speculated Water World with a mobile lid configuration.

The third example exoplanet, LHS 1140b, is a possible ice sheet-covered Water World in a stagnant lid regime, i.e. without active plate tectonics. This case study focuses on assessing the likelihood and effects of a massive volcanic episode at the bottom of a water ocean, eventually reaching the icy crust—a complex scenario of how LIPs would influence chemosynthetic subsurface-ocean-trapped microbial life, by altering life-sustaining conditions.

The topic of mass extinctions on super-Earths relies on a theoretical basis, an assumption of possible extraterrestrial life, the novelty of observational data, and remains largely unexplored. It is important to establish that current planetary climate and geophysical models are limited in pre-

dicting long-term extinction events including LIPs [34]. This study does not provide new data, but a comprehensive synthesis, analysis, and prediction of the mechanisms of LIPs-driven mass extinction events on several categories of super-Earths.

4 Case Studies

4.1 Lava Planets

55 Cancri e illustrates that although exoplanets closer to hot stars may be easier to observe, they are not optimal targets in terms of their potential habitability.

4.1.1 55 Cancri e

55 Cancri e is among the best studied exoplanets. The super-Earth orbits its host star (55 Cancri) with a period of 18 hours at an orbital semi-major axis of 0.01544 ± 0.00009 AU [35]. Demory et al. [35] estimate the exoplanet's mass to be $8.08 \pm 0.31 M_{\oplus}$. Obtained through transit observations, the radius is approximated at $1.92 \pm 0.08 R_{\oplus}$. 55 Cancri e is tidally locked with an equilibrium temperature of about 2400 K [35]. Demory et al. [35] estimate its dayside brightness temperature to fluctuate between 1365^{+219}_{-257} and 2528^{+224}_{-229} K⁷.

Given the high equilibrium temperature, 55 Cancri e probably experiences intense stellar irradiation and tidal heating, leading to the presence of a magma ocean and large scale volcanic activity on the dayside, as illustrated in Figure 1. Unlike smaller Mercury-sized planets, 55 Cancri e is not expected to undergo significant mass-loss caused by thermal winds, suggesting volcanic gases and other ejecta are likely to form plumes on the surface of the planet [35]. If sufficiently large in size, potentially comparable to those present on Io, such plumes might cause changes in the thermal emission of the planet (explaining the observed temperature fluctuations). Mercier et al. [36] revised the photometric data collected by the Spitzer Space Telescope in 2013 for 55 Cancri e, adjusting the Spitzer Phase Curve Analysis (SPCA) values of average dayside and nightside temperatures to 3771^{+669}_{-520} K and 1045^{+302}_{-243} K, respectively—suggesting the far side surface may be (partially) molten depending on the composition of the crust.

⁷Measurements taken in 2012 and 2013, respectively.

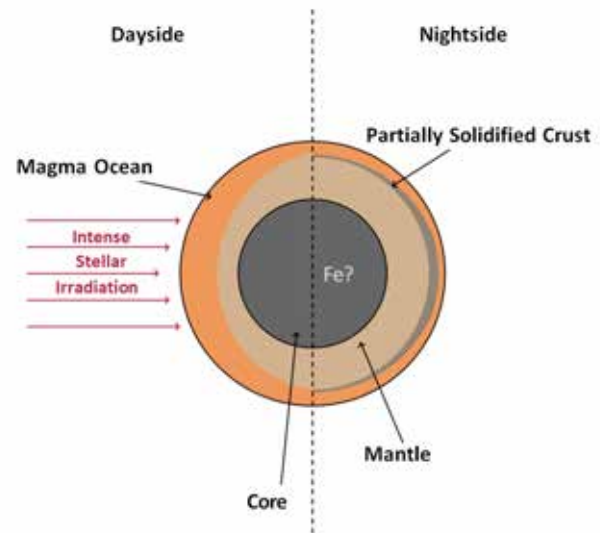


Figure 1: Interior structure of 55 Cancri e. As the planet is tidally locked, the diagram is divided into dayside with a magma ocean and nightside with a partially solidified crust. Layer thicknesses and proportions are unconstrained and shown for illustrative purposes only.

55 Cancri e offers valuable insights into planetary dynamics and geophysical process under intense stellar irradiation. Understanding its volcanic activity and atmospheric dynamics helps refine models of planetary evolution⁸ and distinguish between biosignatures and abiotic features in planetary atmospheres. However, a major problem in terms of the topic of this study is that the likelihood of life existing on such a volatile, lava-covered world is exceedingly low.

4.1.2 Observational Biases

With ongoing technological advances, new Earth-based as well as space-based telescopes have been continuously developed to produce increasingly accurate and precise data, facilitating scientific discovery. The latest space-based telescope used extensively for exoplanet science is the JWST. Fortenbach et al. [38] state that a framework was designed to optimize the selection of specific exoplanets to be targeted first for observations, due to the very large number of astronomers requesting access to the JWST instruments. One of the factors taken into account when

⁸Boukare et al. [37] analyze Lava Planets and relate findings to the Earth's magma ocean stage.

assessing requests for observation time is transit observability—this favors requests to observe exoplanets with short orbital periods. The framework estimates the number of observable transits over the nominal 10-year mission of JWST; therefore, exoplanets closer to the star are inherently ‘at an advantage’.

Moreover, possible targets are ranked based on an average total observing time needed to reach a proposal’s scientific goal. This time is often set by the goal to detect properties of exoplanetary atmospheres, as atmospheric detection is the next frontier in exoplanet science [38]. Those exoplanets orbiting sufficiently hot (therefore bright) stars yield higher signal-to-noise ratios, making them preferred choices.

A threshold exists beyond which the brightness of a star is no longer favorable to observations. Each pixel on the detectors of the instruments on JWST has a maximum capacity for photon collection. Once that is exceeded, it becomes saturated, overwhelming the detector [38]. Such an instance arises when incoming light from an observed celestial body is too intense—Fortenbach et al. [38] mention 36 such cases.

A prime example of a target that meets the key criteria used to assess observation proposals, frequent transits and bright host star, is lava planet 55 Cancri e. It is used here as the first case study, as it combines the presence of significant amounts of magma at the surface of the planet (reminiscent of LIPs with a relatively large number of new observations from JWST (representing ‘the best of the best’ in terms of current exoplanet science)).

Moore and Horwitz [39] further explored extrasolar giant planets, which orbit their host stars at 0.1 AU or less. They examined how stellar irradiation contributes to stellar-induced mass loss, which in turn results in planetary plasma flows and atmospheric evaporation. Observations of the planet orbiting star HD 209458 show evidence of a planetary hydrogen plasma that is escaping outside the planet’s Roche limit [39]. Such a loss of substantial atmosphere is significantly detrimental to a planet’s habitability. This illustrates that the best observed planets are not appropriate for studies of extinctions—they may experience intense volcanism but lack suitable conditions for habitability.

4.2 Kepler 452b: Water World

Kepler-452b has long been considered an intriguing super-Earth; however, due to the faintness of its host star, it is unlikely to be a target of current and next-generation missions [40]. This section explores how this promising, potentially habitable, but overlooked exoplanet might undergo a mass extinction.

4.2.1 Exoplanet Description

Kepler-452b was initially considered the closest Earth-analogue exoplanet orbiting a Sun-like star [40]. With a recently updated radius of $1.511^{+0.143}_{-0.131} R_{\oplus}$, Kepler-452b falls in the category of a super-Earth. It orbits Kepler-452—a main sequence G2-type star—with an orbital period of 384.843 days [8]. The mass of the exoplanet has not been observationally constrained as its host star is too faint for radial velocity measurements [40]. Boldog et al. [41] estimate it to be $3.78 \pm 2.29 M_{\oplus}$, nevertheless, bulk composition remains uncertain and has to be obtained through models. Recent estimates indicate a high H₂O mass fraction, potentially suggesting the presence of surface oceans and a water vapor atmosphere [40], [41]. The mass uncertainty places the exoplanet in the radius gap between a ‘true’ super-Earth and a gas-rich super-Earth (sub-Neptune)⁹ [40].

The star Kepler-452 is 60% more metal-rich than the Sun [40]. Jenkins et al. [8] suggest this indicates the exoplanet’s composition will differ from the composition of the Earth¹⁰. The exoplanet receives 10% more stellar flux than the Earth and is situated in its host star’s ‘optimistic’ Habitable Zone and Photosynthetic Habitable Zone¹¹ [40]. Further increasing its chance to sustain life, Clay [40] states Kepler-452b is likely to receive high levels of magnetic shielding.

⁹Bean et al. [42] define exoplanets above the radius gap of 1.5-2 R_{\oplus} as those able to retain their atmospheres, while those ‘below the radius gap lost their atmospheres and are stripped cores’.

¹⁰This is most likely caused by varying elemental abundance ratios and its influence on radioactive element abundances and internal heating

¹¹According to Hall et al. [4], a Photosynthetic Habitable Zone is defined as ‘the distance from a star where both liquid water and oxygenic photosynthesis can occur’4, p. 1

4.2.2 Life and LIPs on Kepler-452b

As mentioned above, Boldog et al. [41] modeled Kepler-452b's (assumed) four layered interior, finding that it likely is a Water World with a water vapor atmosphere. This could indicate a lack of exposed continents¹². However, the exoplanet may experience plate tectonics. Silva et al. [43] explore six interior models, differing in rock-water ratio and contents of carbon dioxide (CO₂). Building on Boldog et al. [41] favoring a Water World scenario, this analysis relies on the 'OE Model' [43] with both a rocky¹³ and a water surface with an Earth-like CO₂ content. This scenario, further illustrated in Figure 2, allows for a starting point for the extinction analysis that combines the existence of plate tectonics with the presence of life-supporting conditions on Kepler-452b. Furthermore, this case study assumes a possible existence of both chemosynthetic and photosynthetic life. The former likely evolved in the deep ocean next to hydrothermal vents present due to plate tectonic activity. The latter would exist in the upper layers of the global ocean, utilizing the available Earth-like CO₂ content and sunlight. This multifaceted biosphere could be fairly resistant to changing environments caused by plate tectonics.

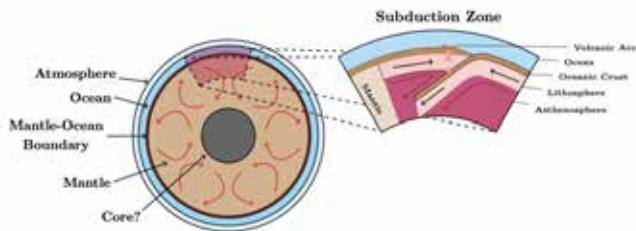


Figure 2: Schematic interior structure of Kepler-452b, illustrating a water vapor atmosphere, ocean, mantle, and speculated core. Circulating arrows have been added to show the current dynamics of the mantle. The zoomed-in oceanic crust boundary illustrates a typical subduction zone on a tectonically active Kepler-452b. Layer thicknesses and proportions are unconstrained and shown for illustrative purposes only.

¹²Boldog et al. [41] explain that a super-Earth may not be able to sustain continents for a significant period of time, while still being tectonically active.

¹³The rocky component is disregarded for this scenario, considering the assumed lack of stable continents.

4.2.3 Extinction

For purposes of this analysis, this case study explores the mechanisms and aftermath associated with a LIPs event on a Kepler-452b-like exoplanet with active plate tectonics and a substantial water-rich atmosphere, as depicted in Figure 2. As previously mentioned, this super-Earth might not be able to sustain stable continents, thus volcanism would occur, at least initially, in a predominantly oceanic setting, explored in Figure 3 and in Scenario 1 in Figure 4. This event would initially result in the creation of a subsurface oceanic plateau, potentially resembling the Ontong-Java Plateau on Earth. The most prominent gas emissions would likely include sulfur dioxide SO₂, carbon dioxide CO₂ and potentially chlorine (Cl). SO₂ impacts in a submarine setting, according to Wignall [29], would have negligible impact on the atmosphere, but potential greatly contribute to ocean acidification.

The assumed existence of a water vapor atmosphere implies a strong baseline greenhouse effect. Volcanic CO₂ injected into the atmosphere (either indirectly by first dissolving in ocean water and later outgassing to the atmosphere, or directly if the surface of the volcanic plateau breaches the ocean surface, as in Scenario 2 in Figure 4) would have a long residence time in surficial systems and would not be easily removed by subduction, significantly enhancing global warming. A release of CO₂ into the ocean could also result in direct hydrothermal warming of the water and rapid development of oxygen-poor conditions (anoxia)¹⁴ [29]. What is more, CO₂-induced global warming coupled with a water vapor atmosphere would likely result in catastrophic global environmental changes, such as an intense runaway greenhouse effect.

Found in Earth's geological record and characteristic of some extinction events are large carbon isotope excursions—suggesting a drastic decrease in ¹³C content. These isotopic excursions are interpreted as evidence of an influx of isotopically light carbon (¹²C) in the water-atmosphere system [28], [29]. On Kepler-452b, assuming both chemosynthetic and photosynthetic biosphere activity, a massive LIPs event could similarly desta-

¹⁴This results from oxygen's decreased solubility in warmer water and decreased oceanic circulation, discussed by Wignall [29].

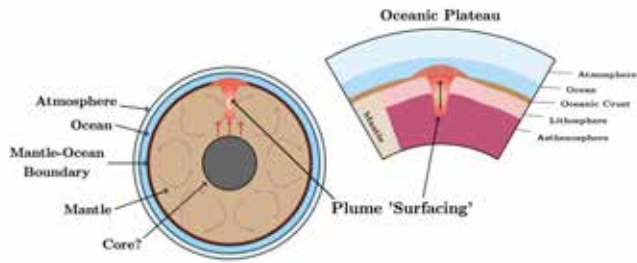


Figure 3: Schematic interior structure of Kepler-452b, illustrating an ascending mantle plume. The zoomed-in oceanic crust boundary illustrates the creation of an oceanic plateau in submarine conditions on Kepler-452b. Layer thicknesses and proportions are unconstrained and shown for illustrative purposes only.

bilize the global carbon cycle. On such a water-rich exoplanet, carbon sinks would be predominantly marine. Sustained outgassing of CO₂ would likely overwhelm them, especially in the case of continuous eruptions in one area allowing for the plateau to inject gasses directly into the atmosphere, as shown in Scenario 2 of Figure 4. Chlorine when added to the atmosphere would cause local acid rain and ozone depletion¹⁵.

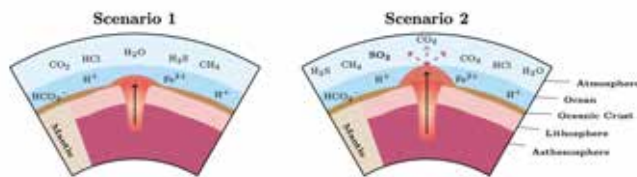


Figure 4: This figure explores two possible scenarios for the height of the oceanic plateau. Scenario 1 illustrates basaltic floods contained in a submarine setting. Scenario 2 portrays an oceanic plateau reaching the atmosphere.

Subaerial LIPs would likely have a more pronounced effect on the climate of Kepler-452b. SO₂ would form sulfate aerosols, inducing short-term cooling [28]. CO₂ emissions would continue accumulating and further enhancing global warming in a water vapor-rich atmosphere. ‘The cold trap’ effect¹⁶ limits the atmospheric lifetime of Cl [29], and its effect is likely limited in the face of the overall climatic disruption. Although life

¹⁵Adapting an Earth-like CO₂ content suggests the presence of free oxygen O₂, essential to O₃ formation.

¹⁶Wignall [29] explains that water vapor and hydrogen chloride would condense on ash particles.

on Kepler-452b may have adapted to a dynamic environment shaped by ‘regular’ volcanism that is an integral part of plate tectonics, an intense LIPs event, especially with atmospheric exposure, would likely strain both the carbon sinks and biospheric resilience, potentially causing an extinction.

Compared to a hypothetical planet with the exact same properties as Kepler-452b but in a static lid regime, the presence of an active plate tectonic cycle would likely offer a somewhat faster climatic recovery due to rock cycling, enhanced organic carbon burial, and its influence on the hydrological cycle, but it is not possible to quantify this effect.

4.3 LHS 1140b: Ice Sheet-Covered Water World

Understanding the diversity of exoplanets is essential when exploring the types of catastrophes that might lead to extinction. This section examines a radically different world, LHS 1140b, where life may have evolved, and considers how life might end through a catastrophic volcanic episode.

4.3.1 Exoplanet Description

LHS 1140b is an exoplanet orbiting a red dwarf (LHS 1140) with a period of 24.74 days [44]. At $1.73 \pm 0.025 R_{\oplus}$ and $5.6 \pm 0.19 M_{\oplus}$ [45], LHS 1140b has been categorized as a Super-Earth [46]. Its composition remains debated. Gomes and Ferraz-Mello [47] strongly suggest, based on the estimated mean density, that it is an Earth-like rocky body. Cadieux et al. [48] argue that the exoplanet is unlikely to be rocky and might be a Water World (with 9-19% Water Mass Fraction) or a sub-Neptune (with a thin H/He atmosphere (approx. 0.1%)) instead.

Situated in a conservative habitable zone of its host star, LHS 1140b has an equilibrium temperature of 226 ± 4 K [48], potentially supporting liquid water. It has been proposed as a potential Hycean world [49], characterized by a global ocean and a hydrogen-rich atmosphere [48]. While a Hycean classification remains unlikely¹⁷ [50], its specu-

¹⁷Damiano et al. rule out the presence of an H₂-rich atmosphere based on the absence of strong transmission spectral features from CH₄ and CO₂ on LHS 1140b.

lated water-rich nature makes it a valuable candidate for habitability studies.

Quick et al. [44], suggest that LHS 1140b might be a cold ocean planet. Internal heating rates of the exoplanet may exceed those of Jupiter's moon Io—the most volcanically active body in the solar system[44]. This is inferred from its surface area to volume ratio, indicating potential high (cryo)volcanic activity. However, detection of such will be challenging due to high estimated atmospheric water vapor outgassing rates [44].

Daspute et al. [45] explore several internal structure scenarios for LHS 1140b dependent on its atmospheric composition: 1–2% water vapor, 1–2% H/He, and a no-atmosphere case¹⁸. As discussed by Quick et al. [44], the amount of H₂O outgassed may be insufficient to sustain a substantial atmosphere.

This overview highlights the ongoing debate regarding the nature and persistence of the exoplanet's atmosphere—an important discussion point contextualizing the plausibility of various internal structure models. For the purpose of this study a no-atmosphere case [45] is considered here, to shift the focus to endogenic processes and subsurface habitability of LHS 1140b-like exoplanets.

The no-atmosphere model case assumes a layered exoplanet with a Fe-Ni-S core, Mg-Fe-Si-O mantle, and a multi-phase (liquid + solid) water layer. Based on Quick et al. [44], this model assumes the existence of liquid water beneath an ice shell, as shown in Figure 5. A stagnant lid regime is assumed for the rocky mantle.

In order to model a volcanism-induced extinction, this paper assumes that life has evolved in a LHS 1140b-like planet's stable, stratified ocean. The presence of an ice shell and lack of plate tectonics most likely leads to no low-ocean and surface mixing, supporting stratification and poor nutrient cycling. Given the planet's assumed relatively high internal heating [44], it is plausible that episodic mantle rock vertical transport disrupts the stagnant lid regime leading to episodic volcanism on the ocean floor. While cryovolcanism does not occur on Earth, it is common in the outer solar system on icy bodies [51], such as Enceladus, Io, and Charon. As aforementioned, with LHS 1140b

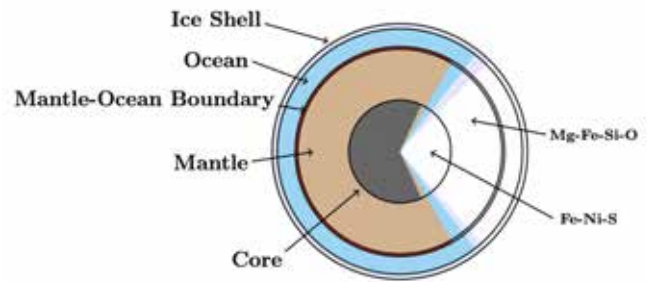


Figure 5: Schematic interior structure of an LHS 1140b-like exoplanet, illustrating a surface ice shell, a hypothesized subsurface ocean, a silicate mantle, and a dense metallic core. Layer thicknesses and proportions are unconstrained and shown for illustrative purposes only.

exceeding Io's internal heating rates, it is logical to expect both large scale volcanic and cryovolcanic eruption events.

4.3.2 LIPs on an Ice Sheet-Covered Water World

Large Igneous Provinces present on Earth pose a threat to life as they are theorized to have caused several past mass extinctions [29]. Cryovolcanism and LIPs share several qualities: they are planetary-scale geological phenomena marked by volatile emissions and widespread environmental disruption. They are driven by internal heat sources, may leave geological or chemical signatures, and have potential for episodic re-occurrence [29], [51].

The key differences between them, however, clearly show that only one of the two currently presents a plausible candidate for an extinction-level event on a planet such as LHS 1140b. In the absence of direct evidence to the contrary available at the time of writing this paper, and based on current understanding of planetary surface conditions, it can be reasonably inferred that the ice shell itself, characterized by cryovolcanic activity, and extreme low temperatures, is uninhabitable and unlikely to support life.

Subsurface-originating life is further reinforced by the expected biological isolation of the subsurface ocean. Shielded from UV-radiation and atmospheric loss, an LHS 1140b-like planet would facilitate chemosynthetic life independent of surface conditions, constraints analogous to those proposed for Europa [52]. Alternatively, Quick

¹⁸Daspute et al. [45] also highlight a small, but finite probability that LHS 1140b has a rocky surface.

et al. [44] predict an ice shell ≤ 3 km thick, which could suggest some ocean-surface interactions and a more vulnerable biosphere. Evaluated together, these features suggest that while surface cryovolcanism may be geologically prominent and easier to observe, it is deep, LIPs-like endogenic events that likely pose the greatest existential threat to a biosphere confined to the subsurface ocean.

4.3.3 Extinction

As shown graphically in Figure 6, a hot mantle plume could eventually reach the ocean floor. Non-explosive basaltic eruptions would over time create an oceanic plateau.

On Earth, the volume of a single LIP can reach up to 4.44×10^7 cubic kilometers (the Ontong Java Plateau in the southwest Pacific [29]). Partial obduction of the site revealed interbedded limestone indicating extensive submarine emplacement [29]—conditions potentially analogous to those on an ocean world like LHS 1140b. Drawing on this example, the modeled extinction scenario considers how a similarly massive LIP event might evolve in a LHS 1140b-like exoplanet. The voluminous basalt flows, forming oceanic plateaus, would cause a displacement of ocean waters. If the water column were stably stratified before the volcanism, the stratification could be disrupted (similar to volcanism-induced disruptions of stably stratified water bodies in crater lakes on Earth). If the lava deposits would build up to reach the water-ice interface, the stability of the ice-ocean boundary might become disturbed and cryovolcanic activity could increase rapidly, both in terms of the amounts of volatiles emitting from faults in the icy crust and in terms of the chemical composition of the volatiles. Initial volatile release would occur underwater. The outgassing of sulfur dioxide would cause significant ocean acidification [29]—unlike in continental eruptions, where SO₂ emissions can contribute to short-term global cooling [29].

The release of carbon dioxide would presumably still have a global warming effect if it can find its way through the ice layer and if it were retained in an atmosphere; however, the mechanisms associated with it would shift. The planet’s ocean would likely undergo direct hydrothermal warming caused by the eruptions themselves.

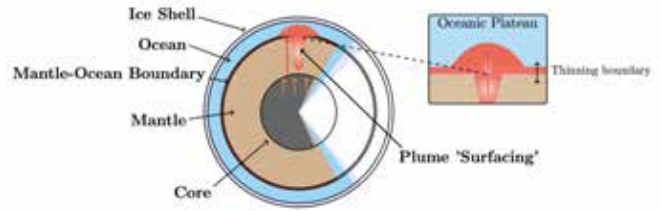


Figure 6: LEFT: Cutaway view of LHS 1140 b’s interior. A hypothesized upwelling of hot mantle material reaches the base of a subsurface ocean. RIGHT: Large Igneous Province causing thinning and doming of the oceanic lithosphere, leading to oceanic plateau creation.

Dissolved CO₂ would contribute to the ocean’s thermal budget and also lead to its eventual temperature increase. Oceanic Anoxic Events (OAEs) are a highly probable consequence of the ocean warming. Ocean anoxia or dysoxia is closely linked to the widespread development of oxygen-poor deposition [29].

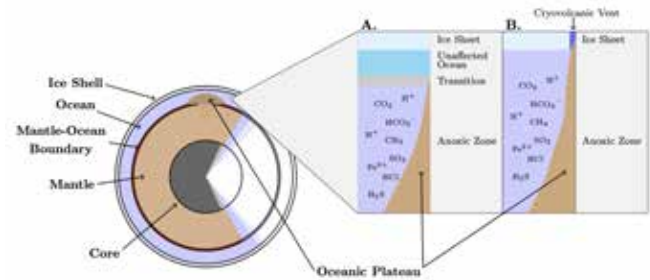


Figure 7: This schematic illustrates the internal structure of an LHS 1140b-like exoplanet with a LIP-driven oceanic plateau. The two zoomed-in panels of the ocean layers show possible scenarios of ocean stratification depending on the height reached by the oceanic plateau. Scenario A explores an instance in which the oceanic plateau does not reach the ice sheet and allows for a layer of unaffected ocean. Scenario B illustrates the possibility of cryovolcanic activity caused by the oceanic plateau reaching the bottom of the ice sheet creating a vent to the surface. Both scenarios highlight chemical disequilibria caused by a LIPs event.

As the oceanic LIPs eruption progresses, further explored in Figure 7, the cascading effects—intensified hydrothermal circulation, increased ocean temperatures, ocean acidification—would fundamentally alter the planet’s biosphere. Ocean

warming in combination with an increase in dissolved CO₂ could drive the water column towards density stratification and oxygen depletion (OAEs). On Earth, such events are closely associated with large biotic crises and even extinctions [29].

On a LHS 1140b-like exoplanet, where life likely depends on chemosynthetic ecosystems, the disturbance of redox balances and the collapse of nutrient and element cycling would devastate the ecological niches. With the energy gradients suppressed and ocean chemistry destabilized, conditions would no longer support complex, or potentially even microbial, life. Thus, a LIP event on a LHS 1140b-like exoplanet could act as a mass extinction mechanism, possibly equivalent in severity to Earth's great biotic turnovers.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

The three exoplanet categories used as case studies offered insight into how large scale volcanism could lead to mass extinctions on diverse planetary types.

The example of lava planet 55 Cancri e highlights how intense stellar irradiation can lead to large scale volcanism on its dayside in the form of magma oceans, reminiscent of continuous LIPs. While such lava planets are at present primary targets for observation with state-of-the-art telescopes, due to factors like short orbital periods and bright host stars, they are unsuitable for habitability studies. This case study serves less as a direct example of potential extinction events and more as a crucial contextualization for the limitations and priorities of current exoplanet observations in the search for life.

Kepler-452b offers an example of an overlooked, potentially tectonically active Water World with an atmosphere, where a LIPs event can have devastating effects on the climate by erupting in water and/or directly into the atmosphere. In a submarine setting, sulfur dioxide emissions, while negligible in the atmosphere, might contribute to ocean acidification. Carbon dioxide injected into a presumed water vapor atmosphere would likely lead to intense global warming and potentially runaway greenhouse effect. Should the oceanic plateaus breach the surface, creating sub-aerial LIPs, the climatic disruption would be even

more severe, potentially causing short-term cooling from sulfate aerosols followed by prolonged global warming. What is more, this case study reveals how plate tectonic-'powered' carbon sinks are both dangerous (a large interior reservoir of carbon means a large amount of carbon is prone to release in volcanic events) and helpful (potentially faster recovery of the environment after a volcanic episode).

Finally, an ice sheet-covered Water World LHS-1140b, which may lack an atmosphere but may have a surface made of water ice covering a subsurface water ocean, helps to assess the effects of a LIPs mechanism on planets far removed from our current understanding of volcanism. With presumed cryovolcanism and internal heating rates potentially exceeding Jupiter's moon Io, these exoplanets may be very volcanically active. A LIPs event trapped in the subsurface ocean beneath the ice sheet would lead to the disturbance of redox balances, collapse of nutrient cycling, devastation of ecological niches, and suppression of energy gradients. Thus, it might likely lead to a mass extinction of the speculated chemosynthetic life. This scenario suggests that even insulated, subsurface biospheres are not immune to catastrophic internal geological processes.

Through this discussion, the study reinforces the point that merely being within a star's habitable zone is an insufficient guarantee of long-term habitability. The internal dynamics and potential for catastrophic events such as LIPs are equally crucial. This research emphasizes the pressing need for future studies to develop more sophisticated planetary climate and geophysical models capable of predicting the occurrence, as well as longer term effects of extinction events on exoplanets. Given the current limitations on direct empirical data, such comparative approaches are indispensable for advancing our understanding of the potential for life beyond Earth. Ultimately, this paper serves as a foundational step in constructing a framework for assessing exoplanetary 'impending doom' and broadens our understanding of the drivers of mass extinctions beyond the terrestrial record.

6 References

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Sciences

Harmonizing Neural Pathways: Instrumental Music Making as a Therapeutic Modality for Multiple Sclerosis and Depression

A Comparative Analysis of Emotion-Regulating Improvisational Music Therapy (EIMT) on Neural Network Function and Synaptic Plasticity

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Neuro-musical alignment. By Stella Vriends and Zoë Vriends

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the therapeutic potential of Instrumental Music Making (IMM) as a form of active Music Therapy (MT) to enhance synaptic plasticity and functional brain network connectivity in individuals with Multiple Sclerosis (MS)—a neurodegenerative disease primarily affecting young adults between 20 and 40 years of age. While Music Therapy has shown measurable success in treating Major Depressive Disorder (MDD, hereafter referred to as depression), this thesis explores whether its beneficial effects on neural networks in depression can be adapted to MS, given the shared impairments in critical neural circuits including the Limbic System, Default Mode Network (DMN), and Cognitive Control Network (CCN). The study is guided by three research questions: i) What are the (overlapping) network impairments in MS and depression? ii) How can IMM as a form of active Music Therapy improve synaptic plasticity and brain network functioning in patients with MS? iii) Can the therapeutic effects observed in depression through MT be replicated or adapted for MS patients? To answer these questions, this thesis employs a theory-guided narrative literature review, synthesizing existing neuroscientific and clinical research on the pathophysiologies and comorbidity of MS and depression, and the neurobiological mechanisms underpinning music-induced plasticity. Special attention is given to Emotion-Regulating Improvisational Music Therapy (EIMT)—a structured, active MT modality with demonstrated efficacy in improving emotion regulation and functional connectivity in depressed patients. Complementing this theoretical analysis, the study incorporates semi-structured interviews with experienced music therapists to explore the feasibility, mechanisms, and clinical relevance of applying IMM-based approaches to MS rehabilitation. Qualitative interview data revealed strong professional consensus around IMM's therapeutic value. Key findings included its capacity to promote emotion regulation, support adaptive identity reconstruction, and stimulate whole-brain activation through improvisation and synchronization—techniques which may foster neural reorganization and emotional resilience. Therapists also emphasized the flexibility of EIMT across diagnoses, and its potential to engage MS patients in non-verbal, relational, and body-based emotional processing despite cognitive or physical limitations. This research holds both clinical and societal relevance. As a non-invasive, multimodal, and affectively engaging intervention, IMM could complement or replace existing pharmacological strategies by actively promoting neural recovery and psychological well-being in MS patients. By advancing a novel theoretical and practice-informed framework for neurorehabilitation, this thesis contributes to the emerging field of personalized, network-based interventions in chronic neurological illnesses.

Keywords and phrases: Multiple Sclerosis (MS); Major Depressive Disorder (MDD); Instrumental Music-making (IMM); Emotion-regulating Improvisational Music Therapy (EIMT); synaptic plasticity; neural networks.

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List of Abbreviations

- ACC** Anterior Cingulate Cortex
- AMTA** American Music Therapy Association

CCN Cognitive Control Network

CNS Central Nervous System

CPM Component Process Model

DMN Default Mode Network

DTI Diffusion Tensor Imaging

DPC Dorsolateral Prefrontal Cortex

EIMT Emotion-regulating Improvisational Music Therapy

fMRI Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging

FPN Frontoparietal Network

IMM Instrumental Music Making

MDD Major Depressive Disorder

MS Multiple Sclerosis

MT Music Therapy

MRI Magnetic Resonance Imaging

OFC Orbitofrontal Cortex

QoL Quality of Life

TA Thematic Analysis

VIS Visual Network

1 Introduction

Multiple Sclerosis (MS) is a debilitating neurological condition, affecting over 1.8 million young adults globally (World Health Organization [WHO], 2023). It is a chronic, autoimmune neurodegenerative disease characterized by demyelination, inflammation, and axonal damage. These pathological processes collectively give rise to a spectrum of clinical manifestations that contribute to the overall burden of disease (Axisa & Hafler, 2016). The inflammation and loss of myelin—two defining features of MS pathophysiology—result in ‘conduction blocks’, during which neural communication at the cellular level is either slowed down or entirely disrupted (Smith & McDonald, 1999). This neural disruption extends to the synapses, the junctions where electrical signals pass from one neuron to another. Persistent disruptions in normal signaling then disturb the patterns of neural activity required for synapses to adjust their strength and efficacy appropriately. Consequently, this reduces the capacity for synaptic plasticity, limiting the brain’s ability to form new neural connections, strengthen existing ones, or effectively reroute signals to compensate for damage (Bellingacci et al., 2021). During MS, immune-mediated alterations in the synapses’ ability to undergo long-term (plastic) changes interfere with the dynamics of neural networks, contributing to deficits in learning and memory, reduced information processing speed, impaired visuospatial learning, as well as disruptions in executive function and the regulation of emotions (Di Filippo et al., 2018). Subsequently, these micro-level impairments cause the onset of a cascade that disrupts the structural integrity of neural circuits and leads to a breakdown in the coordinated activity or functional connectivity across large-scale brain networks (Bellingacci et al., 2021; Di Filippo et al., 2018).

Ultimately, the combined synaptic and network-level disturbances in MS manifest as a range of physical and cognitive deficits, including cognitive decline, motor dysfunction, chronic fatigue, and an overall reduced quality of life (QoL) (Ostermann & Schmid, 2006; Vidal-Jordana et al., 2015). Moreover, these multi-level disruptions not only give rise to these observable symptoms but also create a neural environment that may be particularly receptive to

interventions that encourage reorganization and plasticity, such as Music Therapy (MT).

Beyond its physical and cognitive manifestations, MS frequently presents with psychiatric comorbidities, notably major depressive disorder (MDD, hereafter referred to as depression) (Mustač et al., 2021; Solaro et al., 2018; Wood et al., 2012). While a brain affected by MS is marked by visible axonal lesions and structural network damage, depression is primarily distinguished by functional dysregulation in key brain networks without apparent structural anomalies (Lam et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2017). Emerging evidence suggests that the anatomical localization of MS lesions correlates with an increased propensity for the onset of depressive symptoms (Mustač et al., 2021; Solaro et al., 2018). Notably, both conditions exhibit impairments in overlapping neural circuits—including the cognitive control network (CCN), limbic system, and default mode network (DMN)—thereby implicating common pathophysiological mechanisms despite their distinct aetiologies (Lechner-Scott et al., 2024; Mustač et al., 2021; Solaro et al., 2018).

Depression was specifically chosen as a comparative subject due to several interconnected factors. Firstly, my internship project¹ investigated MT’s effects on depression, prompting a deeper theoretical exploration of this condition. Secondly, depression presents a robust theoretical and clinical frame of research. And thirdly, my initial curiosity about potential overlaps between MS and depression led me to discover substantial evidence of shared neural pathways and pathogenetic comorbidity, validating depression as a particularly relevant condition for comparative analysis. Thus, although other neurologically impairing conditions might also provide insights, the unique convergence of practical experience, theoretical alignment, and clinical relevance justified the selection of depression as a critical comparative subject.

Research on the depressed brain has explored the therapeutic potential of music appreciation as a means to alleviate disease burden and en-

¹Exploratory theoretical and clinical research conducted from February to June 2025 under the supervision of Dr. Sonja Aalbers, in the Netherlands. It focused on Emotion-Regulating Improvisational Music Therapy (EIMT) for individuals with depression. The internship provided early exposure to relevant clinical frameworks and informed the development of the review’s theoretical focus.

hance QoL (Koelsch, 2009). This is supported by evidence that, in neurologically healthy individuals, music processing and production engage extensive neural networks spanning sensory, motor, emotional, and cognitive domains (Altenmüller & Schlaug, 2013). This widespread neural activation, coupled with music's apparent deep cultural and psychological resonance (Panese, 2012), suggests that music's intrinsic ability to turn on and connect the CNS on multiple levels may be harnessed to restore neural health and promote emotional well-being in individuals with psychiatric and neurological disorders.

Despite the promising implications of MT, the majority of previous research has predominantly focused on passive listening paradigms. In contrast, Instrumental Music Making (IMM), an active form of MT, engages these neural circuits more directly. To clarify, MT encompasses a broad range of interventions, which can be dichotomized into passive approaches (such as Receptive Music Listening) and active interventions (such as Instrumental Music Making, IMM). Within the realm of active MT, Emotion-Regulating Improvisational Music Therapy (EIMT) represents a specialized approach that leverages improvised musical expression to address emotion dysregulation. EIMT has emerged as a promising intervention, with evidence suggesting it enhances emotion regulation, improves stress resilience, and reinforces functional connectivity in individuals with depression (Aalbers et al., 2020; Aalbers et al., 2017; Altenmüller & Schlaug, 2013; Koelsch, 2010). Given the overlapping network dysfunctions observed in both MS and depression, this study hypothesizes that EIMT—or more broadly, IMM—might also serve as a complementary non-pharmacological intervention for MS patients, fostering synaptic plasticity and functional network connectivity, and thereby improving QoL.

This thesis explores the shared network impairments in MS and depression and investigates whether IMM can improve synaptic plasticity and brain network function in these conditions. Employing a systematic literature review that includes a comparative analysis of MT applications in depression, alongside primary qualitative data derived from interviews with experienced music therapists, this study endeavors to elucidate the therapeutic potential of IMM for MS patients. By combining theoretical evidence with clinical ex-

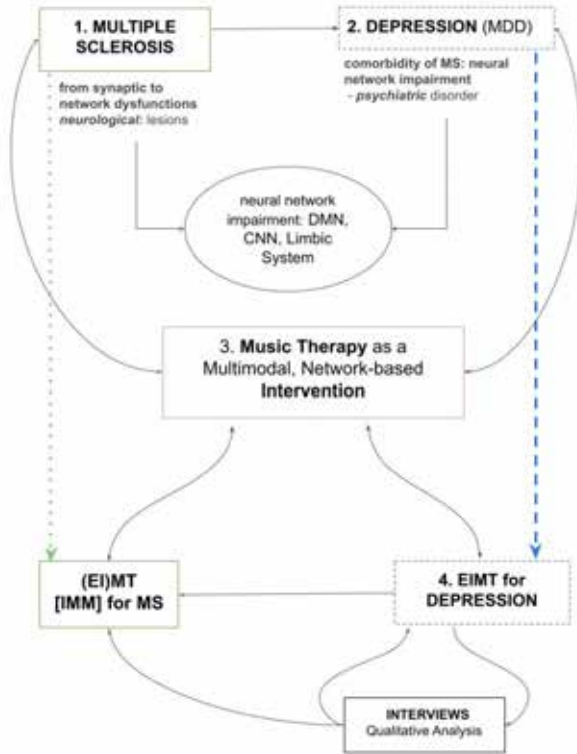
pertise, it seeks to contribute to the broader framework of synaptic and network-based interventions within neurological and psychiatric care.

The clinical and societal relevance of this research lies in its potential to offer a non-invasive therapeutic alternative that may complement or, in certain contexts, replace conventional pharmacological treatments. By targeting synaptic plasticity, functional connectivity, and emotion regulation, such an approach could significantly ameliorate the well-being of MS patients. Considering that MS predominantly affects young adults during crucial and formative life stages, elucidating the impact of IMM on brain plasticity paves the way for personalized rehabilitation strategies, thereby enhancing long-term outcomes and advancing the field of non-pharmacological interventions. Ultimately, by integrating comparative analyses with expert insights, this work aims to lay the foundation for a comprehensive framework that integrates neuroscientific theory, clinical evidence, and therapeutic practice, to advance the role of MT in neurorehabilitation.

Following the theoretical rationale visually represented in Figure 1, the narrative literature review will begin by outlining the pathophysiology of MS—from cellular and synaptic disturbances to network-level impairments—and examining its associated burden and impact on QoL. It will then present depression as a frequent comorbidity of MS, focusing on its underlying neural mechanisms and overlaps with MS-related dysfunction. Next, the review will examine current research on the cognitive and neural benefits of instrumental music training in healthy individuals. And finally, it will elucidate the beneficial neurophysiological effects of EIMT on patients with depression, thereby supporting the hypothesis that IMM may yield positive neurological and psychiatric outcomes in individuals with MS.

I hypothesize that IMM will benefit individuals with MS in several key ways, the most significant one being a potential delay in disease progression. This could occur through a reduction in the frequency and severity of MS relapses, the enhancement of synaptic plasticity, and the promotion of functional reorganization of neural networks (Lopes & Keppers, 2021; Schmid & Aldridge, 2004). Collectively, these changes may reduce the overall disease burden and ameliorate the QoL of MS patients.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Current Thesis



Note. This diagram illustrates a mind map of the theoretical rationale linking MS and depression through shared neural network impairments, and proposes the application of Emotion-Regulating Improvisational Music Therapy (EIMT) as a potential intervention for MS. It outlines the chapter progression (1 to 4) from neurological dysfunction to therapeutic exploration, supported by qualitative interview analysis. The dotted arrows represent the hypothesized links between each disease or disorder and its corresponding therapeutic approach, while the straight lines indicate the conceptual and theoretical connections among the various components of the framework.

2 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitatively oriented mixed-methods approach, combining a theory-guided narrative literature review with semi-structured expert interviews to investigate the therapeutic potential of Instrumental Music Making (IMM) in the context of MS, without differenti-

ating between its subtypes (RRMS, PPMS, SPMS). The primary focus lies on the applicability of Improvisational Music Therapy—a structured form of active MT—for enhancing synaptic plasticity, functional brain connectivity, and QoL in patients with MS. This research is grounded in comparative insights from research on EIMT for alleviating depression, given the established neural network overlaps between these conditions.

The literature review establishes the theoretical foundation by combining and synthesizing neuroscientific research on the shared neural network dysfunctions in MS and depression, the mechanisms of music-induced neuroplasticity, and the clinical structure and logic of EIMT. The expert interviews complement this theoretical analysis by offering practice-based insights from experienced music therapists, specifically regarding the clinical adaptability and perceived efficacy of EIMT for MS patients. This dual methodology enables both conceptual depth and clinical relevance, helping to bridge neuroscientific theory with therapeutic practice.

2.1 Narrative Literature Review Methods

The literature review employs a theory-guided narrative approach, integrating targeted thematic exploration with a structured, question-driven logic to construct a comprehensive and integrative synthesis of the current state of research at the intersection of neurodegeneration, depression, and music-based interventions. Multiple scholarly databases—including PubMed, Scopus, the University of Amsterdam Library, Google Scholar, ResearchGate, and selected high-impact journals in neurology and music therapy—were consulted for peer-reviewed publications up to 2024. The utilized search terms included combinations of: “Active Music Therapy”; “MS pathophysiology”; “Depression and Neural Networks”; “Emotion-Regulating Improvisational Music Therapy”; “Synaptic Plasticity” and “Functional Connectivity in MS”; “Neural Network Impairments”; “Music and Depression”; “MS relapse”; “Neuroplasticity and Functional Recovery”; “Synaptic Dysfunction”; “Loss of Functional and Structural Connectivity”; “Musicians vs non-musicians”; “Music-Making as a Therapeutic Strategy”. Inclusion criteria prioritized studies that ex-

amined the pathophysiological mechanisms and neural network dysfunctions in MS and/or depression; the documented effects of music-making on brain plasticity, emotion regulation, and network reorganization; and the theoretical and empirical basis of EIMT as a clinical model.

Both qualitative and quantitative studies were reviewed to ensure a multidimensional perspective. This process allowed for a critical synthesis of knowledge concerning shared neural impairments and the therapeutic rationale for music-based interventions in neuropsychiatric conditions.

2.2 Expert Interviews Methods

To complement the literature review, four semi-structured interviews with experienced music therapists were conducted to gain insight into the practical applications of EIMT and its potential use in MS treatment. Participants were recruited through a public post on LinkedIn (see Appendix A.), with selection based on the following inclusion criteria: clinical experience in music therapy, familiarity with improvisational techniques (particularly EIMT), and professional practice in Dutch healthcare or therapeutic contexts.

Interviews were conducted either online via Microsoft Teams or in person at the therapist's workplace, and each session lasted between 30 to 60 minutes. An interview guide (see Appendix B.) was developed to maintain thematic consistency across interviews while allowing space for individual perspectives. The guide covered topics such as therapeutic process, client responses, perceived emotional and cognitive effects of improvisational work, and the feasibility of applying EIMT to patients with MS.

The collected dataset was analysed in an inductive and reflexive manner following the six-step thematic analysis (TA) established by Braun and Clarke (2022): data familiarisation; coding; initial theme generation; reviewing and developing themes; refining, defining, and naming themes; and producing the report. The analysis combined deductive codes (e.g., "emotion regulation," "synchronization") derived from the literature with inductive themes (e.g., "therapeutic trust," "neural engagement," "identity reconstruction") that emerged organically from the data.

As the sole researcher, author Zoë Vriends

conducted the interviews, transcribed the recordings, and independently performed the thematic analysis. This degree of involvement raises important considerations regarding interpretive bias, which were addressed through reflective memo-writing and close attention to thematic consistency.

2.3 Ethical Considerations

This study did not require formal ethical approval, as the literature review relied solely on publicly available sources and the interview portion involved non-vulnerable, professional adult participants. All therapists were fully informed about the research purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Oral informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the start of each interview. To safeguard privacy, all identifying details were anonymized, and the interview data were securely stored in compliance with the ethical research guidelines of the University of Amsterdam.

3 Theory-Guided Narrative Literature Review

3.1 Multiple Sclerosis Pathophysiology: from Synaptic to Neural Network Dysfunction

Multiple Sclerosis (MS) is a complex and debilitating neurodegenerative disease characterized by the formation of multiple lesions or scars (from Greek, *sklerós*: 'hard', 'plaque', 'lesion') on neural axons following an immune-mediated attack through the blood-brain barrier (BBB) (Ortiz et al., 2014; Ostermann & Schmid, 2006). Over time, the cumulative effects of demyelination and inflammation—the two hallmarks of MS—lead to brain atrophy, progressive disability, and cognitive and motor impairments, ultimately reducing the QoL of young adults (Axisa & Hafler, 2016; Kalincik, 2015).

3.1.1 At the Synaptic/Cellular Level

The primary target of this MS-related immune inflammation is myelin, a thin lipid-based insulating layer that surrounds axons and is crucial for

efficient neural conduction, as well as maintaining long-term axonal integrity (Ostermann & Schmid, 2006; Smith & McDonald, 1999). When autoreactive T cells and B cells infiltrate the CNS via the BBB, they trigger a cascade of immunomodulatory events that culminate in (chronic) neuroinflammation, demyelination (i.e. the loss of myelin), and axonal damage (Axisa & Hafler, 2016; Smith & McDonald, 1999). This process leads to the development of “conduction blocks,” wherein synaptic transmissions—normally rapid and continuous—become delayed or entirely disrupted (Smith & McDonald, 1999, p. 1651). When demyelination occurs, exposed nerve fibers lose their protective and insulating properties, impairing their ability to propagate electrical impulses (Smith & McDonald, 1999). The Nodes of Ranvier, specialized gaps along the axon where sodium (Na⁺) channels are densely clustered, normally facilitate saltatory conduction² by amplifying and accelerating electrical signals. However, in axolemmas (i.e., the demyelinated part of axons), the density of the Na⁺ channel clusters diminishes and becomes insufficient, resulting in neurotransmission failure, increased metabolic demand, and overall neural dysfunction (Di Filippo et al., 2018; Smith & McDonald, 1999).

Importantly, these immune-driven processes extend beyond axonal conduction and significantly affect synaptic function and plasticity (Smith & McDonald, 1999). As Bellingacci et al. (2022) emphasize, synaptic dysfunction is now recognized as a key pathological feature of MS, arising from direct inflammatory damage to synaptic terminals and altered neurotransmitter homeostasis. Di Filippo et al. (2018) describe this process as “inflammation-driven alterations which disrupt the delicate crosstalk between the immune and nervous systems” (p. 599): Inflammatory cytokines and immune signaling interfere with the balance of excitatory (glutamatergic) and inhibitory (GABAergic) synaptic transmission, disrupting normal synaptic functioning and plasticity.

Synaptic plasticity—the brain’s capacity to adapt and remodel connections in response to activity or inactivity—is critical for learning, memory, and functional compensation following neural damage (Tommasini et al., 2012). Fundamental to this plasticity are several key mechanisms. One is long-term potentiation (LTP), which refers to a sustained increase in synaptic strength or excitatory

postsynaptic potential (EPSP) amplitude (Purves, 2017, p. 176). Another is Hebbian learning, often summarized by the phrase ‘neurons that fire together, wire together.’ This principle promotes the strengthening and refinement of synaptic connections (Purves, 2017, p. 590). In an MS brain, the loss of this power manifests at early disease stages through cognitive symptoms, such as executive dysfunction, reduced information processing speed, visuospatial memory deficits, and altered social cognition.

The cumulative disruption of neural conduction, synaptic integrity, and plasticity ultimately impairs the functional architecture of wider-scale neural networks, contributing to widespread network dysregulation and reduced adaptive capacity within the CNS (Bellingacci et al., 2021; Chard et al., 2021).

3.1.2 At the Network Level

The downstream effects of synaptic dysfunction in MS extend into the realm of large-scale brain organization, disrupting communication within and between neural networks (Bellingacci et al., 2021). Neural networks refer to interconnected groups of brain regions that coordinate to perform cognitive, sensory, and motor functions. At this scale, both structural and functional connectivity play critical roles. Structural connectivity refers to the brain’s physical wiring—comprising synaptic contacts, white matter tracts, and anatomical projections that enable signal transmission (Tommasini et al., 2012). Complementarily, functional connectivity describes the temporal synchrony or quantitative correlations between spatially distinct brain regions during neural activity (Bassett & Sporns, 2017). When neural and synaptic transmission are impaired—through demyelination, inflammation or disrupted neurotransmitter balance—these patterns of co-activation become unstable and lead to broader system-level dysregulation. Importantly, the ability to consequently reorganize these networks strongly depends on lesion extent, chronic inflammatory environment, and individual factors such as age, sex, and lesion severity—all of which significantly influence the brain’s capacity for adaptive functional compensation or plasticity (Tomassini et al., 2012).

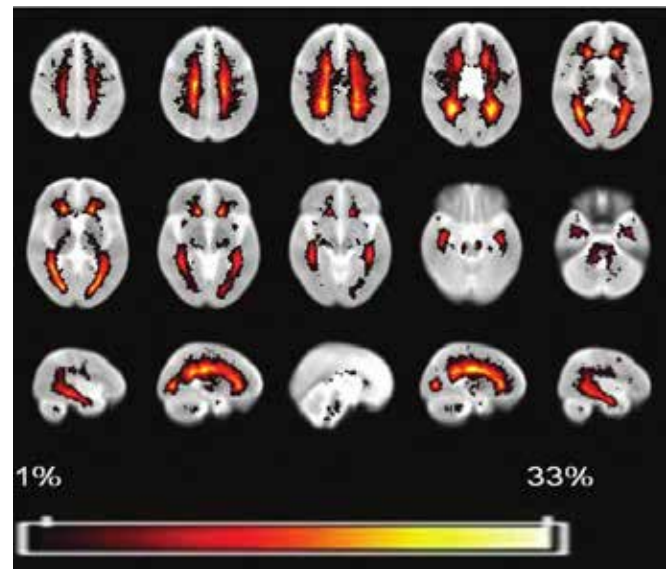
These dynamic patterns of both structural and

functional MS-related changes in neural activity can be investigated using advanced neuroimaging techniques such as MRI, fMRI, and Diffusion Tensor Imaging (DTI) (Vidal-Jordana et al., 2015). In particular, the field of network neuroscience provides a framework for mapping and modelling the complex interplay of synaptic interactions and anatomical projections among brain areas, using tools like graph theory to conceptualize the brain as a dynamic network of nodes (i.e., brain regions) and edges (i.e., the structural or functional connections between them) (Bassett & Sporns, 2017; Broeders et al., 2024). Notably, recent research by Broeders et al. (2024) indicates that in MS patients with cognitive impairment, the loss of structural connectivity is linked to a reduced capacity for dynamically reconfiguring functional networks, resulting in a less adaptable and more energetically demanding neural environment. Pointedly, empirical evidence from their experiment shows that these patients require more energy to shift between different patterns of brain activity. This increased energetic cost may help explain why such reconfigurations occur less frequently in MS-affected brains. The networks particularly affected by this pattern are the default mode network (DMN), the limbic system, and the cognitive control network (CCN), with the latter two being necessary for emotion regulation and executive functions (Vidal-Jordana et al., 2015). Additionally, disruptions were observed in the Frontoparietal Network (FPN) and Visual Network (VIS) (Broeders et al., 2021). The distribution (in voxels) and frequency (ranging from 1%, $n = 2$, to 33%, $n = 69$) of lesions underlying these network disruptions are illustrated in Figure 2 (Sombekke et al., 2011).

3.1.3 From Pathophysiology to Clinical Manifestations

MS impairs neural function across small and large scales. At the cellular level, immune-mediated inflammation and demyelination disrupt synaptic conduction, impair synaptic plasticity, and disrupt excitatory-inhibitory balance, limiting the brain's adaptive capacity (Di Filippo et al., 2018). These microscopic changes cascade into broader network dysfunction, where damaged structural connections impair functional connectivity, reducing coordinated brain activity

Figure 2: Lesion-frequency Map in Patients with MS



Note. Lesion-frequency map across 208 MS patients showing lesion distribution in the periventricular, callosal, and juxtacortical regions—areas critical for inter-network communication (adapted from Sombekke et al., 2011).

(Bellingacci et al., 2021). These network-level disruptions explain why functional impairments in MS may exceed what directly results from the visible structural damage observed on MRI scans (Chard et al., 2021).

This breakdown prompts the brain to compensate through adaptive or maladaptive functional reorganization (Chard et al., 2021). However, when the brain can no longer effectively reconfigure its networks, the resulting symptoms—cognitive dysfunction, motor disturbances, fatigue, and mood disorders—become signs of this failure to adapt. In essence, the cumulative breakdown from synaptic-level dysfunction to network disconnection and the deterioration of reconfiguration mechanisms lays the foundation for the wide range of clinical manifestations in MS.

Traditional pharmacological treatments—including acute interventions such as corticosteroids and long-term immunotherapies like Natalizumab, and B-cell depleting agents—primarily target the inflammatory and immunological mechanisms responsible for lesion formation (Kalincik, 2015; Steinman, 2014). While these treatments have contributed to signifi-

cant decline in annualized relapse rates over time (Inusah et al., 2010) and slowed disease progression, they often fall short in restoring the complex neural connectivity necessary for continued cognitive, emotional, and sensory functioning. This disconnect is particularly evident since patients continue to experience cognitive deficits and diminished QoL (Steinman, 2014). Given the complexity and variability of neural plasticity as described by Tomassini et al. (2012), interventions that proactively stimulate adaptive reorganization—such as IMM—are highly valuable. By engaging multiple neural systems simultaneously, music-based therapies might enhance synaptic plasticity and functional connectivity, offering a powerful complementary strategy to conventional treatments. Through the simultaneous activation of diverse brain regions, these therapies help to rewire damaged circuits, potentially mitigating cognitive decline and improving QoL. Together, these insights highlight the need for a multifaceted treatment approach in MS—one that not only suppresses inflammation and prevents further structural damage, but also, actively promotes the restoration of neural function through targeted, experience-based interventions such as MT.

3.2 Depression in MS: Comorbidity and Neural Network Overlaps with MS

Depression is a highly recurrent psychiatric comorbidity of MS (Mustač, et al., 2021), with typical comorbid prevalence being around 30%, though estimates range from 4.27% to 59.6% (Solaro et al., 2018; Wood et al., 2012). This is significantly higher than the estimated 10% prevalence in the general population (Lechner-Scott et al., 2024), highlighting the disproportionate burden of depression in people with MS (Boeschoten et al., 2017).

The American Psychiatric Association (2022) defines depression as a persistent period (\geq two weeks) of low mood or loss of interest, accompanied by a range of cognitive and physical symptoms that cause significant impairment in functioning (DSM-5-TR, 2022). In the case of MS-comorbid depression, the psychological strain of managing a chronic, progressive, and often unpredictable disease may contribute to the development of depression; however, evidence also sup-

ports a more direct neurobiological link between MS and depression. Structural brain changes visible on MRI—particularly lesions located in mood-regulating areas such as the frontal lobe and limbic system—have been shown to account for up to 50% of the variance in MS-related depression (Feinstein et al., 2014; Lechner-Scott et al., 2024). Solaro et al. (2018) show that this comorbidity also involves a *temporal and progressive correlation* (p.117), with increased MS disability—measured by the Expanded Disability Status Scale (EDSS) score—being the strongest predictor of depression risk. On this note, findings by Wood et al. (2012) reveal that for every one-point increase in MS EDSS, the risk of depression rises by 17%, highlighting physical impairment as a major contributor to depressive symptoms in this population.

Moreover, depression is not just an affective consequence of MS but may also influence its course (Solaro et al., 2018). A growing body of research points to a *bidirectional relationship* between MS and depression, where depression is seen to increase the morbidity and mortality associated with MS as well as being correlated to it pathogenetically (Feinstein et al., 2014, p. 590). MS-related neuroinflammation, lesion location, and psychosocial stressors increase the risk of developing depressive symptoms (Boeschoten et al., 2017; Mustač et al., 2021). In turn, depression has been associated with worsening clinical outcomes, including accelerated cognitive decline, increased relapse frequency, reduced adherence to treatment, and higher mortality—partly due to increased suicide risk (Feinstein et al., 2014). As such, depression is increasingly understood not only as a comorbid psychiatric disorder, but also as a potential complication and biologically embedded symptom of MS. Consequently, this bidirectionality can be used in treatment strategies that ameliorate both conditions. For example, Solaro et al. (2018) demonstrated that depression treatment can be associated with the suppression of the Th1 immune response known to induce pro-inflammatory cascades in autoimmune diseases like MS. This finding suggests that treating depression in MS may confer immunological as well as psychological benefits, adding another layer of relevance to its clinical and therapeutic management.

3.2.1 Onset and Pathophysiology of Depression

Depression in individuals with MS is recognized as a multifactorial comorbidity (Boeschoten et al., 2017; Mustač et al., 2021). Firstly, the psychological burden of living with a chronic, unpredictable, and often degenerative illness provokes emotional distress. Secondly, social factors—such as reduced social support, isolation, and strained interpersonal relationships—can further exacerbate vulnerability. Additionally, beyond these psychosocial dimensions, a growing body of research points to direct neurobiological mechanisms that underlie this comorbidity. In particular, structural brain changes play a key role in the onset of depression in MS (Mustač et al., 2021). Pointedly, studies suggest that it is not merely the extent of neural damage, but the specific anatomical location of lesions, that increases the risk of depression (Solaro et al., 2018). Mustač et al. (2021) showed that lesions in the temporal lobe, arcuate fasciculus, superior frontal and superior parietal lobes, as well as spinal cord lesions and global cerebral atrophy are all independent predictors of depression in MS.

Lechner-Scott et al. (2024) further report that MRI-evident volume reductions in the ventromedial prefrontal cortex (vmPFC), anterior cingulate cortex (ACC), insular cortex, and their subcortical connections are strongly associated with depressive symptoms. These regions are critical for emotion regulation, cognitive control, and stress processing. These empirical findings support a growing view of depression as a neuropsychiatric disorder with morphological characteristics, wherein damage to mood-regulating neural circuits disrupts emotional homeostasis. They reinforce the claim that lesion location, rather than overall disease burden, is the decisive factor in the pathogenesis of depression in patients with MS (Boeschoten et al., 2017; Feinstein et al., 2014; Mustač et al., 2021).

Broadening the lens beyond MS, depression is widely understood as arising from the complex interaction of genetic, environmental, and neurobiological factors. Twin and family studies estimate that genetic predisposition contributes 30-40% of individual risk, but genome-wide association studies indicate that liability is polygenic, involving numerous small-effect variants (Hasler

et al., 2010; Howard et al., 2019). Environmental influences—particularly early-life adversity and ongoing interpersonal stress—account for the remaining 60-70% risk-factor for depression (Hasler et al., 2010), underscoring the potential of psychosocial interventions for prevention.

On the neuroendocrinological level, dysregulation of the body's stress-response system, the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, plays a central role: when this axis is chronically hyperactive, cortisol remains elevated, making individuals overly sensitive to stress (Hasler, 2010; Mustač et al., 2021). Early-life trauma can embed this vulnerability via enduring epigenetic changes (Heim & Binder, 2012). In parallel, disturbances in monoaminergic neurotransmission—particularly serotonin (5 HT), norepinephrine (NE), and dopamine (DA)—are linked to hallmark symptoms such as anhedonia (i.e., loss of pleasure), psychomotor slowing, and fatigue. However, this classical monoamine hypothesis is now considered too narrow because it cannot explain either the delayed onset of antidepressant effects or the full range of depressive symptoms. Because no single pathway explains depression, contemporary models, such as Hasler et al.'s Multifactorial "Network Model" (2010), integrate impaired neuroplasticity (e.g. reduced brain-derived neurotrophic factor), excitatory-inhibitory imbalance (excess glutamate and deficient GABA), and neuroinflammation to account for the full range of symptomatology and responses to treatment. The rapid antidepressant action of the NMDA antagonist ketamine highlights glutamatergic dysregulation, while elevated pro-inflammatory cytokines such as IL-6, TNF- α , and IL-1 β have been shown to activate the HPA axis, alter monoamine metabolism, suppress neurogenesis, and precipitate "sickness behaviour" features like social withdrawal and fatigue (Hasler et al., 2010). Supporting this expanded view, neuroimaging studies have consistently identified structural and functional abnormalities in key emotion-regulating regions of patients with depression, including reduced volume and activity in the prefrontal cortex and hippocampus, and hyper-reactivity in the amygdala (Zhang et al., 2018). This complexity helps explain the limited effectiveness of standard depression treatments and supports the development of novel therapeutic approaches that target inflammation and neuroplasticity.

Beyond brain circuits, maladaptive emotion construction itself may perpetuate depression. From a psychological and theoretical standpoint, Klaus Scherer's (2009) Component Process Model (CPM) of emotion offers a compelling framework for understanding emotional dysregulation in depression. Rather than viewing emotion as a static state, the CPM conceptualizes it as a dynamic, multi-system process involving synchronized changes in five components: cognitive appraisal (1), physiological arousal (2), motor expression (3), action tendencies (4), and subjective feeling (5). In depressive states, this synchrony is disrupted; for example, negative appraisal biases lead individuals to underestimate their coping abilities or perceive events as uncontrollable, manifesting core symptoms such as hopelessness and anhedonia (Scherer, 2009).

Together, these genetic, environmental, social, neurobiological, and psychological perspectives converge to form a comprehensive model of depression that is particularly relevant in MS, where structural brain changes, neuroendocrine disruption, inflammation, and emotional appraisal mechanisms may all act in concert. An integrated understanding helps guide not only diagnostic insight but also multimodal treatment strategies, which may include pharmacological, psychosocial, and neurorehabilitative approaches such as MT.

3.2.2 Neural Network impairments and overlap with MS

The above-mentioned integrated understanding of depression acknowledges that it is a condition marked by widespread disruptions in crucial neural networks, particularly those responsible for emotion regulation, executive control, and self-referential processing. Converging neuroimaging findings support the neurocognitive model of depression, where dysfunction in circuits such as the limbic system, the DMN, and the CCN underlies many of the cognitive and affective symptoms seen in patients (Disner et al., 2011; Lam et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2018).

The Limbic System, including the amygdala and subgenual anterior cingulate cortex (sgACC), is often hyperactive in depression, contributing to emotion dysregulation and enhanced salience of negative stimuli. In contrast, top-down regula-

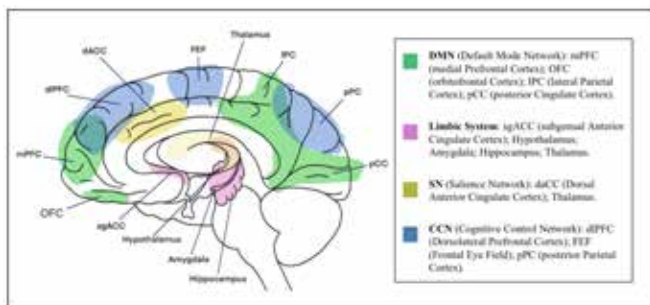
tory structures, particularly the dorsolateral and ventrolateral prefrontal cortices (DLPFC, VLPFC), exhibit reduced activity, impairing control over emotions, decision-making, and goal-directed behavior (Disner et al., 2011; Zhang et al., 2018). This imbalance between bottom-up emotional reactivity and top-down cognitive regulation creates a feedback loop that reinforces biased attention, negative memory recall, and persistent rumination (Disner et al., 2011). Disruptions in the DMN, the network responsible for self-focused thought and mind-wandering, further contribute to the development of negative self-schemas, while impaired connectivity within the CCN results in executive dysfunction and reduced cognitive flexibility (Disner et al., 2011). Lam et al. (2014) highlight attention, executive function, memory, and processing speed as cognitive domains that are commonly affected in depressive states. These domains are also consistently disrupted in patients with MS, suggesting a meaningful overlap in the cognitive and neural architecture of the two conditions.

Recent models extend this understanding by identifying hub regions—highly connected nodes critical for global brain communication—as particularly vulnerable. Zhang et al. (2018) emphasize that damage to these hubs, especially within the PFC, anterior cingulate cortex (ACC), and orbitofrontal cortex (OFC), undermines both emotional and cognitive stability, as each of these regions forms part of broader circuits that regulate affect, motivation, and memory. Therefore, their dysfunction leads to symptoms like anhedonia, emotional instability, rumination, and suicidal ideation (Zhang et al., 2018).

Critically, similar network dysfunction is also evident in MS, where lesions and demyelination frequently affect the PFC, limbic structures, and thalamus—the same regions implicated in depression. Both conditions involve breakdowns in functional connectivity, especially within the DMN, salience network (SN) and fronto-limbic circuits—CCN and Limbic System, all visible in Figure 3. This overlap reinforces the notion that depression and MS share common neural substrates, particularly in the context of cognitive and emotional dysregulation (Solaro et al., 2018; Disner et al., 2011). As such, interventions that target these shared networks, especially those that engage multiple domains of brain function simul-

taneously, may offer therapeutic benefits across both conditions.

Figure 3: *Parts and Positioning of Key Neural Networks Involved in MS and Depression*



Note. The highlighted areas are impaired/touched in conditions like MS and depression. This figure was made by the author, Zoë Vriends, drawing inspiration from existing images on the web (DMNetwork; LimbicSystem; Krönke et al., 2020; Schimmelpfennig et al., 2023)

3.3 Music Therapy as a Multimodal, Network-Based Intervention

A medium that recruits and stimulates multiple neural systems in parallel is music. Functional-imaging studies show that music synchronously engages the prefrontal cortex (PFC), limbic structures, thalamus, and the large-scale DMN, SN, and CCN—the very hubs most affected in MS and depression (Altenmüller & Schlaug, 2013). Given the extensive overlap between these brain areas and those involved in both MS pathology and depression, music therapy emerges as a uniquely positioned intervention. Music is a historically and culturally embedded form of human expression that appears universal in both its structure and emotional impact (Zaatar et al., 2023).

While music may not seem essential for survival, its complex and multifaceted interaction with the brain suggests otherwise. From an evolutionary and neurobiological standpoint, music offers a powerful, non-pharmacological tool capable of modulating diverse cognitive and emotional functions (Altenmüller & Schlaug, 2013; Gitman et al., 2023; Koelsch, 2009).

The American Music Therapy Association (AMTA) defines music therapy as the clinical and evidence-based use of music interven-

tions to accomplish individualized goals (AMTA, <https://www.musictherapy.org/>). Various forms of music therapy have been developed, ranging from receptive (passive) approaches to active music-making and integrative methods (Aalbers et al., 2020; Altenmüller & Schlaug, 2013; Boiko et al., 2017; Koelsch, 2009). Passive MT involves listening to music to promote relaxation, emotion regulation, and catharsis by stimulating the auditory cortex, limbic system, and DMN (Koelsch, 2009). Active MT engages patients in music-making, requiring motor-sensory integration, fine-tuning of motor control, and emotional expression, thereby activating the Sensorimotor Network (SMN), Limbic System, and CCN (Hyde et al., 2009; Schmithorst & Wilke, 2002). Integrative approaches further broaden this effect by combining music with movement or visual arts to promote multisensory stimulation (Boiko et al., 2017).

Clinical methods such as rhythmic auditory stimulation, melodic intonation therapy, and music-supported motor rehabilitation illustrate how music can be applied to train or retrain impaired neural networks (Altenmüller & Schlaug, 2013; Lopes & Keppers, 2021). Especially in improvisational music-making, brain imaging has shown that virtually the entire brain lights up, including the reward and emotion systems (Zaatar et al., 2023). In fact, several studies have demonstrated how the brains of musicians look different and appear bigger and stronger in structural and functional connectivity compared to those of amateur musicians or non-musicians (Gaser & Schlaug, 2003). To support this, Pantev & Herholz (2011) demonstrated that sensorimotor-auditory training—actively playing an instrument—revealed greater plastic outcomes compared to auditory-only training—listening to sound/music. This provides a compelling rationale for exploring active MT, or IMM, as a multimodal, network-based intervention capable of promoting adaptive plasticity and circuit-level reorganization.

3.3.1 Active Music-Making and Whole-Brain Engagement

Active MT, especially in the form of IMM, requires constant interplay and adaptation within and between sensory, cognitive, motor, and emotional neural circuits (Zatorre et al., 2007). Specif-

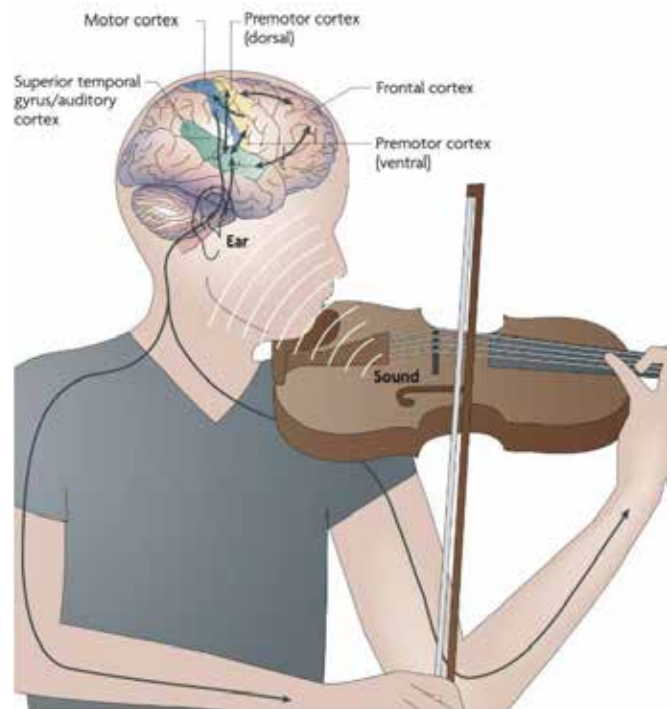
ically, playing an instrument is a highly multisensory and emotionally engaging experience that involves auditory, visual, and tactile input; furthermore, it requires especially multimodal involvement by integrating perception, action, and cognition within a socially meaningful and universally communicative context. These overlapping demands make music-making an ideal whole-brain activity.

As Zatorre et al. (2007) explain, sound production is tightly coupled with auditory perception through dynamic feedback and feedforward mechanisms. In particular, as shown in Figure 4, sound production is initiated by the motor and premotor cortices that prepare and set off movement, while the auditory cortex generates predictions of what the output should be. The actual sound is then produced and enters the temporal lobe, where the auditory cortex compares it to the predicted output. At this point, the auditory cortex sends fine-tuning instructions in the form of feedback and feedforward loops to the (pre)motor cortex to monitor performance (Gaser and Schlaug, 2003; Zatorre et al., 2007). This real-time loop supports a phenomenon known as sound-action mapping, where auditory input and motor output are mutually reinforced, forming a closed neural circuit that enhances coordination and precision (Zatorre et al., 2007).

The emotional salience of music-making is also critical. Reward circuits within the limbic system—such as the nucleus accumbens (NAcc) and the ventral tegmental area (VTA)—are activated, while memory-related regions, like the hippocampus, encode the experience. As a result, music engages distributed networks that span perception, action, memory, and emotion.

These integrative processes shape the brain's structural architecture. DTI studies show increased fractional anisotropy (FA)—a measure for white matter integrity—in the corpus callosum of musicians, which suggests enhanced communication between brain hemispheres (Schmithorst & Wilke, 2002; Vandermosten et al., 2012). Meanwhile, lower FA in the internal capsule has been associated with greater motor automation—likely reflecting the refinement and optimization of complex motor sequences through extensive practice. Gray matter volume is also significantly larger in the motor, auditory, visual, and parietal regions of professional musicians compared to non-

Figure 4: *Sound-Action Mapping: Auditory-motor Integration during Music Production*



Note. This figure emphasizes the real-time feedback loop between auditory and motor regions during violin playing—a process visually represented by directional pathways and labeled brain regions (adapted from Zatorre et al., 2007, p. 548).

musicians (Gaser & Schlaug, 2003). These regions collectively support sensory-motor integration, cognitive control, and reward-based learning (Zatorre et al., 2007). Music, then, is not only a way of expressing oneself, but also a form of functional brain training. As Münte et al. (2002) note, the musician's brain serves as a model of neuroplasticity. Together, these changes reveal how music performance sculpts motor and cognitive networks over time: music-making is a full-body, full-brain activity that coordinates perception, action, emotion, and cognition, potentially serving as a powerful tool for reshaping neural function in neuropsychological disorders. This therapeutic potential is supported by a matched control study in MS patients by Schmid and Aldridge (2004), which found that active music therapy led to moderate improvements in self-esteem, depression, and anxiety, despite present but insignificant changes in functional measures. Partici-

pants reported enhanced emotional expression, self-confidence, and a shift in self-perception from feeling “disabled” to more “capable” (p. 229). These findings highlight how active, emotionally engaging music-making can support adaptive changes in affective and identity-related brain networks, reinforcing its value as a network-based therapeutic approach.

3.3.2 Music-Induced Neuroplasticity: Mechanisms and Therapeutic Potential

Playing an instrument is one of the most complex and demanding tasks the brain can perform, and its therapeutic potential is closely tied to the brain’s capacity to adapt to these demands (Altenmüller & McPherson, 2008; Munte et al., 2002). A trained musician’s brain reflects years of adaptation to these requirements, and continued practice is necessary to maintain such skills (Hyde et al., 2009). When rapid information processing and high temporal precision are required—as in music performance—myelin-producing cells increase in number and size, improving the speed and efficiency of nerve signal transmission (Altenmüller & Schlaug, 2013).

This capacity for structural and functional adaptation—neuroplasticity—extends across both short and long timescales. It involves changes not only in the “software” of the brain (e.g., synaptic strength, firing patterns) but also in its “hardware” (e.g., the structure of neural tissue and overall brain anatomy) (Altenmüller & McPherson, 2008). Short-term musical training can enhance auditory discrimination and reorganize neural responses within days or weeks, while long-term engagement leads to enlarged cortical representations, more efficient auditory-motor coupling, and improved pitch and rhythm precision (Pantev & Herholz, 2011). Specifically, neuroplasticity unfolds across different temporal stages: within seconds or minutes, the efficiency and size of synapses can increase; within hours, new synapses and dendritic branches begin to grow; and over weeks, gray matter density increases—slowing cell death and enhancing the brain’s structural resilience (Altenmüller & Schlaug, 2013).

These changes and differences have been studied and measured in different ways. Short-term plasticity can be observed using techniques

such as event-related potentials (ERPs) and fMRI, which reveal the brain’s quick responsiveness to sensory-motor training and adaptation (Wan & Schlaug, 2010). Long-term changes can be uncovered with techniques such as DTI, which estimates the connections between brain regions (Vandermosten et al., 2012; Wan & Schlaug, 2010). An exemplary DTI study by Schmithorst & Wilke (2002) uncovered differences in white matter architecture between musicians and non-musicians, specifically in interhemispheric pathways such as the corpus callosum. Similarly, Hyde et al. (2009) used Deformation-Based Morphometry (DBM) to compare the brains of children who received 15 months of instrumental music training with those of a control group that did not undergo training. Their longitudinal research revealed significant structural brain changes in the primary motor cortex, auditory regions, and the corpus callosum—demonstrating training-dependent neural development (Hyde et al., 2009). More recent systematic evidence supports music-based therapy as a potent tool for promoting neuroplasticity and functional adaptation. Notably, Lopes & Keppers (2021) reviewed 10 clinical trials with MS patients and found consistent improvements across motor domains (e.g., gait, dexterity, balance) and non-motor cognitive functions (e.g., fatigue, depression) following music-based interventions. Their findings align with the notion that music can act as a multimodal training platform, facilitating energy-efficient, dynamic reconfiguration of functional networks impaired in MS.

These neuroplastic effects are especially pronounced when training begins early and engages multiple modalities, as in IMM, which uniquely demands the integrated operation of sensory, motor, and cognitive systems (Pantev & Herholz, 2011). However, they should not be interpreted as evidence that musicians are inherently protected from neurological or psychiatric conditions such as MS or depression. Rather, their relevance lies in the mechanisms that musical training activates, which can be purposefully leveraged for therapeutic aims. Such evidence underscores that it is the training itself, rather than the innate predispositions to play music, that drives the functional and structural remodeling of brain networks, reinforcing music’s potential as a targeted tool in neurorehabilitation.

Music-making engages and strengthens the

very neural systems often compromised in clinical populations. For example, as music activates the limbic and reward systems—and thus emotion regulation, motivation, and affective stability—it can be used for patients with depression in several ways. This makes music therapy a promising intervention for mood disorders, as it not only modulates affective circuits but does so in a way that promotes structural resilience and functional recovery. By targeting and reinforcing specific neural pathways, music-based interventions offer a dynamic approach to neurorehabilitation—adapting the principles of training-induced plasticity to therapeutic goals. The integrative nature of music-making, its emotional salience, and its capacity to reshape the brain underscore its transformative potential in both preventive and clinical contexts.

3.4 Emotion-Regulating Improvisational Music Therapy (EIMT) for Depression

As outlined in the previous chapter, active forms of music therapy engage patients directly in music-making processes, offering a powerful means of emotional expression and neural stimulation. Among these, Improvisational Music Therapy (IMT) has gained recognition for its capacity to foster emotional exploration through spontaneous musical interaction (Bruscia, 1987): it enables individuals to spontaneously create music in a therapeutic context, offering a medium for self-expression, emotional exploration, and interpersonal connection that transcends verbal communication (Koelsch, 2018).

Building on this foundation, Aalbers et al. (2020) developed Emotion-Regulating Improvisational Music Therapy (EIMT) as a structured, evidence-informed model specifically designed to support emotion regulation in individuals with depression. EIMT integrates the spontaneous, expressive qualities of IMT with structured therapeutic goals grounded in emotion theory—particularly the Component Process Model (CPM), which views emotion as a dynamic interplay between five interrelated systems (Scherer, 2005). The improvisational aspect of EIMT is not incidental; rather, it provides a flexible, embodied, and relational format that mirrors the complexity of emotional life. Through musical improvisation, patients engage

both limbic and cognitive systems, enabling access to emotional content that may be inaccessible through language alone. EIMT thus represents a fusion of clinical artistry and neuroscience, offering a tailored approach to emotion regulation in depression.

3.4.1 Components and Structure of EIMT

EIMT targets five core components of emotional processing, as defined by Scherer's (2005, 2009) theoretical Component Process Model (CPM). These components are engaged through improvisational techniques that allow patients to embody emotional experiences in real time, co-create music with the therapist, and reflect on the emotional meaning of their musical choices. (1) Cognitive appraisal is activated as patients recognize and make sense of their emotional states through sound, with the therapist providing musical and verbal reflection that helps reframe and interpret these experiences; (2) physiological arousal is modulated by adjusting musical elements such as tempo, volume, and rhythm, offering a somatic channel for calming or energizing the nervous system; (3) motor expression is facilitated through the act of music-making itself—playing instruments or vocalizing—which externalizes internal states through embodied movement and sound; (4) action tendencies are accessed and gently reshaped as patients explore impulses like withdrawal, tension, or assertion in a safe musical space; and finally, (5) subjective feeling is accessed through the emotional resonance of the improvisation, allowing patients to experience and express complex inner states that may otherwise be difficult to verbalize.

Based on this model, the therapy program is typically structured into three distinct phases, each with its own focus and therapeutic aims: phase 1—Assessment and Planning (1 session)—involves collaboration between therapist and patient to identify emotional patterns and establish a therapeutic plan and overarching goal as well as introducing improvisation as a tool for emotional exploration; phase 2—Emotional Processing (5 sessions)—focuses on active engagement with emotional content through structured and free improvisation, during which the therapist uses synchronization techniques to go over all the five components (one per session) and sup-

port emotion regulation in real time; phase 3—Integration and Closure (2 sessions)—consolidates emotional insights and regulation strategies for patients to internalize their progress, with music-making often reflecting themes of closure, transition, and forward orientation (Aalbers et al., 2020).

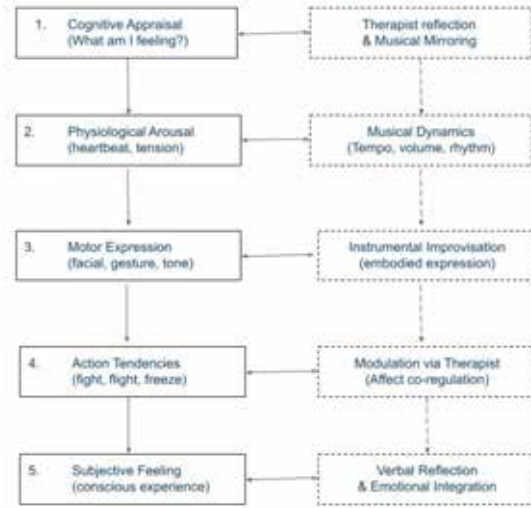
Throughout all phases, the therapist plays an active and responsive role, not only facilitating musical expression but also offering emotional containment, co-regulation, and verbal interpretation. This engagement is visible in the diagram in Figure 5. While each session includes moments of verbal dialogue, the emphasis remains on music as the primary channel of emotional communication, which is especially beneficial for patients who struggle with trauma, emotional inhibition, or limited verbal insight. By bridging non-verbal and verbal domains, EIMT creates a dynamic, multi-modal therapy space that supports both spontaneous expression and structured emotional processing.

3.4.2 The Synchronization technique

A defining feature of EIMT is its use of synchronization—a therapeutic technique in which the music therapist attunes to the patient’s musical output, mirroring and gradually modulating elements such as rhythm, tempo, pitch, intensity, and phrasing (Bruscia, 1987). This technique creates a powerful sense of validation and emotional resonance (Koelsch, 2015). When the therapist reflects the patient’s emotional state through musical interaction, it communicates deep listening, empathy, and understanding—reinforcing the patient’s sense of being heard and emotionally held.

From a neuroscientific perspective, synchronization engages multiple systems involved in emotion processing and regulation. First, it activates the mirror neuron system, which supports empathy and social attunement by simulating observed actions and affective states (Bruscia, 1987). Simultaneously, rhythmic engagement and musical coordination influence limbic structures—including the amygdala and hippocampus—helping to regulate emotional intensity and foster positive affect. Synchronization is also thought to downregulate activity in the DMN, thereby reducing self-focused rumination, and enhance activation in the CCN, improving top-down

Figure 5: Mapping EIMT onto Scherer’s (2005, 2009) CPM



Note. The diagram illustrates how EIMT engages the five synchronized components of emotion—cognitive appraisal, physiological arousal, motor expression, action tendencies, and subjective feeling—through improvisational musical interaction. This diagram was created by author, Zoë Vriends.

regulation of emotion and attention (Hennessy et al., 2020; Koelsch, 2009).

Biochemically, synchronized music-making may lead to lower cortisol levels, indicating reduced stress, and stimulate the release of endorphins and oxytocin, which promote social bonding and emotional resilience. Psychologically, the co-regulating nature of synchronization strengthens emotional insight, impulse control, and cognitive reappraisal, enabling patients to reframe distressing emotional experiences in a supported, safe, and embodied way (Aalbers et al., 2017; Koelsch, 2009). Moreover, therapeutic alliance is often deepened through musical synchrony, which promotes trust, safety, and collaborative engage-

ment—key ingredients in any effective therapeutic process (Aalbers et al., 2020).

In summary, EIMT offers a powerful non-verbal treatment modality for depression that aligns with contemporary theories of emotion and neuroscience. Through its structured phases and targeted improvisational techniques, this form of therapy addresses key emotion regulation processes that are often impaired in individuals with depression. Central to its effectiveness is the use of synchronization—a relational and neurological mechanism that facilitates co-regulation, emotional insight, and self-expression. By integrating expressive freedom with therapeutic structure, EIMT enables patients to explore, process, and transform their emotional experiences in ways that verbal therapies may not (Aalbers, 2020). As this thesis moves toward its empirical section, the principles underlying EIMT will serve as a guiding framework for the qualitative analysis of expert interviews. These insights will help assess the translational potential of EIMT for MS, where similar patterns of emotional and neural network dysregulation suggest a promising new therapeutic frontier.

4 Results

4.1 Findings from the Theory-Guided Narrative Literature Review

The narrative analysis of the selected studies revealed three central, interrelated themes that form the theoretical foundation for this thesis: (1) multilevel neural disruption in MS, (2) overlapping neural network impairments in MS and depression, and (3) the potential of IMM as a multimodal, plasticity-enhancing intervention. These thematic domains emerged from a synthesis of neurobiological theory, clinical insight, and exploratory work during a parallel internship research project on EIMT for depression.

First, the literature confirmed that MS impairs brain function on both micro- and macro-levels. At the cellular level, immune-mediated inflammation, demyelination, and axonal damage disrupt synaptic transmission and compromise synaptic plasticity, especially mechanisms such as long-term potentiation (LTP) and Hebbian learning. These changes reduce the brain's capacity to adapt and compensate, laying the ground-

work for functional impairment. At the network level, MS lesions affect structural and functional connectivity in key brain systems, including the DMN, CCN, and limbic circuits. These disruptions impair higher-order cognitive, emotional, and self-regulatory functions.

Second, the review demonstrated significant overlaps between MS and depression in terms of morbidity and symptom profiles, as well as underlying network dysfunction. Depression in MS is not merely reactive but also linked to lesion location and inflammatory processes that affect shared circuits involved in emotion regulation, executive control, and cognitive flexibility. Both conditions show disruptions in the DMN, CCN, and fronto-limbic pathways, pointing to a common network-level pathology.

Third, active forms of music therapy—particularly IMM—emerge as promising interventions for targeting these compromised systems. IMM engages distributed brain networks across motor, cognitive, and emotional domains, promoting functional connectivity and neuroplasticity. Evidence from studies in depression shows that music therapy can strengthen emotion-regulating circuits, reduce stress-related biomarkers, and induce structural brain changes. These effects are especially relevant to MS, where cognitive and emotional deficits persist despite pharmacological treatment.

Together, these findings suggest that IMM, as a form of active music therapy, may support synaptic repair and network reorganization in MS through the same mechanisms observed in depression. This theoretical synthesis directly informs the central research question: How can IMM improve synaptic plasticity and brain network functioning in patients with MS? Foundational to this inquiry are two guiding sub-questions: What are the overlapping network impairments in MS and depression? and Can the therapeutic effects observed in depression through MT be adapted for MS patients?

4.2 Findings from the Semi-Structured Interviews

Informed by the theoretical analysis, this section presents findings from four semi-structured interviews conducted with experienced music therapists practicing in diverse clinical settings

Table 1: Summary of Thematic Interview Findings

Theme	Code	Quote	Source(Interview #)
Emotion Regulation	Music for emotion regulation	“Music can calm clients down when they’re really overwhelmed.”	1,3
	Improved emotion awareness	“They feel more comfortable and they know what it is that they feel. . . .”	2
Improvisation & Flexibility	Judgment-free play	“Improvisation removes judgment. A client can let go of expectations and just play.”	2,4
	Brain-wide activation	“Improv activates the entire brain: internal alignment – no conflicts.”	4
Synchronization & Relational Dynamics	Emotional alignment	“Synchronization lights up the entire brain, creating internal emotional alignment.	4
	Connection beyond words	“You use music to connect without words – on a deeper level than only words can do.”	2,4
	Voice and breath	“Singing is like the inner shower.”	3
Therapeutic Techniques	Imagination-based relaxation	“Close the eyes... with the right music... relaxed imagination.”	2
	Reconnection with healthy self	“Clients (re)connected with their healthy side.”	1
MT for Coping with MS	Coping with identity loss	“Music helps with coping with loss of identity and loss of function in MS.”	2

Note. Codes are short, descriptive labels that identify important features of the data. In this analysis, both theory-driven (deductive) and data-driven (inductive) codes were used and grouped into broader themes that reflect meaningful patterns relevant to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

across the Netherlands. Although these interviews were originally part of the parallel clinical internship project, the analytical lens here is specifically focused on themes relevant to the feasibility of applying IMM to MS. The six-step thematic analysis (TA) (Braun & Clarke, 2022) revealed key insights regarding emotion regulation, improvisation, synchronization, therapeutic engagement and clinical adaptability—each of which offers valuable practice perspectives on the possible integration of IMM into MS rehabilitation.

Table 1 presents an overview of the themes, including representative quotes from participants, coded by number (1–4). These findings provide primary qualitative support for the central hypothesis of this thesis: that IMM, previously shown by EIMT to be effective in treating depression, may serve as a valuable non-pharmacological intervention for individuals with MS, given the shared network dysfunctions and psychosocial challenges common to both conditions.

4.2.1 The Power of Music: increased awareness and expression of emotion

The overarching theme throughout all the interviews was the power of music and sound (1-4). As expressed by 4, “music is capable of breaking silence about inner feelings, first through music, [and] then verbally”. It offers a cathartic release of emotions and a channel through which they are naturally and instinctively expressed (2,4). When the client “feels more comfortable [in playing an instrument], they become capable of knowing what it is that they feel” (2), and then “develop the ability to translate the feelings and emotions into music” (4). This effective power of music-making is valuable for patients with MS as they often suffer from comorbid psychiatric problems such as loss of identity, insecurities, and overall depressive states.

4.2.2 Improvisation: intra- and inter-neural alignment

Improvisation emerged as both a technique and a therapeutic mindset that fosters cognitive flexibility, “spontaneity” (4), and psychological safety—traits highly relevant to MS patients coping with unpredictability and loss of control. Therapists described improvisation as “removing judgment” and allowing clients to “just play” in an “exploratory and naturally expressive manner” without fear of failure (2,4). This sense of freedom was contrasted with the rigidity often observed in clients with formal musical training, who can become “stuck in their heads” (1), “only thinking of notes and technique” (2), consequently blocking the window for therapeutic work.

Several therapists emphasized the neurophysiological value of improvisation, with one noting that it “activates the entire brain,” creating a sense of alignment both within and between neural systems (4). For individuals with MS, whose neural pathways are often disrupted, these kinds of integrated whole brain experiences could support adaptive neuroplasticity and promote emotional resilience.

4.2.3 The Synchronization Technique: pre-verbal co-regulation as the mother-child relationship

Among the most consistently emphasized insights was the foundational role of the synchronization technique as the core mechanism on which EIMT is based. This technique entails the therapist’s musical attunement to the client through “rhythm, tempo, dynamics, and phrasing”, creating a “co-regulated space” in which emotional states are mirrored, validated, and gradually modulated (4). As interviewee 4 described, “Synchronization... creates emotional alignment,” enabling clients to feel seen and emotionally understood without the need for verbal explanation. This alignment fosters safety, trust and the conditions for processing long-buried emotions (3). Rather than imposing direction, the therapist follows and subtly adjusts to the client’s musical expressions, promoting change through emotional resonance (participant 4 referred to Koelsch, 2015) rather than confrontation or analysis. Participant 2 framed this as a process of “creating a space where the client feels mirrored, leading to spontaneous change.”

An analogy was adopted by several interviewees to illustrate the innate natural power of this technique, the mother-child relationship. Participant 2 likened musical synchronization to the mother’s instinctive act of soothing her child: “It’s very similar to how a mother [rhythmically] mirrors her baby to reassure them.” Participant 3 expanded on this by noting how becoming a parent themselves deepened their understanding of synchronization as a pre-verbal, relational form of safety-building: “When your newborn baby cries, you naturally start singing and then the baby might relax and fall asleep”. This intuitive connection is relevant to MS patients who may experience emotional dysregulation, isolation, or a breakdown in communication due to neurological impairments.

Furthermore, several therapists described synchronization as a non-verbal language of empathy, especially for clients who struggle with emotional awareness or verbal expression. As participant 2 put it, “You use music to connect without words—on a deeper level than only words can do.” This function is especially pertinent to individuals with MS, who may face fatigue, cognitive load

or speech-related challenges. Thus, synchronization holds strong potential as an adaptive, accessible and neurologically attuned technique in MS-focused music therapy.

4.2.4 Music Therapy for Coping with MS: identity, memory, and expression

Particularly compelling themes in the therapeutic needs of people with MS are coping with identity loss, emotional suppression and physical limitations. Several therapists mentioned how music-making supports a reconnection to a “healthy side” (1) or facilitates “identity reconstruction [after illness or trauma]” (2). These processes are especially relevant for MS patients who may struggle with feelings of lost autonomy or personal coherence due to disease progression.

The expressive potential of EIMT for individuals with compromised language or cognitive function lies in that it “offers expression without relying on language.” (4). This insight aligns with neurological research suggesting that non-verbal, multimodal interventions can activate, train, and maintain alternative pathways when certain areas of the brain are impaired—an important consideration for MS populations, where lesion sites vary across individuals.

Additionally, participants emphasized music’s role in neuroplasticity and memory. Therapist 4 stated that music therapy often “helped them progress further than solo practice ever did,” pointing to the unique emotional and social context in which MT unfolds. Others described how clients were drawn back to specific instruments that carried positive emotional memory, highlighting the motivational and affective power of sound-based memory recall (2). For MS patients experiencing cognitive decline, such memory-related engagement may enhance motivation and mood while potentially supporting cognitive rehabilitation.

4.2.5 Feasibility and Clinical Transferability of EIMT to MS

Finally, when asked about the feasibility of applying EIMT or IMM more broadly to individuals with MS, all participants expressed **cautious optimism**. Therapists agreed that while improvisation and synchronization are powerful across di-

agnoses, certain adaptations would be necessary. Notably, they emphasized the importance of tailoring session structure to the client’s current cognitive and physical capacity, noting that flexibility and therapist sensitivity are key to maintaining engagement (2,3). The non-verbal, intuitive nature of EIMT was repeatedly described as an advantage for working with populations affected by neurological or psychiatric conditions: “Depending on the client and their goals, I work either very structured or more observant” (2), suggesting that EIMT offers the flexibility needed to serve a spectrum of symptom presentations and functional limitations. Participant 3 further described how sessions are often built around one “umbrella goal”—such as learning to feel safe in oneself—which could integrate well into broader MS rehabilitation frameworks that address identity, emotional regulation, and resilience over time.

Crucially, therapists highlighted the neurophysiological benefits of active music-making, clearly distinguishing it from passive music listening. While receptive methods aid relaxation (2), Instrumental Music Making (IMM) was described as uniquely engaging a broader range of sensorimotor, emotional, and cognitive networks (3): “Improvisation activates the entire brain: internal alignment—no conflicts—and connections [within the brain]” (3), suggesting a form of integrated neural stimulation that can support both emotional and functional change.

Unlike passive modalities, IMM demands real-time coordination of perception, motor output, and affective processing. This embodied impact was explained as, “when clients are fully immersed in music-making, they feel their own vibration and become capable of freeing themselves” (3). For individuals with MS—who often face disrupted connectivity and cognitive fatigue—this whole-brain engagement may support adaptive neuroplasticity and emotional resilience.

Therapists also described IMM as a powerful tool for stress regulation—a critical concern for people with MS, where chronic stress can trigger inflammatory cascades and worsen neurological symptoms. Participant 4 explicitly referenced Martina de Witte’s (2022) meta-analyses on music and stress, noting that “stress is a physiological and emotional trigger that worsens many conditions, including MS.” Rhythmic entrainment,

breath regulation, and emotional resonance were cited as mechanisms that support parasympathetic activation and stress relief.

Some also connected music-making to broader concepts of healing. Participant 3 remarked, “I think there is much more possible in healing—neurological reprogramming, rewiring... readjust the cells, especially for people who are ill.”, reflecting a belief in music’s potential to catalyze neural change, especially in chronically ill populations like those with MS.

For these reasons, therapists viewed IMM not only as a method of expression but also as a form of functional brain training: participant 4 stated, “It’s different when you use music as a form of help”, implying that therapeutic music activates distinct neural and emotional circuits compared to performance or listening alone. Taken together, these insights suggest that IMM, through its whole-brain activation, stress-reducing capacity, and plasticity-promoting potential, may serve as a promising and adaptable tool in MS neurorehabilitation.

5 Discussion

The primary aim of this thesis was to explore the power and potential of Instrumental Music-Making as a complementary or alternative intervention for Multiple Sclerosis (MS), by examining it in relation to Emotion-Regulating Improvisational Music Therapy’s (EIMT) established efficacy in depression. The central objective was to investigate whether the observed neurobiological and clinical benefits of EIMT in depression could be translated to the context of MS. This inquiry was guided by three key research questions addressed below.

1. What are the overlapping network impairments in MS and depression?

To respond to the first question, this thesis reviewed the pathophysiology of both disorders singularly. Despite differing in aetiology, MS and depression are increasingly understood to share a pathogenetic link, as evidenced by the high comorbid prevalence of depression in MS (WHO) and the consistent finding that lesion location—particularly in mood-regulating regions—is a strong predictor of depression onset. This suggests that it is not merely the psychological burden of MS, but rather direct neurological

impairment to affective circuits, that underlies the elevated depression rates observed in this population.

MS and depression share a noticeable overlap in neural network dysfunction. Specifically, both conditions are characterized by impairments in the Default Mode Network (DMN), Limbic System, Cognitive Control Network (CCN), and Salience Network (SN). These networks collectively govern emotion regulation, executive function, and self-referential processing. In MS, the immune-mediated inflammation and demyelination at the synaptic level impair the conditions necessary for LTP and Hebbian plasticity to occur, leading to impaired synaptic plasticity and cascading into loss of structural and functional connectivity (Bellingacci et al., 2021; Di Filippo et al., 2018). These disruptions contribute to hallmark MS symptoms such as fatigue, cognitive decline, emotional instability, and motor deficits. Similarly, in depression, the same networks—particularly the limbic-prefrontal circuits—exhibit structural and functional impairments (Disner et al., 2011; Lam et al., 2014). Notably, damage to hub regions such as the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC), prefrontal cortex (PFC), and orbitofrontal cortex (OFC) has been linked to both affective symptoms and diminished cognitive flexibility (Zhang et al., 2018). These findings establish a shared neural basis that justifies the cross-condition application of network-based interventions such as Improvisational Music Therapy.

2. How can Instrumental Music-Making (IMM), as a form of Music Therapy, improve synaptic plasticity and brain network functioning in patients with MS?

The second research question was addressed by examining how musical engagement reshapes the brain. Synaptic plasticity refers to the brain’s ability to modify the strength and structure of synaptic connections in response to experience. This plasticity, especially when reinforced through LTP and Hebbian mechanisms, is essential for recovery in both neurodegenerative and psychiatric disorders (Di Filippo et al., 2018; Tommasini et al., 2012). In this thesis, IMM is framed as a potent stimulus for such plasticity. As demonstrated by DTI and functional MRI (fMRI) studies, music-making can remediate impaired neural processes by simultaneously engaging and linking brain regions that might otherwise re-

main disconnected. Music performance is a high-tempo, bilateral activity requiring real-time coordination between auditory, motor, cognitive, and emotional systems. According to Altenmüller & McPherson (2008), such activity promotes myelin growth, which enhances neural conduction speed and inter-regional communication—key factors in restoring efficient information flow in demyelinated MS brains.

These effects are especially pronounced in active music-making compared to passive listening (Pantev & Herholz, 2011). As Münte et al. (2002) state, music “made with the body and felt with the heart” has the power to remap the brain. Pointedly, increased gray matter volume and improved white matter integrity observed in musicians (Hyde et al., 2009; Schmithorst & Wilke, 2002) point to a brain shaped by continuous adaptation—a model of what MS rehabilitation seeks to mimic. By encouraging motor-sensory coordination, cognitive flexibility, and emotional engagement, IMM simultaneously targets the very functions impaired in MS. Therefore, IMM holds the potential to restore not only structural integrity but also functional connectivity, contributing to improved QoL in MS patients through enhanced emotion regulation, memory, and executive function. Crucially, these neuroplastic changes are not incidental outcomes—they constitute the therapeutic mechanism itself. By promoting adaptive plasticity, IMM-based interventions may: (1) restore function in damaged networks by rerouting signals or recruiting alternate pathways, (2) strengthen underactive circuits, and (3) compensate for impaired regions—especially relevant in MS, where demyelination and inflammation severely disrupt connectivity. These network-level adjustments provide the foundation for observable improvements in both cognitive and affective symptoms, supporting the use of IMM as a non-pharmacological strategy for network rehabilitation.

3. Can the therapeutic effects observed in depression through MT be replicated or adapted for MS patients?

The final research question was explored through an overarching comparative and qualitative framework. EIMT, a structured form of active music therapy developed for emotion regulation in depression, engages the five emotion components identified in Scherer’s (2009) Com-

ponent Process Model and, through improvisation and therapist-led synchronization, enables patients to access, process, and regulate affective states through non-verbal, embodied interaction (Aalbers et al., 2020).

To examine the translational potential of EIMT for MS, this thesis included semi-structured interviews with four experienced music therapists practicing in the Netherlands. Despite the small sample size, the interviews yielded valuable clinical insights into how IMM could benefit individuals with MS. Therapists highlighted three core therapeutic mechanisms as especially relevant to MS rehabilitation: neuroplasticity, co-regulation, and expressive freedom. Synchronization was identified as key to establishing emotional safety and resonance—particularly important for individuals with MS experiencing emotion dysregulation, identity challenges, or verbal communication difficulties. Improvisation was described as removing judgment and enabling spontaneous expression, fostering cognitive flexibility and full-brain engagement, which are especially beneficial for patients dealing with fatigue or executive dysfunction.

By engaging overlapping neural networks implicated in both MS and depression, IMM-based interventions can be expected to restore disrupted connectivity, strengthen underactive circuits, and recruit alternative pathways for functional compensation. This triad of mechanisms is particularly critical in MS, where inflammation and demyelination impair natural neural reorganization.

Although direct clinical trials are still lacking, the comparative neurobiological rationale, the documented effectiveness of EIMT in depression, and the supporting clinical insight from practicing therapists converge to strongly suggest that IMM—especially in the structured format of EIMT—holds promise as a non-invasive, non-pharmacological, and complementary rehabilitation tool for MS. Its focus on network-level engagement, emotion regulation, and plasticity makes it a uniquely suitable intervention for patients whose therapeutic needs extend beyond the scope of conventional pharmacological treatments.

5.1 Limitations

This study is theoretical in nature and does not include experimental data. While the qualitative component offered rich, practice-informed perspectives, it was based on only four interviews with music therapists from diverse clinical backgrounds and target populations. As such, the findings are not generalizable and should be interpreted as exploratory in nature. Furthermore, interviews were limited to therapists; perspectives from individuals with MS were not included, which could have added valuable insight into patient experiences, needs, and preferences.

The application of EIMT to MS remains hypothetical. To date, no empirical studies have tested its direct effects on MS-specific outcomes such as demyelination, cognitive decline, or fatigue. While the comparative rationale is supported by shared neural mechanisms in MS and depression, further research is needed to establish clinical efficacy and safety in MS populations.

Finally, the literature review, while theory-guided and integrative, was not conducted using systematic review protocols such as PRISMA. This choice was made because I did not conduct a single, linear search and screening process, and because the topic itself is relatively new and exploratory, requiring a more flexible and interpretive approach to identifying relevant sources. The selection of sources was therefore narrative and interpretive in nature. This limits the replicability and transparency of the review process; however, this limitation was addressed by complementing the literature review with primary data collection through in-depth interviews, allowing for a deeper and more contextualized understanding of the research topic.

5.2 Future Research

Future research should empirically investigate the effects of IMM and EIMT on neural connectivity and plasticity in patients with MS, using neuroimaging tools such as DTI and fMRI. Ideally, such studies would involve longitudinal designs assessing both structural and functional changes alongside clinical symptoms and QoL measures. Moreover, experimental comparisons between passive and active MT could clarify the added value of instrumental engagement. A targeted interven-

tion trial of EIMT in MS populations would be a critical next step toward validating this promising therapeutic approach. Additionally, exploring the applicability of EIMT to other neuropsychiatric comorbidity pairs—such as Parkinson’s disease and depression—could extend its therapeutic relevance and inform broader clinical use.

6 Conclusion

This thesis explored the therapeutic potential of Instrumental Music Making (IMM) as a non-pharmacological intervention for improving synaptic plasticity and brain network function in Multiple Sclerosis (MS), drawing on its established efficacy in depression. Through a systematic literature review and qualitative interviews with experienced music therapists, the study demonstrated that MS and depression share overlapping dysfunctions in key neural circuits. These shared impairments provide a compelling basis for adapting music-based interventions across both conditions.

Instrumental Music-Making (IMM) was shown to engage mechanisms of synaptic plasticity, functional connectivity, and stress regulation—core therapeutic targets in MS. By activating widespread brain networks through emotionally and sensorimotor-rich experiences, IMM supports neuroplastic change, mood regulation, and cognitive resilience. Clinical perspectives further affirmed its feasibility for MS rehabilitation, particularly through Emotion-Regulating Improvisational Music Therapy (EIMT).

Although empirical trials are still needed, this study offers a strong theoretical and practice-based foundation for positioning IMM as a complementary or alternative treatment for MS. As a non-invasive and adaptable approach, IMM has the potential to enrich therapeutic pathways, enhance quality of life, and promote long-term neurological well-being in individuals with MS. In bridging the science of neuroplasticity with the art of music, this study not only reimagined the therapeutic landscape for MS but also underscored the profound capacity of human creativity to heal the brain.

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A LinkedIn Post



🎵 Oproep aan muziektherapeuten! Jouw inzichten nodig voor onderzoek 🎵

Voor mijn studie doe ik onderzoek naar de effecten van improvisatorische muziektherapie bij patiënten met depressie. Ik ben op zoek naar muziektherapeuten met ervaring in improvisatorische muziektherapie, specifiek de synchronisatietechniek, die hun inzichten willen delen.

Jouw expertise is van onschatbare waarde om beter te begrijpen hoe muzikale improvisatie de mentale gezondheid beïnvloedt. Sta je open om je ervaringen te delen? Laten we in contact komen!

Dit onderzoek wordt uitgevoerd in opdracht van Sonja Aalbers en ik zou het enorm waarderen als je jouw inzichten met mij wilt delen. Ken je iemand die mogelijk geïnteresseerd is? Tag hen hieronder of stuur me een berichtje! 🙏

Alvast bedankt! ❤️

[#Muziektherapie](#) [#Onderzoek](#) [#Improvisatie](#) [#MentaleGezondheid](#)
[#Synchronisatie](#) [#MuziekEnGezondheid](#) [#Nederland](#) [#Amsterdam](#)

B Interview Guide

1. Professional Background & Motivation

Can you briefly describe your background and how you came to work in music therapy?

a. Follow-up (if needed): *Was there a particular population or area of practice that drew you into the field?*

2. Approach to Music Therapy

How would you describe your general approach to music therapy in practice?

a. Follow-up: *Could you give an example of how a typical session unfolds?*

3. Use of Theory & Neuroscience

Do any specific models or theories (e.g., EIMT, neurologic music therapy) influence your work?

a. Follow-up: *To what extent does neuroscience shape or support your approach?*

4. Observed Impact & Client Response

What kinds of emotional or behavioral changes do you typically observe in clients over time?

a. Follow-up: *Is there a moment or case that particularly stood out to you?*

5. Applying Music Therapy to MS

What are your thoughts on the potential for using active, instrumental music-making (like EIMT) with clients who have Multiple Sclerosis?

a. Follow-up: *Are there specific adaptations or techniques you think would be important for this population?*

6. Closing

Is there anything else you'd like to add that you think is important for this topic?

a. Final note: *Thank you for your time and insights. Your contribution is an invaluable part of this research.*

Social Sciences

Dismantling *Russkiy Mir*:

International Criminal Law as an Emancipatory Tool in Ukraine

Axl Szyszko

Supervisor

Sofia Stolk (VU)

Reader

Prosper Maguchu (VU)



Makeshift memorial to fallen soldiers on Maidan Square in Kyiv, Ukraine. Seco, F. (2022).

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Abstract

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 marked not only a violent escalation of the long-developing conflict, but also the latest chapter in an extensive history of Russian imperialism in the Central and Eastern European region. Facing this history requires a comprehensive legal mechanism, one that goes beyond reparations and truth commissions. This project evaluates how international criminal law can be used as an emancipatory tool for Ukraine in resisting Russian oppression. In doing so, this work will begin with unpacking Russia's imperial agenda by investigating *Russkiy Mir* as an ideological and political concept and its fundamental incompatibility with Ukraine's existence, thus building the case for adopting a Central and Eastern European, postcolonial approach to the issue. Next, the paper will critically analyze past transitional justice attempts in Ukraine following the conclusion of the Maidan Uprising. Finally, the work will evaluate potential transitional justice mechanisms for fostering accountability for Russia's aggression towards Ukraine. Particular focus will be placed on the creation of a Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression, also taking into account the regional and global implications for the creation of such a tribunal. The project draws from primary and secondary sources and combines historiographical, political, and legal analyses. By taking a postcolonial approach, the work recenters the historical experience of Ukraine and the wider Central and Eastern European region, highlighting their agency, legal emancipation, and sovereignty, which are often overlooked in Western international relations scholarship and Russian-centric frameworks.

Keywords and phrases: *Ukraine; transitional justice; crime of aggression; Russian imperialism; Russkiy Mir*

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List of Abbreviations

CC Criminal Code of Ukraine

CEE Central and Eastern Europe(an)

EU European Union

ICC International Criminal Court

ICPA International Center for Prosecution of the Crime of Aggression

NATO North Atlantic Treaty Organization

STA Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression

TJ Transitional justice

UN United Nations

UNGA United Nations General Assembly

UNSC United Nations Security Council

WWII World War II

1 Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Aim and Relevance

Russia began its full-scale invasion of Ukraine at 5:00 a.m. on February 24, 2022 (Lister et al., 2022). The day marked the beginning of the largest attack on a European country since World War II (WWII) (Dietrich, 2023). While this invasion may have surprised a significant number of observers, it cannot be denied that the move constituted part of a broader regional pattern. Such a trend has been evident for decades, exemplified by Russia's presence in Transnistria since 1992, Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008, and Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, among others. Consequently, the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine reinforced an experience deeply ingrained in Central and Eastern European (CEE) memory, representing a long-standing history of Russian aggression and expansionism (Bond, 2023).

The project at hand seeks to evaluate the potential of international criminal law as an emancipatory tool in Ukraine's ongoing struggle against Russian aggression. As will be elaborated in the subsequent chapter, this thesis is rooted in a transitional justice (TJ) approach. As such, by centering the CEE experience, this work first recognizes Russia's expansionism as the root of the ongoing conflict, and later utilizes international criminal law as a means of seeking accountability for Russia's expansionist policies. The ultimate goal is to foster the global recognition of, as well as eventual reconciliation with, Russia's imperial legacy as well as its contemporary manifestations. Crucially, many CEE scholars have asserted that Ukraine's ongoing armed struggle against Russia is part of an overarching pattern of Russia's aggressive policies against former Soviet states (Kassymbekova & Marat, 2022; Khromychuk, 2024; Orzechowski, 2024). In contrast, existing accountability-seeking TJ models utilize a Western-centric approach (Labuda, 2024), and oftentimes fail to consider Russia's imperial aggression as the root of the conflict (Mälksoo, 2022). In line with this argument, the key contribution of this paper is the alternative reading it offers on Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Instead of framing the war as a "Russia versus the West" or "Russia versus the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)" conflict, the work posits that Russia's in-

vasion of Ukraine is another manifestation of the long-standing CEE anti-imperial struggle against the hegemon. This approach highlights Ukraine's agency as a geopolitical actor, an aspect frequently overlooked by both Russian and Western narratives surrounding the war, which typically frame Ukraine as a "Western pawn" (Mälksoo, 2022). In addition, by taking a CEE postcolonial approach, the project shifts TJ discourse such that it incorporates the voices and experiences of the impacted region, further appreciating Ukraine's geopolitical agency. Finally, by critically evaluating various TJ measures, the work ultimately aims to propose a legal mechanism that could redefine postcolonial justice, not just in the CEE region, but also on a global scale, contributing to the global decolonial movement.

The central question this paper aims to address is as follows: What role does international criminal law play as an emancipatory tool for Ukraine and the broader CEE region in resisting Russian imperialism? The paper has multiple research objectives—first, it seeks to unpack Russian imperialism by defining *Russkiy Mir* as the central ideological and political concept behind Russia's imperial agenda, in particular investigating the role of historical memory within this concept and evaluating how its utilization by the Kremlin threatens Ukrainian sovereignty. The guiding question for this objective is: In what ways does the concept of *Russkiy Mir* serve to justify Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine? Second, the project aims to critically analyze TJ measures implemented in Ukraine following the 2014 Maidan Uprising. The guiding question for this objective is: What TJ mechanisms were attempted in Ukraine thus far, and what are their potential limitations when applied to the context of the ongoing invasion? Third, the work seeks to explore international criminal law as a potential TJ tool for fostering accountability against Russian oppression. As will be outlined in a following chapter, it is imperative to acknowledge that the fields of international criminal law and TJ are not mutually exclusive—that is, while the fields intersect, and international criminal law is a useful tool within a TJ framework, one is not a subset of the other, and vice versa. As such, when exploring international criminal law as a tool for administering TJ, this thesis will particularly focus on the establishment of international tribunals. While three legal

mechanisms will be evaluated, the focal point of this chapter will concern the creation of a Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression (STA), which would be tasked with prosecuting the crime of aggression, allowing it to work in parallel with International Criminal Court (ICC) proceedings regarding alleged genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes committed in Ukraine. The guiding question for this objective is: By prosecuting the crime of aggression, which legal mechanisms are best suited to address Russian imperialism, and how can the selected tribunal design serve as a model for colonial accountability in the broader CEE region and beyond?

1.2 Structure and Methodology

The thesis is divided into four core chapters. Chapter 2 contains the theoretical framework of the thesis. In the first section, I elucidate the connection between TJ and international criminal law, describing how a TJ approach is applied to the thesis. In the second section, I make the case for utilizing a postcolonial approach in the work. Chapter 3 tackles the topic of Russian imperialism, exploring how the concept of *Russkiy Mir* serves to justify Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine. In the first section, I define *Russkiy Mir* as a political and ideological concept. Building on this, the second section further explores the role of historical memory as a key pillar within *Russkiy Mir*. The third section of this chapter then discusses the relationship between contemporary Russian politics and Ukrainian sovereignty, highlighting the fundamental incompatibility between these two concepts. Next, Chapter 4 outlines a past TJ framework utilized in Ukraine following the 2014 Maidan Uprising, with the aim of identifying the limitations of this framework, to inform the design of a more effective TJ mechanism in response to the current invasion. As such, the first section of the chapter outlines the exact TJ measures utilized in the post-Euromaidan context, while the second section critiques them from a postcolonial perspective. Chapter 5 serves as the core of the thesis, evaluating how international criminal law, through the use of international and hybrid tribunals, can be utilized to address Russian imperialism and foster colonial accountability in the broader CEE region and beyond. The first section of this chapter explores the capacities of three existing legal

mechanisms—the ICC, universal jurisdiction, and Ukrainian domestic courts—for prosecuting Russia's aggression against Ukraine, with one subsection dedicated to each respective legal mechanism. The second section of the chapter makes the case for the establishment of an STA, with the first subsection focusing on the rationale for its creation, and the second subsection outlining the existing support for the mechanism. The third section of Chapter 5 delves into the institutional design of the STA, where the first subsection elaborates on its structure, and the second subsection describes its scope. The fourth section of the chapter then shifts the focus to an ongoing debate between the establishment of an STA or, alternatively, a hybrid tribunal. The fifth section of Chapter 5 outlines the potential of the successful establishment of the STA to serve as a first step towards a postcolonial legal order. Finally, Chapter 6 serves as a conclusion, summarizing the findings of this thesis and restating the significance of establishing the STA in light of Russia's countless crimes committed on Ukrainian territory.

This paper adopts a multidisciplinary, qualitative approach, combining postcolonial theory and historiographical, political, and legal analysis to explore how international criminal law can be utilized as a means of resisting Russian imperialism. Thus, the literature review situates TJ in a CEE, postcolonial context, offering an alternative to Western-dominant narratives and applications of international criminal law. The paper posits a thematic analysis of two core topics: Russian imperialism and *Russkiy Mir* as obstacles to TJ in Ukraine, as well as international criminal law as an emancipatory tool.

The work relies on primary and secondary sources, with all literature obtained through Google Scholar or from recommended class readings. Considering the research centers on politics and justice in the CEE region, the majority of the consulted academic work is written by authors from that geographic area. Information regarding past TJ attempts in Ukraine, the role of historical memory in Russia's imperial agenda, and alternative TJ mechanisms for Ukraine is acquired from secondary sources, that is, academic literature obtained through the search term "transitional justice Ukraine" in Google Scholar. The majority of the evaluated sources were published from 2022 onwards, as they must take into ac-

count the ongoing full-scale conflict in Ukraine. However, when investigating past TJ attempts in Ukraine, sources dating from 2014 onwards were permitted, seeing as the 2014 Maidan Uprising and Russia's annexation of Crimea brought about various relevant accountability measures. Literature concerning Russian imperialism, *Russkiy Mir*, the case for an STA, and the broader application of the postcolonial approach in CEE to the "Global South" is obtained from recommended readings for a class that discussed the EU's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine—these readings consist of secondary sources, including academic literature, legal assessments, and comparative case studies, and they are all dated from 2022 onwards. Given that this thesis adopts a postcolonial perspective on the war in Ukraine, it is also of utmost importance to integrate Ukrainian voices into the research. As such, apart from scholarly articles authored and co-authored by Ukrainian scholars, this paper will also draw from opinion articles written by Ukrainian academics regarding Ukraine's liminal position in geopolitics and Russia's imperial history. Finally, the chapter covering existing legal mechanisms and their limitations, such as ICC jurisdiction over the crime of aggression and United Nations (UN) voting processes—in the context of creating a Special Tribunal or hybrid court—will be informed by primary sources, which entails legal texts such as the UN Charter and the Rome Statute. The section will be further substantiated by secondary, legal analyses obtained through search terms "hybrid court Ukraine", "Special Tribunal Ukraine", "ICC jurisdiction crime of aggression", and "Security Council crime of aggression" in Google Scholar.

As mentioned previously, this paper adopts three key analytical lenses. First, through postcolonial theory, the work examines Ukraine's ongoing armed struggle through a postcolonial perspective, identifying Russia as an imperialist actor. Second, by evaluating historical memory and the identity politics in both Russia and Ukraine, the paper will outline how historical memory shaped past TJ attempts in Ukraine and how historical memory shapes Russia's foreign policy and imperial agenda, thus defining *Russkiy Mir* as an ideological and political concept. Finally, through a combination of legal and political analysis, the work will assess the feasibility and effectiveness of various legal mechanisms (the ICC, universal

jurisdiction, domestic courts, the STA, and hybrid courts) as tools for justice.

Taking into account the rapidly shifting political dynamics resulting from the ongoing armed conflict in Ukraine, this paper retains analytical longevity by focusing on structural and ideological aspects of the issue, rather than on current events. As such, the work purposefully takes an approach that does not require any predictions regarding the potential resolution of the conflict. While the paper adopts a multidisciplinary approach, combining various types of analyses and postcolonial theory, it is imperative to mention that the work will not draw from original data, and draws minimally from primary sources. Consequently, by emphasizing analytical and empirical contributions, the paper adopts a broader scope, but largely misses lived, first-hand experiences. Finally, the project's content is limited by the availability of existing sources. CEE is not a monolith—the region encompasses various countries with diverse cultures, histories, and social groups across class, urban-rural, and educational lines. Much of the available literature represents only a specific segment of this population—that is, educated demographics—meaning that some voices remain underrepresented. Therefore, while the best effort has been put towards highlighting the CEE experience, the availability of sources may have caused an unintentional reproduction of certain silences and gaps.

2 Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

2.1 Nexus between Transitional Justice and International Criminal Law

TJ is defined by a range of interventions restoring justice and fostering reconciliation and social order (Naumkina et al., 2024), with the aim of enabling a society to overcome a legacy of large-scale abuses, most commonly as a result of conflict or authoritarian rule. Typically an interdisciplinary undertaking (Grover, 2019), TJ operates at an intersection of law, historical memory, and political transformation, mobilizing criminal prosecution, reparations, establishing the truth, and institutional reforms (Cherviakova, 2023; Naumkina et al., 2024) as a means of allowing a soci-

ety to move forward following a major paradigm shift (Schabas, 2011). Simultaneously, as mentioned in Chapter 1, it is imperative to note that the above-mentioned disciplines are not, in their entirety, subsets of TJ, or vice versa. As such, international criminal law, the focus of this thesis, constitutes an important part of TJ, serving as one of the many potential tools that can be employed within a TJ framework (Shelton, 2004, pp. 1045–1047).

As will be described in the following sections, Ukraine's relationship with Russia is tainted by centuries of oppression (Mälksoo, 2022), interference in domestic affairs (Kuzio, 2005; Pankow & Patman, 2017), and years of outright aggression (Dutkiewicz & Smoleński, 2023). This historical memory, further confirmed by the country's experience of the ongoing invasion, creates a sentiment of distrust, resentment, and, in many cases, hate on behalf of the Ukrainians towards the Russian state and, at times, the Russian people (Ash & Shapovalov, 2024; Denisova, 2025). Applying a TJ approach to fostering accountability for Russia's aggression against Ukraine would serve as a first step in allowing society to address these wrongs, providing a stepping stone to reconciliation (Kassymbekova & Marat, 2022). It is also critical to highlight that this reconciliation would not be merely bilateral—seeing as the historical memory of Russian aggression and expansionism is prevalent across the CEE region (Bond, 2023), a TJ mechanism would carry major symbolic value to most CEE states, thus setting the stage for reconciliation on a regional scale. This thesis applies a TJ approach as a framework that operationalizes international criminal law to address both legal accountability and historical injustice in the context of Ukraine, thus highlighting the need for individual prosecution, which international criminal law can provide in this context.

International criminal law also presents significant pitfalls, both for CEE states and for postcolonial states more broadly. Historically, international tribunals have failed CEE states. The specific prosecutions in question are the Nuremberg trials, the memory of which vary greatly on the European continent. While they constituted a landmark case for the West, often referred to as the “beginning of international criminal law” (Sayapin, 2014, p. 148), the CEE memory is more complicated. The lack of a similar prosecution of

the Soviet Union, either directly after the end of WWII or after its dissolution, has effectively whitewashed the Soviet Union's crimes (Labuda, 2024), thus preventing accountability and reconciliation with the Soviet Union's war crimes during WWII (Weinke, 2024). This complicated historical memory serves as a strong argument against utilizing international criminal law and, by extent, international tribunals, in the context of Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine. However, as will be outlined in later chapters, this major pitfall of international criminal law will be remedied by calling for CEE leadership in establishing the STA, such that the repressive history of Russia and its predecessor is taken into account, and lies at the center of the tribunal. Regarding postcolonial states on a global scale, historically, international criminal law has served as an imperialist tool—an instrument of colonization, mobilized by great powers to subordinate indigenous peoples and to legally justify this subjugation (Kotova & Tzouvala, 2022). This paper explores an alternate utilization of international criminal law, positing instead that international criminal law can serve as an emancipatory tool to foster accountability of colonial states as well as to challenge the global order at large. This thesis will thus not only build a case for this assumption, but will also offer various existing legal routes, through which such a legal mechanism can be established and utilized to the benefit of postcolonial states worldwide.

2.2 Justifying a Postcolonial Approach

Having clarified the connection between TJ and international criminal law, it is likewise necessary to establish the case for taking a postcolonial approach to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In the context of international law, Labuda (2024) defines postcolonialism as a critical approach to the discipline—one that acknowledges the inherent unequal and discriminatory relationships between states or regions. Labelling the post-Soviet space as postcolonial is generally controversial in academia, as postcolonial studies typically focus on racial hierarchies, and thus have largely centered on Western practices (Mälksoo, 2022). Kassymbekova and Marat (2022) expand on this idea, highlighting that both Western academia and the “Global South” have failed to recognize Russia's colonial history, with the for-

mer accepting Russia's hegemonic role in the CEE and Central Asian region, and the latter praising the USSR, Russia's predecessor, viewing it as an anti-Western, anti-capitalist power (Kassymbekova & Marat, 2022). Yet, both narratives overlook the fact that indigenous populations and non-Russian ethnic groups were and continue to be marginalized and systematically oppressed by Russia (Hendl et al., 2023). Mälksoo (2022) argues that Ukraine is a neglected case of Soviet colonialism, demonstrated by a continual pattern of Russia denying Ukrainian sovereignty and its right to exist, as well its underrepresentation within academic discourse. The author explains that Russia's imperial nationalism prevails against Ukraine, which is exemplified by Russia's denial of Ukrainian identity and its "messianic" framing of the ongoing invasion of Ukraine as a "denazifying" and "demilitarizing" operation. The author goes on to highlight the fundamental incompatibility between Russian imperialism and Ukraine's existence (Mälksoo, 2022). Labuda (2024) contributes to this conversation, highlighting Ukraine's liminal position within the global order. The author emphasizes that Ukraine straddles the boundaries between "North and South" and "East and West" divides present in Western academia's perception of global geopolitics, further driving its neglect as a victim of imperialism (Labuda, 2024). Similarly, Khromeychuk (2022) discusses her experience of asking her students to visualize a mental map of Europe, noting that Ukraine is frequently missing in her pupils' visualizations of the continent, despite it being the largest country in Europe. Hence, Hendl et al. (2023) critiques the application of Western-dominant and Russian-centric frameworks when analyzing the war in Ukraine, stating that such approaches erase the unique experiences of Ukrainians and the broader CEE region (Hendl et al., 2023). Consequently, authors such as Labuda (2024) highlight the need for a CEE, postcolonial approach that appreciates Ukraine's history and broader CEE insights and experiences.

3 Chapter 3: Russian Imperialism and Russkiy Mir: The Core Obstacle to Transitional Justice

This chapter serves to define and unpack the ideological and political concept of Russkiy Mir. To begin, the connection between Russian imperialism and Russkiy Mir is elucidated. Next, the work delves into the various goals of the ideology, tying these missions back to Russia's expansionist policies. Subsequent analysis explores the role of history in Russkiy Mir, particularly the duality of historical memory, and how it is harnessed to justify Russia's imperial agenda. Building on this, the chapter explains the mutually exclusive relationship between contemporary Russian politics and Ukrainian sovereignty, highlighting how Russia utilizes various narratives to undermine, challenge, and threaten Ukrainian sovereignty. It follows that imperialism and expansionism are not exclusive to Russian leadership, but instead are present in all levels of Russian society. This section highlights the need for a major social transformation within Russia, addressing its history of repression, and thus justifying the usage of international criminal law as a TJ tool.

3.1 Defining Russkiy Mir as an Ideological and Political Concept

Effectively addressing Russia's aggression against Ukraine through a TJ framework requires examining Russkiy Mir, the central notion standing behind Russian imperialism. Russkiy Mir, or Russian World, defined by Orzechowski (2024), is a strategic concept embodying Russia's civilizational distinctiveness from the Western and Asian models. The concept originates in Eurasianism, proliferated by ideologist Alexander Dugin, who advocates for a great continental empire led by Russia. Thus, Orzechowski (2024) claims that the primary mission of the Russian Federation is to reestablish Russia's influence as a global power by strengthening its position in the post-Soviet area and expanding its territory. This goal of reclaiming "lost" Soviet territories is known as "land gathering", and is conducted primarily by cultural support for the Russian-speaking diaspora, serving as a cover for broader economic and military expansion.

sion to Europe and beyond (Orzechowski, 2024). Mälksoo (2022) supports this notion, arguing that Russia has continuously demonstrated a firm desire to restore a political community in “historically Russian” areas. The spread of *Russkiy Mir* in the post-Soviet space is typically accompanied by the presentation of Russia as a “civilizational power” and “guarantor of stability” (Orzechowski, 2024). As such, *Russkiy Mir* has served as a justification for military intervention and political influence in former Soviet states, with the Kremlin utilizing claims of humanitarian issues to legitimize political interference in other countries under the guise of protecting ethnic Russians and, by extent, the Russian language and culture (Orzechowski, 2024).

3.2 The Role of Historical Memory in Russia’s Imperial Agenda

Russkiy Mir is based on three pillars: the Moscow Patriarchate, a community of language and culture, and a shared historical memory (Orzechowski, 2024). Nuzov (2016) posits that states manipulate collective memory in an effort to justify policies. As will be demonstrated below, the Russian Federation is no exception. Russia’s dominant historical narrative revolves around the myth of the “Great Patriotic War”, that is, WWII, which portrays Russia as a great power with a unique civilizational achievement—a victory over fascism (Nuzov, 2016). Another narrative central to Russian national identity, as demonstrated above, is the perceived loss of greatness after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. These contradicting narratives are thus leveraged by the Kremlin. Utilizing this dual self-perception as both a victim of major territorial loss and an entitled defender allows Russia to invoke its imperial identity as a means of further legitimizing control over former Soviet republics, including Ukraine (Kassymbekova & Marat, 2022).

3.3 Contemporary Russian Politics and Ukrainian Sovereignty

Russia has demonstrated a long-standing imperialist ambition towards Ukraine since the collapse of the Soviet Union (Dutkiewicz & Smoleński, 2023). In fact, the Russian narrative largely dismisses Ukrainian independence as a “favor” from

the Soviet Union. Thus, with Russia as its successor, it can be easily implied that Russia is entitled to intervene in Ukraine’s domestic politics (Mälksoo, 2022), leveraging the identity of the “entitled defender”. Similarly, the historical narrative of the Great Patriotic War is also leveraged as a means of disregarding Ukrainian sovereignty. Nuzov (2016) writes that Russia largely views Ukrainian nationalists as Nazi collaborators. Hence, by appealing to the perception of Russia as the “victor against fascism”, the Kremlin is able to further justify interference in Ukraine’s domestic politics (Nuzov, 2016). In fact, Khromeychuk (2024) highlights that utilizing the term “Great Patriotic War” over “WWII” in Russia constitutes a warning sign regarding the state’s “cult-like” perspective on the conflict as well as its condoning and continuation of the violent legacy of the Red Army.

Ultimately, the dual narrative of an entitled defender and civilizing power and a victim of major, unjustified territorial losses enabled President Vladimir Putin to successfully foster a sense of “militant patriotism” among the Russian public in an effort to justify the invasion of Ukraine (Kassymbekova & Marat, 2022). This was already exemplified in 2014, when Russia’s involvement in the armed conflict in Donbas and its annexation of Crimea was portrayed as an effort to protect ethnic Russians and Russian speakers from “a rampage of Nazi, nationalist, and anti-Semitic forces” (Nuzov, 2016). Similarly, the ongoing invasion of Ukraine is justified as a “defense against Nazism”, appealing to the cult of the Great Patriotic War (Orzechowski, 2024), with the narrative being additionally accompanied by messianic framing exemplified through the terms “demilitarizing” and “denazifying” operation utilized by the Kremlin (Mälksoo, 2022).

As argued by Mälksoo (2022), Russia’s ongoing invasion of Ukraine constitutes a clear manifestation of Russia’s desire to reestablish itself as a great power through the consolidation of *Russkiy Mir*. The analysis above shows that this conflict is underpinned by Russia’s continual denial of Ukrainian sovereignty and state legitimacy, thus demonstrating that Russian imperialism and the existence of Ukraine as a sovereign state are fundamentally incompatible (Mälksoo, 2022). Therefore, understanding the concept of *Russkiy Mir* is fundamental to the understanding that Russia’s aggression against Ukraine is not dependent on

Putin, the head of state, but is rather part of a deeply ingrained belief that pervades through all levels of Russian society (Orzechowski, 2024). Consequently, the ongoing invasion of Ukraine underscores an urgent need for a *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung* program, a country-wide effort of addressing and overcoming the past, for Russian society, seeing as the conflict is a direct consequence of Russia's inability to address its repressive past and Soviet legacy (Mälksoo, 2022).

4 Chapter 4: Past Transitional Justice Attempts in Ukraine: Failures and Lessons Learned

This chapter explores past TJ attempts in Ukraine. Providing context regarding the Maidan Uprising, the chapter first outlines the key measures utilized in Ukraine's post-Euromaidan TJ framework. Here it is important to note that while these legal measures were not directly designated by Ukraine's parliament, the Verkhovna Rada, as a TJ framework (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2014; Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2015), many scholars referred to this series of laws as such at the time (Bachmann & Lyubashenko, 2017; Gricius, 2019). As will be described in the following section, the series of measures introduced by the Verkhovna Rada constituted a national effort of shifting away from Russian influence in light of the Maidan Uprising and the subsequent annexation of Crimea and war in Donbas (Rogoza, 2022), thus motivating the use of the phrase "TJ framework" as a descriptor in this chapter. The chapter then explores the shortcomings of these measures. Reflecting upon these critiques, the chapter posits that the post-Euromaidan TJ framework was largely introspective, not including any provisions that recognized Russia's role in initiating or instigating the conflict or interfering with Ukraine's domestic affairs—facts already proven in the previous chapter on *Russkiy Mir*. Building on this observation, the chapter concludes with a postcolonial critique of the previous measures, supporting the view that TJ must be directed chiefly towards Russia, and advocating for the application of proper accountability measures in doing so.

4.1 Post-Euromaidan Transitional Justice

Prior to evaluating potential TJ frameworks for Ukraine today, past TJ attempts in the country must be examined. As will be demonstrated below, analyzing the post-Euromaidan TJ framework in Ukraine will serve to strengthen the case for utilizing a postcolonial approach and leveraging international criminal law as a tool for TJ.

The Maidan Uprising, also known as Euro-maidan, was a series of uprisings across Ukraine between November 2013 and February 2014 in direct response to the government's decision to abandon an association agreement with the European Union (EU) (Gricius, 2019). Euro-maidan constituted an attempt to break away from Ukraine's "Russian direction" as well as its "oligarchic democracy", characterized by close ties between political and business elites. Unlike the 1991 transition to independence, Euromaidan was accompanied by the use of violence against protesters as well as the Russian annexation of Crimea and the rise of Russian-backed separatism in eastern Ukraine. The Maidan Uprising resulted in the ousting of the pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich, the establishment of a transitional government, and nation-wide calls for measures punishing members of the old regime and an action plan to tackle corruption (Bachmann & Lyubashenko, 2017). As a result, post-Euromaidan Ukraine saw the implementation of various TJ policies aimed at addressing the country's post-Soviet legacy (Lachowski, 2017).

TJ in Ukraine following Euromaidan centered on four core measures: criminal trials, vetting and lustration, retrospective criminal justice, and international criminal justice. Criminal trials were initiated against high-ranking officials of the Yanukovich regime, including Yanukovich himself, for atrocities committed during the Maidan Uprising. Similarly, the special forces involved in violence against protesters on Maidan Square, the Berkut units, were disbanded. A lustration process was introduced, characterized by the vetting of judges and other public officials, as well as the removal of other individuals associated with human rights violations, suppression of protest, and miscarriages of justice. The Verkhovna Rada also passed a broad lustration law, the Law on Government Cleansing, which encompassed

de-Sovietization and decommunization measures (Bachmann & Lyubashenko, 2017). These measures were aimed at condemning Ukraine's Soviet legacy by replacing Soviet historical narratives, removing Soviet symbols (Lachowski, 2017), and embracing a pro-European direction (Nuzov, 2016). As widespread government corruption was identified as the root cause of the violence, retrospective criminal justice measures were taken to address this issue, holding public officials accountable for past actions, with the aim of reducing the chances of future human rights abuses (Bachmann & Lyubashenko, 2017). Finally, Ukraine sought assistance from the ICC first regarding the human rights abuses during the Maidan Uprising, and later to prosecute war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Donbas since February 2014 (Lachowski, 2017), utilizing international criminal justice to administer TJ.

4.2 Critique from a Postcolonial Perspective

Despite the various measures taken, the effectiveness of TJ in Ukraine was undermined by a series of challenges. First, law enforcement was widely criticized for its selective nature—the TJ legislation in particular has been applied selectively against networks deemed as “hostile”, that is, any individuals associated with the Yanukovich government or deemed as obstructive towards Ukraine's pivot in the pro-European and pro-Western direction. Many individuals belonging to former Berkut units and the Yanukovich regime avoided criminal accountability entirely by fleeing to Crimea and joining the Russian security forces or fleeing to Russia—as such, the conflict in eastern Ukraine and the annexed peninsula provided criminals an “exit option” (Bachmann & Lyubashenko, 2017). Yet, the majority of criticisms regarding Ukraine's past TJ attempts concern its decommunization laws. Nuzov (2016) acknowledges that until 2014, Ukraine's national identity oscillated between a pro-Russian and a pro-Western direction, leading to internal divisions and conflicting interpretations of history. As such, while the decommunization laws were introduced with the primary goal of fostering a unified national identity at a time of transition, they have been widely criticized for being implemented with-

out much public debate, thus deepening divides within Ukrainian society (Nuzov, 2016). To remedy this, various authors highlighted the need for truth commissions in order to reconcile the differing historical memories within Ukraine, that is, between pro-Russian and pro-Western groups (Lachowski, 2017; Nuzov, 2016). Yet, these authors failed to consider Russian interference in Ukrainian politics as well as Russia's disregard for Ukrainian sovereignty as a whole—while they acknowledged Russia's crime of annexing Crimea, the propositions for TJ only targeted Ukraine and the division within. However, for a holistic solution, the scope of the TJ framework should encompass Russia. As evidenced, contemporary Russian politics are fundamentally incompatible with Ukraine's existence as a sovereign state. It is also important to note that this is not merely a retrospective remark, as demonstrated in the previous chapter. Russia's imperialist nature has been evident long before both its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the 2014 Maidan Uprising (Dutkiewicz & Smoleński, 2023). The analysis in this section demonstrates that Ukraine's post-Euromaidan TJ framework primarily focused on internal issues, often overlooking the role of Russian interference. This inward-looking approach limited its effectiveness, thereby underscoring the need for a postcolonial perspective that recognizes Russian neo-imperial aggression as central to the conflict and includes Russia as a key subject of TJ.

5 Chapter 5: International Criminal Law as an Emancipatory Tool: The Special Tribunal and Other Mechanisms

This chapter examines the potential of international criminal law, particularly the establishment of a Special Tribunal for Aggression (STA), as an emancipatory instrument in Ukraine's resistance to Russian imperialism. It begins by defining the crime of aggression and assessing the capacity of three legal mechanisms, namely the ICC, universal jurisdiction, and Ukraine's domestic courts, to prosecute this crime. Upon analyzing the limitations in the scope of prosecution of each mechanism, the chapter then argues for the establishment of an STA as the legal mechanism of choice,

considering key features such as its use of international criminal law, integration of legal and domestic judges, and its complementarity to the ICC. The chapter also features a comparative discussion of the internationalized tribunal with an alternative model—hybrid tribunals. The final section then reviews the growing international support for the STA and discusses its broader implications for reconfiguring international legal accountability and enhancing the agency of CEE states and other postcolonial states alike within the global legal order.

5.1 Existing Legal Mechanisms and Their Limitations

In order to make a case for the creation of an STA, it is necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of existing legal mechanisms. The following section outlines the capacities of three existing legal mechanisms—the ICC, universal jurisdiction, and Ukrainian domestic courts—for prosecuting Russia’s crime of aggression against Ukraine. Khan et al. (2021) highlight that the use of force by one sovereign state to dominate another is a long-discredited means of interstate engagement, thus designating the crime of aggression as a fundamental breach of norms in international relations and a crime against the international community (Khan et al., 2021). A definition for aggression proposed by UN Resolution 3314 (XXIX) describes aggression as the use of military force by a State against the sovereignty, territorial integrity, or political independence of another State or in a manner inconsistent with the provisions of the Charter of the UN (Wilmshurst, 1974). This definition was later integrated into the Rome Statute after the Kampala conference in 2010 (Khan et al., 2021), which, in Article 8 bis, defines the crime of aggression as:

The planning, preparation, initiation or execution, by a person in a position effectively to exercise control over or to direct the political or military action of a State, of an act of aggression which, by its character, gravity and scale, constitutes a manifest violation of the Charter of the UN. (International Criminal Court, 1998, p.10)

It is noteworthy to point out that the Rome Statute

includes provisions that endorse individual responsibility, thus highlighting the ICC’s standard of prosecuting individuals who have the authority to command and direct the military, such as heads of state (Khan et al., 2021). Outlining the two prevailing definitions of aggression not only clarifies the formal legal parameters of the legal mechanisms that are critiqued in this section, but also elucidates the very limitations and power dynamics embedded in these legal frameworks, providing a foundation to move beyond already-existing legal mechanisms when aiming to address Russia’s aggression against Ukraine.

5.1.1 International Criminal Court

Proceedings before the ICC can be initiated in three ways: a member state brings an issue before the court, the ICC prosecutor initiates an investigation, or the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) refers a situation. In the cases where either a member state brings an issue or the prosecutor initiates an investigation, the ICC can only invoke jurisdiction if the matter affects member states. Only when the UNSC refers a matter, can the ICC invoke jurisdiction over a non-member state (Khan et al., 2021). While Ukraine is not a signatory to the Rome Statute (Kuc, 2024), as mentioned in the prior chapter, it has accepted ad hoc jurisdiction of the Court based on two declarations submitted under Article 12(3). First accepting ICC jurisdiction for alleged crimes committed during Euromaidan, and later accepting ICC jurisdiction in the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of Russia’s proxy war in Donbas, extending the ICC’s jurisdiction to the period after February 20, 2014 (Marchuk & Wanigasuriya, 2022). After Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, following the referral of the situation by 43 State Parties, the ICC Prosecutor launched a new investigation into the situation in Ukraine on March 2, 2022 (Karami et al., 2024). Based on the extended period of ICC jurisdiction of Ukraine’s second declaration and subsequent investigation, the Pre-Trial Chamber of the ICC issued two arrest warrants for Russian President, Putin, and Children’s Rights Commissioner for the President of the Russian Federation, Maria Alekseyevna Lvova-Belova, on March 17, 2023. Both individuals are allegedly responsible for crimes falling under Article 8(2)(a)(vii) and Article 8(2)(b)(viii) of the Rome

Statute—the war crime of unlawful deportation of population and the unlawful transfer of population from occupied Ukrainian territory to Russia (International Criminal Court, 2022). However, while Ukraine has allowed for ad hoc jurisdiction of the ICC over the conflict, the central challenge lies in the ICC’s authority regarding the crime of aggression. According to Article 15 bis(5) of the Rome Statute, the ICC has jurisdiction over this crime only when committed on the territory, or by a national, of a State Party (Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, 1998). As such, since both Russia and Ukraine have not ratified the Rome Statute and the Kampala Amendments on the crime of aggression, it is impossible for the ICC to launch an investigation into Russia’s aggression against Ukraine (Imoedemhe, 2023; Korynevych, 2024).

As demonstrated above, the requirements for the ICC to start an investigation into Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine feature structural biases that disproportionately benefit powerful states. Seeing as neither Ukraine nor Russia ratified the Rome Statute or the Kampala Amendments, the only viable path to launching an investigation would be through UNSC referral. Yet, since Russia is part of the Permanent Five, a UNSC referral is discounted due to the state’s right of veto (Imoedemhe, 2023). McDougall (2023) explores two alternative pathways to bypassing these jurisdictional limitations, ultimately concluding that both are also highly limited due to the political realities of these international institutions. The author first considers a scenario in which the Rome Statute is amended to allow the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) to activate ICC jurisdiction. They argue that this would not be feasible, as the UNGA’s powers are limited to making recommendations, which prevents the Assembly from establishing criminal jurisdiction. McDougall (2023) then explores the potential removal of jurisdictional limitations, noting that such a motion would require ratification by seven-eighths of States Parties under Article 121(4), which would not only be procedurally difficult, but such retrospective action could also bring into question the legitimacy of the Court.

The ICC route carries another question of legitimacy. Being an established international institution with 125 member states, one may assume the ICC holds considerable authority and credibility on

the global stage. However, the ICC has faced criticisms of racism and “engaging in judicial neocolonialism”, demonstrated by its overwhelming persecution of African leaders (Labuda, 2023a). On a broader scale, Third World Approaches to International Law scholars uphold the argument that international criminal law was established as and continues to be a project of colonialism and imperialism. These scholars highlight that institutions such as the ICC feature structural and political biases, which are meant to favor the powerful and scrutinize the weak (Sesay, 2024). Thus, in line with the postcolonial approach adopted in this paper, the ICC route not only is unable to prosecute the core crime of interest in the context of Ukraine, but its institutional design favors powerful states and fosters distrust in many postcolonial states. The former is a significant pitfall, considering that the support of postcolonial states is integral when searching for a legal mechanism that aims to redefine postcolonial justice. Consequently, in order to ensure a thorough and effective investigation into Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, an alternative legal remedy will be necessary.

5.1.2 Universal Jurisdiction

Another possible legal mechanism is the use of universal jurisdiction to investigate and prosecute individuals in leadership positions, such as President Putin, for the crime of aggression. Imoedemhe (2023) highlights the complementarity regime of the Rome Statute, which places primary responsibility of prosecution on its member states. Because the Rome Statute is complementary to national jurisdictions, states could utilize universal jurisdiction to prosecute individuals for certain international crimes without regard to where the crime was committed, the nationality of the perpetrator or victim, or any other link, or lack thereof, to the prosecuting state. A total of 43 states have referred the case of Ukraine to the ICC, meaning that, theoretically, any of these states could exercise universal jurisdiction to hold Putin accountable for aggression. However, demonstrated by the lack of action, evoking universal jurisdiction faces the key challenges of a lack of state capacity, or a deliberate unwillingness to act (Imoedemhe, 2023). In addition, this pathway does not align closely with the goal

of adopting a TJ approach. A third state evoking universal jurisdiction would prevent Ukraine from asserting its right to exercise legal authority over crimes committed on its territory, thus diminishing the aspect of national sovereignty both within the TJ framework and from the CEE perspective (Cherviakova, 2023). Similarly, exporting the prosecution of the crime of aggression to a third state would highly limit the accessibility of these trials to the Ukrainian public. Publicly accessible trials would create a space for Ukrainians to confront the events of the war, promoting victim-centered justice (Naumkina et al., 2024). Furthermore, the possibility of assuming universal jurisdiction over the crime of aggression is, in itself, highly debated among scholars (McDougall, 2023). As such, the pathway of universal jurisdiction not only lacks state willingness to act, faces issues of state capacity, and does not align well with the TJ approach, but also suffers from limited legitimacy due to a lack of past cases.

5.1.3 Ukrainian Domestic Courts

The international justice system asserts that the primary responsibility for prosecuting international crimes falls on domestic courts, while international mechanisms should play a secondary, supplementary role. Within the Rome Statute, this is articulated in Article 1 and elaborated upon in Article 17(1) (Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, 1998). Consequently, Ukrainian domestic courts are the primary institutions responsible for bringing war criminals to justice (Kuc, 2024).

It is clear that the partial occupation and full-scale invasion of Ukraine have affected the operation of the domestic judicial system. In order to mitigate these conditions, the President of the Supreme Court mandated a change in the territorial jurisdiction of courts in occupied regions. As a result, jurisdiction of courts in Donetsk, Kyiv, Luhansk, and Kherson was transferred to courts outside these regions (Kuc, 2024). Yet, despite these interruptions, the Ukrainian judicial system has continued to function during the war, fulfilling its obligations to prosecute war crimes committed within its jurisdiction (Nuridzhanian, 2024).

Due to the annexation of Crimea and occupation of Donbas since 2014, Ukrainian courts have substantial experience with armed conflict pro-

ceedings. In fact, prior to the 2022 invasion, 397 criminal proceedings related to war crimes were initiated (Kuc, 2024). As of December 27, 2023, the Prosecutor General's Office of Ukraine reported approximately 119,780 international crime investigations initiated, of which 88 related to aggression, and identified 684 cases as suspected instances of aggression. The first war crimes trial involved Vadim Shishimarin, a 21-year-old Russian soldier who, under Article 438(2) of the Criminal Code of Ukraine (CC), was sentenced to life imprisonment for killing an unarmed civilian, with his sentence later reduced to 15 years on appeal. The Shishimarin case demonstrates Ukrainian courts' understanding of international criminal law, and their ability to utilize extensive amounts of evidence beyond the simple admission of guilt, with the sentence reduction upon appeal further demonstrating the court's impartiality (Kuc, 2024).

As a whole, the CC incorporates international norms into domestic rules in its Section XX concerning criminal offenses against peace, security of mankind, and the international legal order. To illustrate, Article 436 CC punishes public incitement to an aggressive war or armed conflict, and is a broader provision than the Rome Statute, which only prohibits incitement to genocide. Similarly, Article 437 CC defines the crime of aggression with a wider scope than the Rome Statute, dropping the leadership requirement, and utilizing the term "military operations", which has a wider scope than "acts of aggression". It is also essential to note that the CC has not been amended since the beginning of the full-scale invasion in 2022, ensuring stability and legal certainty (Kuc, 2024).

Yet, despite the integration of international norms into domestic legislation, the limited familiarity of Ukrainian legal professionals with international criminal law constituted a major shortcoming of the Ukrainian judicial system. In order to combat this, the justice system offered various courses on war crimes prosecution, including topics like forced removal of civilians, gender-based violence, or the forcible transfer of children. Ukrainian civil society organizations also served as key support in the prosecution of international crimes by raising awareness about the crimes committed, collecting evidence, and supporting cooperation with the ICC. This close en-

gagement between civil society and the judicial system further highlights Ukraine's prior legal experience with criminal investigations in the context of armed conflict. The international community also offered assistance to the Ukrainian judicial system, providing assistance in investigating, prosecuting, adjudicating, and monitoring international crimes (Kuc, 2024). Notably, on February 18, 2022, the Mazovian Branch Office of the National Prosecutor's Office in Warsaw, Poland, initiated an investigation into the war of aggression launched by Russia against Ukraine. The goal of the Polish investigation is to collect, secure, and preserve the evidence of Russian aggression. A primary means of collecting evidence of war crimes utilized by Poland is the gathering of accounts from Ukrainian witnesses who fled to Poland, providing essential evidence for domestic prosecutions in Ukraine (Krzan, 2024). Poland's engagement and support of Ukrainian domestic prosecutions also highlight the preparedness and ability of the Ukrainian judicial system to collaborate with nearby states, thus creating a pathway to CEE regional initiative and collaboration in prosecuting Russia's crime of aggression against Ukraine.

From the perspective of TJ being the ultimate goal, Ukrainian domestic courts also carry a variety of strengths. First, taking ownership of the trials aligns with the TJ principle of national sovereignty, affirming Ukraine's right and ability to exercise legal authority over crimes committed on its territory (Cherviakova, 2023). Second, domestic prosecutions are highly accessible to the public and survivors. This accessibility provides the space for victim participation and victim-centered justice. In addition, publicly accessible trials would allow Ukrainian society to confront the violations committed on their territory, constituting an essential step of helping the population to move on from war to peace (Naumkina et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, despite the willingness and readiness of the Ukrainian judicial system to prosecute international crimes, the wide array of international support, and the general alignment of the approach with TJ goals, Kuc (2024) notes that certain inherent limitations exist to such an undertaking. The author particularly acknowledges that domestic courts suffer from limited access to identified suspects, particularly individuals hold-

ing leadership positions in the aggressor state, as well as the inability to access evidence in occupied territories or in Russia (Kuc, 2024). Specifically, senior state officials enjoy immunity *ratione personae*, or personal immunity (Corten & Koutrouli, 2022), from criminal proceedings for both official and private acts. Seeing as the crime of aggression constitutes an act committed in official capacity, or a state act, President Putin and other high-ranking officials would be able to avoid prosecution in a Ukrainian domestic court. Similarly, Ukraine would be unable to make an arrest on Russian territory without Russian consent (Heller, 2022; McDougall, 2023). As such, despite the widespread preparedness of domestic courts and international support, the Ukrainian judicial system is simply incompatible with the scale of crimes brought about by Russia's invasion (Krzan, 2024). These structural challenges warrant the need for an internationalized element, which will ensure full accountability for Russia's aggression in Ukraine, particularly among senior leadership.

5.2 Making the Case for a Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression

5.2.1 Rationale for a Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression

Russia's invasion of Ukraine represents a crucial moment not just for CEE and their reckoning with Russia's extensive history of imperialism and aggression, but also the international community at large, presenting a choice between restoring the integrity of the prohibition of the use of force or further weakening it by inaction (McDougall, 2023). As outlined in the section above, existing legal mechanisms fall short when presented with the task of prosecuting the crime of aggression. The only pathway for the ICC to gain jurisdiction over the crime is through the UNSC (Khan et al., 2021), which is impossible due to Russia's veto power (Imoedemhe, 2023). Universal jurisdiction in cases of aggression is highly contested among the academic community and lacks legal precedent (McDougall, 2023). Finally, domestic courts are not equipped to handle the quantity of potential cases (Kuc, 2024), further suffering from a lack of access to resources which would ensure accountability of Russian leadership (Krzan, 2024). A potential solution to these shortcomings is to

internationalize the undertaking of punishing the crime of aggression against Ukraine (Korynevych, 2024) by introducing a form of a special criminal tribunal alongside domestic and ICC proceedings. The ultimate goal of this undertaking is to utilize existing legal mechanisms to, in a landmark case, hold a major world power accountable for a core international crime. While, as mentioned above, international criminal law suffers from a history of oppression against and subjugation of non-Western states (Kotova & Tzouvala, 2022), Labuda (2024) notes that the revival of the crime of aggression must begin somewhere. While the mechanism proposed below remains embedded in a historically discriminatory system, it has the potential to form an essential legal precedent for future anti-imperial aggression prosecutions.

As shall be described in the following sections, a special tribunal involving both domestic and international legal professionals would enhance international cooperation, increase legitimacy, particularly in high-profile cases, increase public awareness (Kuc, 2024), and, most notably, address the accountability gap regarding the crime of aggression as well as enable the prosecution of Russian leadership (Korynevych, 2024). The establishment of the Special Tribunal would be complementary to ICC proceedings, as it would focus solely on the crime of aggression, which, as established above, the ICC cannot address in this situation (Imoedemhe, 2023). In turn, the ICC would proceed with its investigation of alleged genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes in Ukraine. In short, the proposed STA will complement the ICC's work by having jurisdiction over the investigation and prosecution of Russian political and military leadership for the crime of aggression in Ukraine (Korynevych, 2024).

5.2.2 Existing Support

Russia's invasion of Ukraine prompted a swift UNGA condemnation of the invasion, as well as a revival of the idea of prosecuting the crime of aggression (Labuda, 2024). The Ukrainian government in particular is a strong advocate for a UN-authorized tribunal, potentially resembling the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (Kuc, 2024). Since the start of the invasion in 2022, multiple proposals have been made to establish a special tribunal for Russia's crime of

aggression against Ukraine (Corten & Koutrouli, 2022), which includes resolutions from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the European Parliament, the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Parliamentary Assembly (Korynevych, 2024). Notably, the European Parliament adopted a special resolution on January 19, 2023, supporting the urgent establishment of the tribunal (European Parliament, 2023), with the national parliaments of Czechia, Estonia, France, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, and Poland adopting similar resolutions (Korynevych, 2024; Krzan, 2024).

A major development toward the creation of the STA is the development of the International Center for Prosecution of the Crime of Aggression (ICPA) in The Hague, as well as the Core Group on the establishment of the Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression against Ukraine through a joint effort between Ukraine and the EU. The ICPA supports the early-stage preparation of crime of aggression cases by securing evidence and preparing for future trials, while the Core Group serves as a platform for states to discuss legal issues related to the tribunal. Seven partner countries of the European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation (Eurojust)—Ukraine, Lithuania, Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Slovakia, and Romania—support the ICPA's ongoing efforts to prepare cases (Korynevych, 2024), underscoring the fervent support of CEE in establishing an STA (Labuda, 2024). The Core Group, on the other hand, consists of 41 states as of June 30, 2024 (Korynevych, 2024), and, as of March 31, 2025, has finalized the work on three draft documents on the establishment of the STA¹—the draft bilat-

¹As of June 25, 2025, Ukraine and the Council of Europe signed an agreement formalizing the establishment of the STA, its statute defined in the annex (Council of Europe, 2025). Now, interested parties—that is, both EU member states and non-member states around the world—may consider joining this Enlarged Partial Agreement on the management of the Tribunal (Council of Europe, 2025). European efforts towards establishing the STA were further demonstrated on October 22, 2025, with the approval of a draft convention establishing an International Claims Commission for Ukraine, which will be tasked with reviewing and determining compensation claims for damages as a result of Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Both member states and non-members of the Council of Europe and the EU may become parties to the convention, which will be adopted and opened for signature in the Hague on December 16, 2025, and will enter into force after 25 ratifications (Council of Eu-

eral agreement between Ukraine and the Council of Europe on the establishment of the Special Tribunal, the Special Tribunal's draft statute, and the draft enlarged partial agreement on the management of the Special Tribunal (Press and information team of the Delegation to the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, 2025). Yet, the most significant development in the direction of an STA came on May 9, 2025, accompanied by the adoption of the Lviv Statement. The document marks the conclusion of the preparatory work required to establish the STA within the Council of Europe (Zuber & Lammert, 2025), underscoring a clear readiness and commitment—at least within the European continent—to confront the crime of aggression through robust international legal action.

5.3 The Special Tribunal

5.3.1 Structure

As described in previous sections, Russia's position as a permanent member of the UNSC disqualifies the creation of the STA through this mechanism. Yet, multiple authors note an alternative pathway—the creation of an international tribunal through a bilateral treaty between Ukraine and the UN through the recommendation of the UNGA (Krzan, 2024; Labuda, 2023b). Corten and Koutroulis (2022) note that Article 13(b) of the Rome Statute would allow the UNGA to create a special tribunal, thanks to a broad interpretation of the “Uniting for Peace” UNGA resolution, which, in cases where the UNSC is deadlocked due to the veto power of a permanent member, authorizes the UNGA to issue recommendations to UN member states (United Nations General Assembly, 1950). Contributing to this argument, McDougall (2023) notes that there exists a legal precedent for the establishment of “international criminal courts”, pointing to the Extraordinary Chambers in Cambodia or the Special Court for Sierra Leone. Notably, the Special Court for Sierra Leone was established by an agreement between the UN and Sierra Leone without relying on Chapter VII, yet was still considered an international criminal court. Holding similar competencies to other international criminal courts, leadership immunity did not apply, the Court had special legal personality, and was established by

treaty. As such, the proposed STA in the case of Ukraine would share these characteristics (McDougall, 2023). It would introduce an internationalized element in the form of a special criminal tribunal through international agreements, be embedded within Ukraine's judicial system, and involve both domestic and international legal professionals (Kuc, 2024), drawing on the Special Court for Sierra Leone as a legal precedent (McDougall, 2023).

5.3.2 Scope

In order to maintain complementarity to the ICC (Imoedemhe, 2023) and limit redundancies, the STA would focus solely on the crime of aggression, having the jurisdiction to investigate and prosecute senior Russian political and military leadership. Seeing as the work of the STA will be conducted parallel to the ICC, it is imperative that the Special Tribunal's work be in line with the ICC's approaches and norms, thus maintaining a high international legal standard. The jurisdiction of the STA should cover the entire period of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, that is, February 2014. As an instrument of individual criminal responsibility, the STA will be able to investigate and prosecute natural persons, who are able to control and direct the political or military actions of the state, who participated in the crime of aggression on Ukrainian territory (Korynevych, 2024).

5.4 Special Tribunal or Hybrid Tribunal?

The proposal for the establishment of an STA has gained momentum within the international community (McDougall, 2023), with discussions shifting from whether such a tribunal should be established to how best to do so (Labuda, 2023b). As described above, the deadlock from the UNSC incentivizes the creation of an international tribunal through a UNGA recommendation (Krzan, 2024; Labuda, 2023b). Yet, Corten and Koutroulis (2022) acknowledge that there exists another alternative for bypassing the need for a UNSC resolution. The authors propose the establishment of a hybrid tribunal which, grounded in Ukrainian domestic law, could prosecute individuals based on Ukraine's domestic criminal jurisdiction, with its work potentially complemented by an agreement with the UN or another regional organization. Labuda (2024)

notes that the debate regarding the Tribunal's institutional design is highly polarized, pointing to disagreements between CEE states, which typically support an international tribunal, and Western states like Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States, which have instead embraced a hybrid design. Considering the relevance of this debate between "hybrid" and "international", this section will evaluate the effectiveness of these institutional designs based on five key aspects, outlined in Labuda's (2023b) work: personal immunities, constitutionality, legitimacy, deterrent effect, and replicability. As this thesis is grounded in a postcolonial approach, the arguments will be integrated based on these five categories with the ultimate goal of restoring agency to Ukraine and the CEE region at large. As such, the goal of this section is to strengthen the case for the establishment of an STA with an international, rather than a hybrid, institutional design.

The first issue presented in Labuda's (2023b) framework is the topic of personal immunities. Under the case law, only an international tribunal avoids the issue of personal immunities, having the power to prosecute the head of state, head of government, and the minister of foreign affairs. Given that the crime of aggression is a leadership crime, the ability to prosecute high government officials is of the utmost importance. At the same time, Labuda (2023b) argues that it is highly unlikely that Russian leadership will be arrested while still in office. As such, since Putin will be prosecuted only following his deposition as head of state, personal immunities will not matter in practice. Thus, Labuda (2023b) argues that a hybrid tribunal, for which personal immunities apply, is an equally acceptable institutional design. Yet, this argument holds a major normative flaw—namely, the principle of an international effort to establish a tribunal that addresses a leadership crime without being able to prosecute leadership is highly redundant. Furthermore, the international tribunal's ability to issue an arrest warrant for Putin while still in office could, as described in a previous section, not only serve to delegitimize him both internationally and domestically, but also hold major counterhegemonic value, particularly to Ukraine and other CEE states (Labuda, 2023b).

The next key issue regarding institutional design outlined in Labuda's (2023b) work is the topic

of constitutionality. Article 125 of the Ukrainian Constitution prohibits the creation of extraordinary and special courts (Kuc, 2024) and, considering Ukraine is currently under martial law, the Constitution cannot be amended (Labuda, 2023b). Many scholars argue that the establishment of an international tribunal bypasses this concern, pointing to the Constitutional Court's 2001 opinion, which clarified that the prohibition refers to national courts created to replace ordinary courts not following procedures. Since an international tribunal created by bilateral agreement would constitute a chamber of the Supreme Court, whose structure is not fully prescribed constitutionally (Kuc, 2024), the international tribunal would not be "within" the Ukrainian system, thus bypassing the constitutional impediment to its establishment (Labuda, 2023b). In addition, Kuc (2024) argues that the Ukrainian Constitution allows for specialized courts under Article 125, further supporting the legality of an internationalized mechanism. Alternatively, a hybrid court, which would most likely be a domestic court with international features, would be "within" the Ukrainian court system, and thus be prohibited under the Ukrainian Constitution. The only way to bypass this prohibition in the case of a hybrid court is to establish it in a third state. Yet, Labuda (2023b) points out that such a structure threatens the creation of a "copy-paste" institutional model, that is, imposing a TJ approach utilized in a different geographical setting, thus propagating a "one size fits all" formula, instead of tailoring the mechanism to Ukraine. Moreover, exporting the court to a third state takes away from Ukraine's and the CEE region's opportunity to reassert themselves as members of the global order (Labuda, 2024). As such, in a framework where CEE agency and TJ are the central focus, approaches must be tailored to their own regional and historical context, thus making an international tribunal a more favorable design.

The third issue Labuda (2023b) touches on in his evaluative framework is the question of legitimacy. Legitimacy is a crucial issue, since the nature and design of the tribunal serve as a reflection of the international community's values and its commitment to the rule of law (Corten & Koutrouli, 2022; Labuda, 2023b). Therefore, involving the UNGA, even through recommendation, would bolster the international tribunal's le-

gitimacy, given a UN decision has the strongest capacity to represent the international community. Similarly, it is essential to avoid a tribunal resulting solely from an agreement between certain states or Ukraine and a regional organization, seeing as reduced international involvement signals decreased legitimacy (Corten & Koutrouli, 2022). The need for international support and involvement also provides Ukraine the opportunity to leverage its anti-imperial and postcolonial credentials and foster a cross-regional coalition (Labuda, 2023b), contributing to cross-regional solidarity between postcolonial states. One concern regarding legitimacy in the context of an international tribunal is voiced by Corten and Koutroulis (2022), who state that enforcing decisions, particularly arrest warrants, presents certain challenges. Namely, if the tribunal is established by an agreement between Ukraine and the UN, Russia, as a third party to the agreement, will not have an obligation to cooperate (Corten & Koutrouli, 2022). At the same time, McDougall (2023) acknowledges that even without Russian cooperation, the issuing of the arrest warrant in itself holds symbolic power and, as previously described, has the potential to delegitimize Putin internationally and challenge the hegemony of the Russian state as a whole. Contrary to the international tribunal, a hybrid court would not carry significant global precedential weight. In addition, the full or partial inclusion of Ukrainian judges has the potential to bring into question the impartiality of the court, further lowering the legitimacy of this institutional design (Labuda, 2023b).

Labuda (2023b) also emphasizes the issue of deterrent effect, citing that a key purpose of criminal liability is the deterrence of future offenders. Thus, the institutional design of the tribunal should maximize its ability to deter future acts of aggression. As such, an international tribunal, given its higher legitimacy and lack of recognition of personal immunity, would have the strongest deterrent effect. Similarly, a hybrid court, given its lower legitimacy, as described above and recognition of personal immunities, is likely to have a limited deterrent effect (Labuda, 2023b).

The final aspect of Labuda's (2023b) framework is the topic of replicability. In the case of the creation of an international tribunal, it could serve as a precedent for future establishment

of ad hoc tribunals, particularly in cases where ICC lacks jurisdiction or the UNSC fails to take action, and where an overwhelming majority of the UNGA recognizes the fact that an act of aggression has taken place. Hybrid tribunals, on the other hand, would be replicable with greater ease. This, however, could potentially constitute a downside, as its ease of replicability risks being co-opted by other states—including Russia—as a justification for issuing arrest warrants for state officials (Labuda, 2023b). From the CEE perspective, establishing a precedent for the creation of international tribunals could aid in addressing other acts of aggression committed by Russia, such as its invasion of Georgia in 2008 or its presence in Moldova's Transnistria since 1992 (Bond, 2023), providing much-needed justice and accountability. Postcolonial states outside the CEE region would also benefit from this precedent, providing an opportunity for anti-imperial prosecutions of the crime of aggression (Labuda, 2024), with reduced risk of being co-opted by their (former) oppressor states. In short, establishing an international tribunal serves not only the interests of the CEE region but also those of the international community. Such a tribunal would set a precedent for mechanisms that promote accountability for crimes of aggression in cases where the ICC lacks jurisdiction, while also ensuring that these mechanisms cannot be replicated or misused by aggressor states in the future.

As previously mentioned, both an international tribunal and a hybrid tribunal carry the fundamental flaw of being rooted in a system that historically has and continues to discriminate against non-Western states (Kotova & Tzouvala, 2022). However, under the assumption that the revival of prosecuting the crime of aggression, particularly in an anti-imperial context, must begin somewhere, an international tribunal offers higher legitimacy as well as stronger credibility, enforceability, and deterrent effect compared to the hybrid institutional design. Since the establishment of an STA against Ukraine would constitute a landmark case in the field of international criminal law, it is imperative for the framework to maximize its capacity for fostering accountability for the crime of aggression, thus motivating the international community to choose an international tribunal as the preferred institutional design for this mechanism.

5.5 Toward a Postcolonial Legal Order

The establishment of an STA, apart from fostering accountability and restoring the integrity of the prohibition of the use of force on the international stage, carries strong normative value on multiple levels. First, within the CEE region, Mälksoo (2022) posits that Russia's invasion of Ukraine constitutes a "decolonizing moment" for these states. By countering Russia's denial of Ukraine's sovereign political agency, CEE states are able, by extension, to reassert their own agency alongside Ukraine. The author notes that this reassertion of state agency challenges the traditional power structures in both the EU and the European continent (Mälksoo, 2022). Mälksoo's argument can thus be extended to the establishment of an STA. By taking a leading role in the establishment of an STA, Ukraine and CEE states will be able to reassert their agency not only on the European level, but also on the global scale. This is also precisely why an STA is preferred by Ukraine and CEE states over a hybrid court—while it is true that a hybrid court would give Ukraine more control and agency over prosecutions, Labuda (2024) notes that the establishment of an STA carries essential normative value, highlighting Ukraine and CEE states as full members of the global order. As such, Ukraine's and CEE states' leadership role in establishing an STA has the potential to challenge deep-rooted hierarchies within the international legal order by demonstrating that smaller and historically peripheral states can initiate transformative legal mechanisms traditionally dominated by Western powers. In doing so, they will not only be able to bring increased visibility to Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the inherent imperialism behind it, but will also be able to, by extension, symbolically confront their own histories of subjugation by Russian and Soviet rule, providing a sense of recognition and historical redress. Thus, the establishment of an STA headed by a coalition of Ukraine and CEE states could challenge the status quo of the international legal order, reshaping accountability norms and challenging the East-West and North-South axes that often marginalize CEE perspectives (Labuda, 2024). Such an approach demonstrates the potential of international criminal law to move beyond its historical use as a colonial or hegemonic instrument, instead serving as an emancipatory tool.

In a similar manner, Labuda (2024) notes that the establishment of an STA could provide a reckoning with the legacy of the Nuremberg trials. As described in the Theoretical Framework chapter of this paper, the author asserts that the memory of the Nuremberg trials varies greatly between Eastern and Western Europe. Labuda highlights that while Nuremberg constituted a recognition of Nazi criminality in the West, the Eastern European memory is more complicated: by solely recognizing the criminality of the Nazi regime, and not the Soviet Union as well, the Nuremberg trials effectively whitewashed Soviet war crimes during WWII, bestowing legitimacy on the Soviet Union's actions (Labuda, 2024). Weinke (2024) supports this notion, writing that the lack of a similar trial for the Soviet Union, even right after its collapse, has now allowed Russian society to retain a sentimental view of Stalinism. Citing Vladimir Bukovsky, Weinke argues that a "Nuremberg for Communism" would have addressed Russia's historical wrongdoings, potentially preventing the widespread expansionist and imperialist tendencies that permeate contemporary Russian society (Weinke, 2024). In other words, a "Nuremberg for Communism" essentially had the potential to halt the development of *Russkiy Mir*. Seeing as this opportunity was missed both directly after WWII and the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine offers a strong precedent to address the aggressive policies present in both Russia and its predecessor.

Third, it can be argued that the establishment of an STA has the potential to foster a strong deterrent effect on both the international scale and against Russia itself. Russia's invasion of Ukraine constitutes the largest act of aggression on the European continent since WWII (Korynevych, 2024). McDougall (2023) argues that the only post-WWII parallel to Russia's aggression against Ukraine is Iraq's 1990 invasion and annexation of Kuwait, highlighting that no other act of aggression rivals the scale, intensity, and final objective of Russia's actions (McDougall, 2023). As such, a comprehensive legal response in the form of an STA would send a clear message that the perpetrators of the crime of aggression do not go unpunished, asserting the idea that the rule of law prevails on the global stage, irrespective of the position an individual or the state holds (Korynevych, 2024). Within Russia, a prosecu-

tion of Putin could serve to delegitimize him as a head of state, isolating him both internationally and domestically. McDougall (2023) particularly refers to the case of Milošević's indictment, where his prosecution reduced his domestic support and neutralized his tone, thus making him more likely to participate in a peace agreement. The discrediting and isolation of Putin as a head of state could signal a major shift domestically within Russia, and could mark a break with the past, creating more favorable conditions for peace and a reckoning with the imperialism embedded in Russian society (McDougall, 2023). Ultimately, as described in previous chapters, it is this imperial identity that sits at the root of Russia's hostile relationships with Ukraine and its other neighbors (Kassymbekova & Marat, 2022). As such, the STA can serve as a first step in this necessary transformation of Russian society away from its deeply ingrained expansionism and imperialism and towards decolonization.

Ultimately, the establishment of an STA has the potential to constitute an essential first step to solidarity between postcolonial states, setting the stage for a worldwide postcolonial movement. In order to garner support for a UNGA recommendation for the creation of the STA, Ukraine could instrumentalize its experience with colonialism and imperialism, fostering solidarity between CEE states and the "Global South", thus creating a cross-regional coalition (Labuda, 2024). The creation of this STA in itself would mark a key turning point in the history of international criminal law, constituting a landmark case where international criminal law is used to challenge a global power and hold it accountable for its criminal conduct. As mentioned in Section 5.2., this tribunal could then be used as a precedent in future counter-hegemonic trials initiated by smaller, peripheral states (Labuda, 2023b).

The creation of an STA carries significant relevance not only for CEE states but also globally. It draws attention to the shared characteristics of postcolonial struggles around the world and represents an initial step toward a postcolonial legal order, one that employs international criminal law as an emancipatory instrument to hold former aggressors and imperial powers accountable for their actions.

6 Chapter 6: Conclusion

This thesis explored the role international criminal law plays as an emancipatory tool for Ukraine and the broader CEE region in resisting Russian imperialism. The work adopted a post-colonial, CEE approach, recognizing Russia's imperial aggression as the root of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine (Hendl et al., 2023), thus advocating for the creation of a Special

Tribunal that fosters accountability for Russia's expansionist policies. In order to build a case for recognizing Russian imperialism as the central cause behind the ongoing invasion of Ukraine, the work first explored *Russkiy Mir* as a political and ideological concept, highlighting the doctrine's inherent incompatibility with Ukrainian sovereignty (Mälksoo, 2022). Next, the thesis analyzed past TJ attempts in Ukraine through the case study of the post-Euromaidan TJ framework. Apart from issues of selective law enforcement, an ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine (Bachmann & Lyubashenko, 2017), and polarized national identity within Ukraine (Nuzov, 2016), past TJ attempts were solely domestic, completely disregarding the aspect of Russian interference in Ukrainian domestic affairs. As such, the case study of post-Euromaidan TJ further underscores the need for the adoption of a comprehensive TJ mechanism that moves beyond the domestic, centering Russia as the key focus. Seeing as the ICC, universal jurisdiction, and the Ukrainian domestic justice system fall short either in terms of capacity or mandate (Imoedemhe, 2023; Krzan, 2024; McDougall, 2023), the STA emerges as the superior TJ mechanism. This legal remedy would not only allow Ukraine and CEE to reckon with their history of Russian expansionism and aggression (Mälksoo, 2022), but also would provide an opportunity for the international community at large to reaffirm their dedication to rule of law on the global stage (McDougall, 2023). The STA offers both comprehensive legal accountability and symbolic decolonization, providing Ukraine and the broader CEE region the chance to reassert their agency through legal leadership, contributing to the rebalancing of international legal discourse. If Ukraine takes a leading role in the establishment of the STA, its legal efforts may serve as a trail-blazer for postcolonial accountability across the globe (Labuda, 2024). Therefore, while this the-

sis acknowledges the inherent colonial structures present within the international justice system, it demonstrates that, when strategically mobilized by smaller or historically subjugated states, international criminal law has the capacity to serve as a powerful emancipatory instrument.

Considering that international criminal law is merely one aspect of a comprehensive TJ approach, there exist other elements that should complement the establishment of an STA in an effort to truly dismantle Russkiy Mir and initiate a decolonization process within Russia. One such element would be a *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung* program, which, mobilized domestically in Russia, could aid Russian society in addressing and overcoming its history of repression (Mälksoo, 2022). Another potential mechanism to consider, depending on the conclusion of the ongoing invasion, is a reintegration program of the inhabitants of the current “Donetsk People’s Republic” and “Luhansk People’s Republic” into Ukraine, the process of which could be facilitated through truth-telling and truth-seeking commissions (Lachowski, 2017). Similarly, a truth commission could be mobilized for both the Ukrainian and Russian populations, to establish a unified historical narrative and initiate a reconciliation process between these populations (Horne, 2023). On a broader CEE scale, particularly in post-Soviet states, the study and use of indigenous languages should be promoted, in order to preserve cultural memory and counter Russian hegemony and influence (Kassymbekova & Marat, 2022).

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022 constituted the largest act of aggression on the European continent since WWII. In March 2022, entering Bucha, a city just 30 kilometers from Kyiv, Russian troops slaughtered more than 400 people (Strategic Communications, 2024). In June 2023, Russian troops detonated a segment of the Kakhovka Dam, triggering one of the most severe environmental disasters in Ukraine’s history (Sushchuk, 2024). April 2025 marks the deadliest month in the war so far, with 209 civilians, of which 19 were children, killed by Russia’s consistent targeting of civilian areas by missile strikes and shelling (Hodunova, 2025). As of March 2025, almost 13,000 civilians were killed as a result of Russia’s invasion (Statista Research Department, 2025) and more than 19,000 children have been forcibly abducted from Ukraine, deported to Rus-

sia (Raymond & Howarth, 2025). When addressing a topic as far-reaching as imperial aggression, there is a risk of overlooking the lived experiences behind each atrocity committed during the conflict. The proposal of a STA is intended to serve as the initial step to a broader process—one characterized by healing and transitioning out of victimhood for the Ukrainian population, and, conversely, one aimed at facilitating the recognition and eventual reconciliation with imperial history for Russian society.

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History and Populism:

CHEGA's Use of Historical Memory in Portugal

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Chega campaign posters spread across the country with the message: '#Shame. Portugal needs a clean-up'. Financial Times (2024).

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Abstract

The rise of populist radical right parties in Europe has been widely examined, with research focusing on their characteristics, influence on public opinion, and strategies for gaining support. A key aspect of these movements is their engagement with historical memory, particularly in reframing colonialism, imperialism, and fascism to foster nationalist sentiments. While Portugal was initially regarded as an exception to this trend, the emergence of the political party CHEGA in 2019 has since drawn scholarly attention. Existing literature has explored CHEGA's ideology, electoral success, and rhetorical strategies, but has paid comparatively little attention to its use of memory. This research examines how CHEGA mobilizes historical narratives in its populist discourse, situating these practices within broader European patterns. Drawing on a social-constructivist perspective, it employs a tailored framework and applies thematic analysis to CHEGA's political programme, speeches, and social media posts to investigate how the party engages with Portugal's past. The analysis focuses on both the Portuguese colonial and fascist periods, showing how CHEGA 1) promotes national pride through luso-tropicalist rhetoric; 2) supports ex-combatants and returnees, 3) aligns with far-right movements in former colonies; 4) reframes authoritarianism as a leftist threat; and 5) adopts an ambivalent stance toward the Estado Novo (New Regime under Salazar). Overall, the study argues that by constructing its own notion of a Portuguese identity, CHEGA uses a selective version of Portugal's past to portray itself as the only party capable of restoring the nation back to an idealized vision of its past greatness and cultural purity. This has significant implications for Portuguese democracy and national cohesion. The thesis contributes to research in political science, history, and memory studies, while informing broader debates on nationalism and identity politics.

Keywords and phrases: *Luso-tropicalism, Portugal, Public memory, CHEGA, populism, National identity, Colonialism, Fascism, Social constructivism, Far-right*

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List of Abbreviations

PEDIGA Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West (Patriotische Europäer Gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes)

PiS Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość)

Fdi Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d'Italia)

PNR-ERP National Renovator party (Partido Nacional Renovador), today known as Rise Up (Ergue-te)

PS Socialist Party (Partido Socialista)

PSD Social Democratic Party (Partido Social Democrata)

CDS-PP People's Party (Partido do Centro Democrático e Social / Partido Popular)

AD Democratic Alliance (Aliança Democrática)

PPM People's Monarchist Party (Partido Popular Monárquico)

PáF Portugal Ahead (Portugal á Frente)

PCP Portuguese Communist Party (Partido Comunista Português)

JSD-PSD Social Democratic Youth (Juventude Social-Democrata)

MFA Armed Forces Movement (Movimento das Forças Armadas)

PREC Ongoing Revolutionary Process (Processo Revolucionário em Curso)

1 Introduction

The growing support for populist radical right parties in Europe has been a salient topic in recent academic literature. Scholarship has focused on these parties' defining characteristics¹, their influence on public opinion², and the particular strategies they employ to gain support³. Much of this research distinguishes between supply-side and demand-side explanations of party success.⁴

Furthermore, authors like Cabrero and Sierp (2024), Couperus et al. (2022), Couperus and Tortola (2019), De Cesari and Kaya (2019), Griffini (2022), Meijen and Vermeersch (2023), Veugelers et al. (2015), and Zhang (2023) have explored how radical right parties engage with public and historical memory, often distorting and reassessing a nation's 'dark history' (Couperus & Tortola, 2019) of colonialism, imperialism, or fascism to appeal to the nostalgia for empire still embedded within collective memory. Key examples include Fratelli d'Italia (Fdi)⁵ in Italy, Freedom Party (Partij voor de Vrijheid) in the Netherlands (Couperus & Tortola, 2019), VOX in Spain⁶, and others such as Génération Identitaire in France and PEGIDA in Germany (Couperus et al., 2022).

Compared to other European countries, Portugal was long regarded as an exception to this recent trend (Mudde, 2007, 2019) until the emergence of the far-right populist party CHEGA in 2019 (Carvalho, 2022; Mendes, 2021). Its leader, André Ventura, has since become a major figure in the Portuguese political sphere. Literature has looked at how CHEGA fits the populist radical right label (Marchi & Zúquete, 2024; Mendes, 2021); demand- and supply-side explanations for the timing of its rise (Braz, 2023; Carvalho, 2022); the territorial nuances of its support (Chamusca, 2024); the party's use of media and discursive strategies (Kelly, 2024; Prior, 2024); its connection with

Christianity (Batista, 2024; Dias, 2022; Moniz & Lino, 2024); and Ventura's use of anti-immigration (França, 2024) and anti-feminist rhetoric (Santos & Roque, 2021).

Extensive research has examined how public memory of Portugal's colonial legacy has shaped processes of nation-building and social attitudes⁷. However, few studies have analyzed how right-wing political parties in Portugal, particularly CHEGA, make use of the past to gain public support. This capstone therefore asks: How does CHEGA use historical memory of colonialism and fascism in its populist discourse?

Chapter 1 of this research introduces the capstone, outlines the broader scholarly context, and presents the research question. Chapter 2 covers the methodology, explaining the rationale for the methods used. Chapter 3 provides a literature review of existing research on right-wing populist movements in Europe and their use of memory. Through an exploration of recent academic debates around CHEGA's rise vis-a-vis Portugal's colonial memory, it also discusses the particular case of Portugal, examining its colonial past, its transition from fascism to liberal democracy, and its current political climate. The literature review concludes by positioning this research within the fields of constructivist political theory and memory studies, offering a broader perspective on how CHEGA engages with historical memory in shaping its political narrative through the lens of social constructivism. Chapter 4 presents the thematic analysis of CHEGA's political programme, party manifesto, public speeches, and social media posts on X. The analysis focuses on the colonial period and the fascist period of Portugal. In relation to the colonial period, it showcases how CHEGA 1) promotes national pride; 2) advocates for the integration and dignity of ex-combatants and returnees; and 3) reframes its historical positioning by emphasising ties with far-right parties in former colonies. Regarding the fascist period, it highlights how CHEGA 1) reinterprets the dictatorship narrative by linking authoritarianism to the far left; and 2) adopts a paradoxical stance on Salazar, selectively acknowledging both the positive and negative aspects of his rule. Chapter 5 connects the results of the analysis to existing research, answers the research question, and

¹Marchi & Zúquete, 2024; Mendes, 2021; Mudde, 2007, 2019

²Brown et al., 2021; Bursztyn et al., 2020; Valentim, 2021; Wodak & Forchtner, 2014

³Batista, 2024; Braz, 2023; Chamusca, 2024; Dias, 2022; França, 2024; Kelly, 2024; Mendes & Dennison, 2020; Moniz & Lino, 2024; Prior, 2024

⁴Carvalho, 2022; Golder, 2016; Manucci, 2024; Rydgren, 2007

⁵Cabrero & Sierp, 2024; Couperus & Tortola, 2019; Griffini, 2022

⁶Benitez-Baleato et al., 2024; Manucci, 2024; Mendes & Dennison, 2020

⁷Campos, 2017; Cardina, 2023; Kalter, 2022; Meuer, 2023; Peralta, 2022; Vala et al., 2008

explores the overall relevance of this capstone. Chapter 6 offers the conclusion and an overall summary of this research.

1.1 Relevance

This research is relevant because CHEGA has rapidly evolved from a small, fringe political party not taken seriously by most voters into a major force reshaping Portuguese democracy. Understanding this phenomenon is crucial for both policymakers and scholars.

CHEGA's electoral growth demonstrates its growing influence on Portugal's political landscape. In the 2019 elections, the party obtained 1.29% of the vote (67,826 votes) and a single parliamentary seat. By 2022, it had surged to 7.18% (399,510 votes) and twelve deputies (Chamusca, 2024). Finally, the 2024 elections confirmed CHEGA's mainstream position, with 18.06% of the votes (1,108,797 voters) and 50 seats in parliament, making it the third-largest parliamentary force⁸ (Chamusca, 2024).

This rapid rise marks a fundamental shift in Portuguese politics. Long regarded as stable and resistant to right-wing ideologies (Mendes, 2021), Portugal is now undergoing a process of significant political realignment. CHEGA has been particularly successful in mobilising support in regions with higher unemployment, ageing populations, and histories of public disinvestment (Chamusca, 2024). Furthermore, the party has resonated with Portuguese returnees and ex-combatants, which is an important demographic, as returnees constituted between 5% and 9% of Portugal's population during the period of decolonisation (Kalter, 2022). CHEGA's success is further amplified by Portugal's high levels of political disaffection. The country ranks among the four countries whose citizens express the lowest confidence in the political efficacy of the government (83%) (Chamusca, 2024). By presenting itself as the authentic voice of Portuguese identity and the only party capable of protecting it, CHEGA has effectively capitalised on the public discontent that has long characterised Portuguese politics. Understanding CHEGA's identity-based mobilisation strategy is

essential for developing effective policy responses to Portugal's changing political landscape. As the party continues to gain support and reshape Portuguese democratic norms, research on how CHEGA constructs and deploys notions of Portuguese identity becomes indispensable, both for policymakers seeking to address citizen concerns and for scholars analysing contemporary European right-wing movements. This research provides critical insights into how democracy in Portugal is being transformed and what this transformation implies for the country's political future. Through an interdisciplinary lens, it bridges political science, history, and memory studies, contributing to broader academic discussions on populism, historical memory, and political discourse in Portugal.

2 Methodology

2.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological approach employed to answer the research question: How does CHEGA use historical memory of colonialism and fascism in its populist discourse? The research design integrates multiple complementary methods to provide a comprehensive analysis of the party's narratives and their socio-political implications.

2.2 Research design

This study adopts a qualitative approach, combining a comprehensive literature review with a thematic analysis of CHEGA's official documents and social media communications. This methodological triangulation allows for an in-depth examination of how CHEGA constructs and mobilises Portuguese identity, while situating these findings within broader scholarly frameworks on right-wing populism and memory politics.

The literature review serves several key functions. First, it positions this research within broader academic debates on right-wing populism and the use of historical memory, facilitating comparative analysis between CHEGA and similar right-wing movements. Second, it examines existing explanations for CHEGA's political rise, identifying theoretical gaps and overlooked dimensions

⁸This capstone was written before the parliamentary elections of 2025 took place, where CHEGA achieved 58 seats in parliament and reinforced its position as the third largest political party.

that this study addresses. Finally, it provides historical context for understanding the environment in which CHEGA emerged, particularly regarding Portugal's colonial and fascist past and its continued relevance to contemporary identity politics.

The primary analytical method of this capstone is a thematic analysis of CHEGA's official documents and public communications. This approach is particularly suited to identifying and interpreting patterns of meaning, revealing how CHEGA constructs and deploys Portuguese memory through its political discourse.

This research analyses three types of data: first, it looks at CHEGA's founding political manifesto, declaration of principles and objectives, and its 2021 political program (the most recent available). As Mendes (2021) notes, these texts are well-suited to qualitative analysis due to their manageable length and substantial focus on abstract ideological rather than merely quantifiable policy positions. These official documents represent CHEGA's formal self-presentation and ideological foundations. Second, it looks at CHEGA's social media communications through a systematic collection of posts from André Ventura's X (formerly Twitter) account. This platform was selected because it provides the largest amount of accessible data and hosts Ventura's largest following among social media platforms (Mendes, 2021). Third, it examines public speeches delivered by André Ventura at party rallies, parliamentary sessions, and other public events from January 2020 to March 2025. These offer insights into how CHEGA's narratives are performed and presented to different audiences in person.

The focus on social media and public speeches is particularly relevant given changing dynamics of political communication in digital environments. In the contemporary hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013), social media platforms have become a channel for political communication, allowing for direct communication between political actors and citizens. As Prior (2024) observes, digital social networks now serve as influential and legitimised channels of political communication that contribute to imposing cultural and historical narratives and constructing meanings that influence social dynamics without traditional media filtering (Castells, 2009; Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2018). Given CHEGA's and particularly André Ventura's extensive use of social media, these platforms

provide rich data sources for analysing the party's agenda, issue salience, and identity narratives.

2.3 Researcher positionality

It is important to acknowledge my positionality as a researcher. As a Portuguese citizen, I bring cultural and linguistic competencies that facilitate a nuanced understanding of CHEGA's discourse within its specific national context⁹. At the same time, I also recognise that my own family history intersects with the colonial narratives that CHEGA mobilises. My paternal grandparents lived in Angola and were directly affected by decolonisation processes, while my maternal grandfather fought in the colonial war in Guinea-Bissau and lives with PTSD from this experience.

This personal connection to Portugal's colonial past provides me with insights into how these historical memories persist in contemporary Portuguese society. I am able to recognise the subtleties of CHEGA's references to colonial history and national identity, critically analyse how historical narratives shape contemporary political rhetoric, and interpret the discourse with sensitivity to the personal and collective memories that inform it.

Simultaneously, I maintain reflexive awareness about how these experiences might shape my interpretations. Throughout the research process, I employ methodological rigor and critical self-reflection to ensure that my analysis remains academically sound while benefiting from these contextual insights. Nonetheless, certain limitations must be acknowledged. For instance, this research focuses primarily on official party communications and may not capture all variations in how CHEGA's identity politics manifests at local levels. The analysis of social media content is also limited to publicly available posts and does not cover private communications that might reveal additional dimensions of the party's discourse.

2.4 Conclusion

The multi-method qualitative approach employed in this research enables a comprehensive examination of how CHEGA constructs a Portuguese identity through the use of colonial and

⁹This also allows me to cite Portuguese works and have a better understanding of the expressions used by CHEGA.

fascist memory¹⁰ in its political discourse. By combining a literature review with a thematic analysis of official documents and social media communications, the research provides both depth and breadth in understanding the CHEGA's use of memory and its broader socio-political implications.

3 Literature Review

3.1 Introduction

Having outlined the methodological approach in Chapter 2, this chapter now turns to the scholarly conversations that inform this research. To further support the research question, the literature review will first provide context to the scholarship around definitions and key characteristics of right-wing populist parties, including their ideological frameworks, authoritarian tendencies, and nationalist rhetoric. The chapter then examines explanations for the rise of far-right support in Europe and literature on the role of public memory and colonial nostalgia in shaping political attitudes, particularly in European contexts. It reviews scholarship on the emergence and rise of CHEGA in Portugal, as well as its political strategies, media influence, and voter appeal. Furthermore, the chapter discusses existing literature on Portuguese colonial and dictatorial memory. It concludes with an explanation of the theoretical framework that will be applied in Chapter 5 of this capstone, highlighting how CHEGA's tactics fit into the social construction of a Portuguese national identity. Overall, this chapter provides the necessary scholarly context to address the question: How does CHEGA use historical memory of colonialism and fascism in its populist discourse?

3.2 Populist far-right parties

Right-wing populist political parties share several key characteristics that have been widely

¹⁰The term colonial and fascist memory will be used in this research to refer to the selective recollection and mobilisation of narratives, symbols, and imaginaries associated with Portugal's Estado Novo regime and its colonial empire. This phrasing is grounded in literature on memory politics that highlight how far-right movements in post-authoritarian contexts often draw on nostalgic portrayals of authoritarian and imperial pasts to construct national identity (De Cesari & Kaya, 2019; Meijen & Vermeersch, 2023; Zhang, 2023).

studied. However, as Dias (2022) notes, the definition of far-right populism remains contested, with scholars proposing various frameworks and interpretations. This research adopts Mudde's (2007) definition, which is among the most widely used in contemporary literature (Dias, 2022; França, 2024; Griffini, 2022; Mendes, 2021; Moniz & Lino, 2024; Santos & Roque, 2021; Wodak & Forchtner, 2014). Mudde (2007) looks at right-wing populist parties in three different ways. First, right-wing populist ideologies typically divide society into two antagonistic camps: 'the people' versus the 'corrupt' or 'evil' elite, often extending this opposition to include other marginalised groups (Wodak & Forchtner, 2014). Within this framework, populists accuse elites for prioritising global concerns over national interests and security, and of advancing their own agendas rather than focusing on the well-being of the general public (Rydgren, 2007). Second, these parties emphasise the creation of a strong state through authoritarianism, particularly in matters of law and order, while paradoxically advocating for a limited government (Mendes, 2021). Third, right-wing populists endorse nationalism and nativism¹¹, shaping social identities by dividing society into opposing groups. This populist framework can foster ideological tendencies such as ethnonationalism, racism, and xenophobia (Santos & Roque, 2021). Nativism thus serves to legitimise exclusionary politics and the rejection of so-called 'gender ideology' and modernisation (Braz, 2023), as these parties promote the belief that foreigners threaten the integrity of the nation-state, which must remain ethnically or culturally uniform (Mendes & Dennison, 2020). Mudde (2007) further distinguishes between 'radical' and 'extreme' right-wing parties. While both oppose mainstream liberal democracy, extreme right parties have a revolutionary character, while radical right parties focus on reform. In this research, the terms 'radical right', 'far-right', and 'right-wing' are used interchangeably, as most parties in recent literature are classified as radical rather than extreme, since they advocate for systemic reform rather than revolutionary change.

¹¹The protection of native-born or established inhabitants over those of immigrants (Santos & Roque, 2021)

3.2.1 Explanations for the rise of the far-right

The rise of populist far-right movements across Europe has prompted extensive research aimed at understanding the factors underlying their growing electoral support. Scholars such as Golder (2016), Carvalho (2022), Manucci (2024), Mendes and Dennison (2020), and Rydgren (2007) explain this rise of support by looking at demand and supply-side explanations of success. Explanations centred on demand emphasise shifts in voter preferences, beliefs, and attitudes, particularly in response to economic and social grievances (Golder, 2016). Theories like the social breakdown thesis¹², the relative deprivation thesis¹³ (Rydgren, 2007), the protest voting theory¹⁴, the economic insecurity thesis¹⁵ (Carvalho, 2022), and the cultural backlash thesis¹⁶ are among some that explain how grievances affect far-right support. Rydgren (2007) further attempts to explain the rise in support of populist far-right movements through the lens of modernisation. According to the author, those struggling to adapt to processes of modernisation and globalisation turn to radical right parties as a counterbalance. Golder (2016) expands this perspective, arguing that individuals that struggle with rapid societal change often are discontent with the current political status quo, making far-right parties more attractive. Golder (2016) identifies ethnic competition as a key demand-side explanation, suggesting that hostility toward immigrants often stems from competition over jobs, housing, and welfare, further driving support for the far-right.

In contrast, supply-side explanations focus on the political opportunity structures and factors related to party organisation. Carvalho (2022) highlights the concept of 'spatial competition', where

¹²Theory argues that socially isolated individuals are more likely to support ethno-nationalist and populist politics (Rydgren, 2007)

¹³Theory that links frustration from social comparisons to far-right support (Rydgren, 2007)

¹⁴Theory focuses on how political alienation from mainstream parties leads voters to support minor radical right parties (Carvalho, 2022)

¹⁵Theory suggests that labour market competition between natives and immigrants fuels concerns about immigration (Carvalho, 2022)

¹⁶Theory argues that far-right voters oppose neoliberal globalisation, multiculturalism, and mass immigration, seeing them as threats to national identity (Carvalho, 2022)

ideological distance between mainstream parties and voter preferences influence support for the radical right. In this framework, proportional electoral systems and political volatility can enable success, while mainstream party convergence¹⁷ fuels discontent and boosts support for minority parties (Golder, 2016). In other words, populist parties succeed when they fill a political void (Manucci, 2024).

Additionally, internal supply factors, such as party political opportunity structures, electoral rules, party competition, media coverage, and political cleavages (Golder, 2016) have consequences on how the party is received by the population. Parties that embrace overt opposition to liberal democracy (e.g., neo-Nazi and neo-fascist parties) tend to have low support. In contrast, those who balance xenophobic nationalism with democratic rhetoric are more successful (Carvalho, 2022). This suggests that, as Mendes and Dennison (2020) argue, far-right parties must appear as 'normal' political actors rather than extremist movements. If perceived as undemocratic or neo-fascist, they struggle to gain broad electoral appeal. According to Golder (2016), the far-right combines ethnonationalism with populist anti-establishment rhetoric, avoiding overt racism or anti-democratic stances. This phenomenon has also been explored by authors such as Brown et al. (2021), Bursztyn et al. (2020), and Valentim (2021). They examine how the increasing success of the far-right, whether through increased parliamentary representation or successful electoral outcomes, has significantly shifted social norms and perceptions of acceptability, making far-right voters less hesitant to express their preferences and vote for these parties openly. This process has contributed to the 'mainstreaming' of the populist far-right (Brown et al., 2021).

Overall, while supply and demand-side factors are often distinguished, their interaction is crucial to understanding the rise of the far-right in Europe. In most cases, the mainstreaming of far-right parties is best explained by the interplay of both factors, as they reinforce each other. This is relevant in answering the research question of

¹⁷Tendency of major political parties to adopt increasingly similar policy positions, often blurring traditional ideological distinctions (Golder, 2016). For example, a centre-right party may embrace more left-leaning economic policies, reducing the perceived differences in voting choice for some voters.

this capstone, because by understanding the fundamental characteristics and explanations for far-right success, there is context for how the party CHEGA is characterised in the Portuguese context.

3.3 Memory politics and the far-right

Another way in which far-right parties collect public support is by appealing to public memory (De Cesari & Kaya, 2019; Meijen & Vermeersch, 2023; Zhang, 2023). In Europe, where several countries share a colonial past, the collective memory of colonialism becomes both a source of nostalgia and a cause of unease (Griffini, 2022). Far-right parties thus take advantage of the colonial nostalgia¹⁸ that is still present in the Portuguese population (Wodak & Forchtner, 2014) and, through historical revisionism and key discursive strategies, promote an essentialist and exclusionary worldview marked by racism, ethnocentrism, nationalism, and heteronormativity¹⁹. This discourse shapes a political culture of contrition, remembrance, and reflection on national identity and history (Couperus et al., 2022), which, in turn, fuels public support for a more authoritarian nationalist leadership against contemporary liberal democracies and the socio-political norms that uphold them (Bursztyjn et al., 2020). Couperus et al. (2022) emphasise how far-right movements manipulate historical narratives to mobilise support. By reinterpreting the past, they construct nostalgic nationalist discourses that frame contemporary issues as a struggle to reclaim lost national greatness. Groups like *Génération Identitaire* in France (Veugelers et al., 2015), *VOX* in Spain (Benitez-Baleato et al., 2024), *Freedom Party (Partij voor de Vrijheid)* in the Netherlands (Couperus & Tortola, 2019), *PEGIDA* in Germany, Greece's *Golden Dawn*-affiliated movements (Couperus et al., 2022), *PiS* in Poland (Meijen & Vermeersch, 2023), and *Fdl* in Italy (Cabrero & Sierp, 2024; Couperus & Tortola, 2019; Griffini, 2022) employ revisionist histories to legitimise exclusionary ideologies and oppose globalisation-driven social change. As Zhang (2023) argues, postcolonial nationalism legitimises ethnonationalist politics by appropriating anti-colonial rhetoric

and victimhood narratives, strengthening resentment toward liberal and globalist ideals.

Given this dynamic, scholars have developed frameworks to systematically analyse how far-right parties use historical memory in their rhetoric. Meijen and Vermeersch (2023) argue that memory politics sustain populist victimhood narratives, allowing leaders to justify punitive policies and consolidate power. Through strategic reinterpretations of history, far-right actors frame themselves as defenders of an oppressed national identity. This process involves 1) identifying historical injustices as moral justification, 2) linking past victimhood to present grievances, 3) blaming elites and outsiders for ongoing oppression, 4) demanding justice through vindictive policies, and 5) perpetuating a sense of crisis to sustain mobilisation.

Cabrero and Sierp (2024) and Couperus and Tortola (2019) have different ways of analysing how radical right parties use history as a strategy to gain popular support. Cabrero and Sierp (2024) examine how *Fdl* strategically uses memory and discourse to normalise fascism and reshape Italian public debate. They identify five key tactics: 1) promoting nationalism and nativism, 2) reinforcing identity narratives that evoke different nationalist pasts, 3) justifying policies through moral values and historical myths, 4) leveraging fear-based rhetoric, and 5) using denial tactics to push certain issues while side-lining others. Couperus and Tortola (2019) examine the cases of Italy and the Netherlands to explore how far-right parties incorporate historical narratives into their rhetoric. They argue that these parties utilise the past in three distinct ways: 1) by positively reassessing their country's dark past, 2) by manipulating history into their agenda with the use of 'fake history,' 3) and, finally, by denying connections with negative aspects of the nation's past that the larger population would not positively receive. These frameworks are crucial for this capstone since they offer tools for examining CHEGA's specific use of colonial and fascist memory in its populist discourse.

¹⁸Romanticized view of the colonial past (Wodak & Forchtner, 2014)

¹⁹The belief that heterosexuality is the only natural or normal sexual orientation (Wodak & Forchtner, 2014)

3.4 Portugal and CHEGA

3.4.1 CHEGA's emergence in Portugal

CHEGA (translated as 'Enough') is a political party in Portugal, often characterised as a populist far-right party within the broader European context (Carvalho, 2022; Mendes, 2021; Prior, 2024). CHEGA's characteristics and ideals mirror Mudde's (2007) framework of populist right-wing parties, highlighting features of authoritarianism, nativism, and populism. CHEGA explicitly defines itself as right-wing in its official party manifesto. The party describes itself as 'national, conservative, liberal and personalist' (CHEGA, n.d.). In its 2021 party program, CHEGA dedicates significant attention to criticising the prevalence of corruption in the Portuguese political sphere, showcasing its populist character by positioning itself on the side of the 'hard-working' Portuguese in opposition to both marginalized groups who receive state support, and political elites who exploit public resources for personal gain (CHEGA, 2021). In line with its appeal to working class Portuguese, the party uses nativist discourse in its anti-Roma and anti-immigration rhetoric (Mendes, 2021). CHEGA also showcases authoritarian characteristics by promoting conservative traditions, ethical values, moral principles, and customary ways of life, opposing progressive social transformations and state-enforced equality, for instance, through a strong law and order ideology (Mendes, 2021).

Until the emergence of CHEGA in 2019, Portugal was considered an exception to the rise of the far-right in Europe by most academic literature (Carvalho, 2022; França, 2024; Mendes, 2021; Mudde, 2019). It was argued that the Carnation Revolution in 1974, which ended 75 years of dictatorship under the Estado Novo regime of Salazar (also referred to as 'Salazarism'), led to a general aversion towards right-wing politics. In fact, according to Mendes and Dennison (2020), Portugal's experience led to a dominant conception of democracy where any other opposition to left-wing sentiments was considered illegitimate. As Benitez-Baleato et al. (2024) argue, the far-right became 'irrelevant' because 'the Carnation Revolution successfully addressed the legacy of Salazarism, effectively closing that chapter and leaving no unresolved grievances'. CHEGA's rise in 2019 has thus put this literature into question,

with the party emerging as the third-largest political force in parliament, growing from one representative in 2019 to twelve in 2022, and fifty in 2024 (Chamusca, 2024). Many authors since then have tried to explain the reasons for this change in the Portuguese political sphere.

3.4.1.1. Supply and demand explanations

Thus far, literature on the rise of CHEGA has explored several key aspects and characteristics of the party and the context of its growth. Chamusca (2024) examines how Portugal's economic crises have led to political discontent, particularly in neglected areas like the Alentejo region. The author argues that a combination of factors, including economic inequality, unemployment, demographic shifts, and social tensions, have contributed to CHEGA's growing success in recent years. This success is further reinforced by rising mistrust of political institutions and dissatisfaction with the effects of globalization, such as job losses and declining stability.

Authors like Braz (2023) and Carvalho (2022) argue that the rise and support of CHEGA is better understood through supply-side explanations, focusing on party-specific factors that contributed to its appeal. Carvalho (2022) argues that demand-side explanations such as protest voting (voting for a candidate or party that one does not endorse in order to convey discontent with existing circumstances) and salience of immigration could not explain the rise of CHEGA. First, despite record-low public confidence in democracy and political institutions in Portugal during the early 2010s, the National Renovator Party (then known as ERP) failed to gain traction, while CHEGA's breakthrough in 2019 occurred at a time when political dissatisfaction was already on the decline. Second, immigration never became a highly salient issue among the top concerns of the Portuguese electorate during the 2010s (França, 2024). Despite the persistence of racist attitudes, particularly toward the Roma community and other minorities, these views did not translate into widespread public concern about immigration.

Carvalho (2022) and Braz (2023) thus examine CHEGA's rise in terms of supply-side explanations. Most importantly, spatial competition was a key factor in CHEGA's rise (Carvalho, 2022). Since 1974, the leadership of the Por-

tuguese government has largely alternated between two main political forces: the centre-left Socialist Party (PS) and the centre-right Social Democratic Party (PSD), often involving various political alliances. Despite this perceived stability, the 2015 elections marked a major shift in the Portuguese political landscape. At this time, the PSD and the People's Party (CDS-PP) created the alliance Portugal Ahead (PáF) to continue the policies of the Democratic Alliance (AD)²⁰ under Prime Minister Passos Coelho. However, as an attempt to counteract this alliance, a coalition was formed between Portugal's left-wing parties: the PS, the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP), the Greens, and the Left Bloc (Chamusca, 2024). Although the coalition did not secure an outright majority, it achieved a 'plural victory', receiving 36.86% of the votes, while the PáF received 38.6%. PáF's failure to gain an absolute majority allowed the PS to form a minority government with unprecedented parliamentary support from far-left parties. The elections marked the first time a PSD-CDS coalition had failed to secure a parliamentary majority. After the PSD's poor performance in the 2017 local elections, Rui Rio was elected party leader following Paulo Portas's resignation (Braz, 2023). Rio abandoned the neoliberal economic policies of his predecessor, shifting the PSD towards a more centrist position, advocating for a greater role of the state in economic affairs and a departure from a free-market approach (Carvalho, 2022). This ideological conversion led to (1) an intense bipolar political competition between the mainstream PS and PSD and (2) a lack of mainstream right-wing ideological alternatives in the Portuguese party system (Manucci, 2024). Political instability was thus a key opening of CHEGA's political success in the following elections in 2019.

3.4.1.2. The charismatic and religious André Ventura Much literature has looked at how André Ventura, CHEGA's leader, is a key reason for CHEGA's overall success. André Ventura was born in 1983 in Mem Martins, a suburban area of Lisbon. Having a conservative disposition from a young age, he was affiliated with the Youth of the PSD (JSD-PSD) at 17 (Dias, 2022). Upon return-

ing to Portugal from his studies in Ireland, he became a law professor, writer, and media personality known for his TV football commentaries and opinion columns in the journal 'Correio da Manhã' (Santos & Roque, 2021). In 2017, Ventura rejoined PSD and attempted to run for mayor in the city of Loures with the support of CDS-PP. During one of his campaign speeches, Ventura blamed the Roma community in Loures for issues such as school dropouts, dependency on subsidies, and involvement in crime, generalising these problems as characteristic of the entire community.

This strategy led to a division in public opinion and successfully captured media attention (Marchi & Zúquete, 2024). Ventura secured 21.5% of the votes in the mayoral race, marking the PSD's best performance in the municipality in two decades. Along with the media attention his Roma-targeting campaign garnered, this result was evidence that politicising 'taboo topics' could be a successful strategy (Mendes, 2021). Ventura's dissatisfaction with the PSD's centrist direction and frustration over his lack of influence within the party led him to leave the PSD in late 2018 and create CHEGA. With his experience in media management and public speaking, Ventura became an important political figure in Portugal, appealing to the population with his controversial yet charismatic character (Prior, 2024). Thus, Ventura's origins within centre-right ranks, which provided CHEGA with greater legitimacy and more favourable media coverage compared to other far-right movements, played a crucial role in CHEGA's rise due to increased visibility and less stigmatisation.

André Ventura's character is especially significant when considering Portugal's connection to Christianity. CHEGA is a party that presents itself as openly conservative, with guiding principles that reflect Christian values. In its political manifesto, CHEGA acknowledges 'the decisive role played by the Catholic Church not only in the structuring of European civilisation but also throughout the history of Portugal' (CHEGA, n.d.). According to Santos and Roque (2021), CHEGA promotes a nostalgic vision of a white, Christian, and heteronormative Europe and Portugal, emphasising traditional values and framing 'gender ideology' and 'wokeness' as a key cause of family crises and broader national and moral decline. According to Batista (2024), CHEGA views religion

²⁰Centre-right coalition formed between the PSD and the CDS-PP between 1979 and 1983. In 2024, the alliance was relaunched with the inclusion of the People's Monarchist Party (PPM).

as inherently linked to nationalism and the Portuguese identity, thus experiencing progressive ideologies as a threat to the Portuguese nation. Similarly, Moniz and Lino (2024) discuss CHEGA's 'nativist, justicialist, exclusionary, nationalist, and even xenophobic' doctrine and practices, which are rooted in populist strategies with religious elements playing a significant role in shaping its approach.

Dias (2022) argues that CHEGA did not mark the beginning of religious populism in Portugal. Rather, it is part of a longer populist tradition that can be traced back to the early concepts of 'Messianism' in the 20th century. Using elements of popular Portuguese religiosity, CHEGA portrays André Ventura as a political Messiah who will guide his followers to a 'kingdom of peace and justice', positioning himself as the saviour of the nation. As a result, Ventura claims he has a special relationship with God and is carrying out God's will on Earth by battling against what he perceives as 'evil' opponents. This narrative uses populist language to establish a moral community by portraying his followers as the 'chosen people' (Dias, 2022).

Recognising CHEGA's characteristics, rise to prominence, the role of Ventura's leadership, as well as the overall scholarly understanding of CHEGA's strategies and reasons for success, reveals the political context within which the party strategically deploys historical memory. This is important to understand the results of this capstone and answer the research question.

3.5 Portugal and Memory

3.5.1 Colonial memory in Portugal

Portugal's long history of colonisation and authoritarian rule under the Estado Novo regime (1933-1974) played a key role in shaping the current Portuguese political landscape, social norms, and beliefs. Portugal's empire, established in the fifteenth century as one of the earliest colonial powers, was also one of the last to decolonise (Cardina, 2023). During the Estado Novo regime, Portugal often justified its colonial actions through various channels, including education, public monuments, exhibitions, statues, and media outlets (Kalter, 2022). In doing so, Portugal defended its colonial policies by emphasising

the pluricontinental, multiracial, and multicultural nature of the Portuguese nation while dismissing the demands for self-determination from liberation movements (Campos, 2017). This led to what Vala et al. (2008) identify as 'luso-tropicalism', where Portuguese colonisation is portrayed as being uniquely benevolent and amicable, with the glorification of imperial conquests and the portrayal of colonialism as a 'great discovery' (Meuer, 2023; Peralta, 2022).

The process of decolonisation in Portugal began after the end of the Portuguese Colonial War (1961-1974) with the Carnation Revolution on April 25, 1974. Despite decolonisation processes having ended decades ago, luso-tropicalism continues to be woven into Portuguese culture and norms (Vala et al., 2008). Peralta (2022) looks, for instance, at how national myths and memories that shape Portuguese identity are manifested into 'cosmopolitan mythspaces'. In the context of decolonisation, memorial displays have helped reshape imperial history, with the exploitative nature of empires reframed to appear beneficial for both colonisers and the colonised. This process mirrors what Gilroy (2005) describes as 'postcolonial melancholia', a nostalgic reimagining of an empire that obscures its oppressive realities. Memories of the Colonial War mimic this trend, although with some more nuance. While left-wing perspectives often saw participation in the war as complicity in colonial oppression, the right viewed decolonisation as a cowardly retreat (Campos, 2017).

3.5.2 Authoritarian memory in Portugal

Tensions surrounding the memory of Portugal's past are particularly evident in the years following the Colonial War. Silva and Ferreira (2018) argue that there is a common trend of historical revisionism of the April Revolution and the Ongoing Revolutionary Process (PREC) that followed. The PREC period in Portugal, also known as 'the Hot Summer of 1975', was marked by animosity between radical-leftist groups and right-wing groups (Lobo et al., 2016). On the one hand, the radical left sought to push the Revolution further and attempted to radicalise the revolutionary process in pursuit of a socialist state. From March 1975 onward, they became key actors in some of the most significant confrontations of the period

such as the occupation of the 'República' newspaper and 'Rádio Renascença' (Renaissance Radio). On the other hand, the Portuguese far-right resorted to armed reactions with the backing of sectors of the Catholic Church and conservative political forces. These tensions led to the November 25, 1975 Counter-Revolution (Silva & Ferreira, 2018), which marked the end of the revolutionary phase with a military intervention against radical leftist forces and the start of a formal transition to democracy.

Between the late 1970s and early 2000s, memory politics and historical revisionism played a key role in shaping Portugal's perception of the PREC. According to Silva and Ferreira (2018), both left and right-wing militants who had engaged in political violence were granted amnesty, resulting in a lack of accountability for the events of the revolutionary years. Successive right-wing governments from 1978 to 1995 actively contributed to the demonisation of the revolutionary period, blaming it for the country's economic struggles and political instability, and portraying the revolutionary process as chaotic, extremist, and nearly responsible for triggering a civil war. During this time, historical revisionism efforts by right-wing groups looked at the past from the perspective of the 'victors', highlighting their role in stabilising the country while minimising the reality of political violence during this period (Cruzeiro, 2011).

By the 1990s, Loff (2000) describes the emergence of a 'rebellion of memory', a response against the historical revisionism that had diminished the memory of armed anti-fascist resistance. According to Loff (2014), historical revisionism in Portugal had downplayed the violence and executions perpetrated during the Estado Novo regime and blamed leftist leaders for the decolonisation process, portraying it as an abandonment of millions of Portuguese citizens who lived in the colonies. This 'rebellion of memory' was thus a shift in the opposite direction. For the first time in decades, the anniversary of the Revolution was celebrated with enthusiasm by the political establishment, signalling an attempt to reclaim and positively frame the memory of the 1974-75 Carnation Revolution in contrast to years of revisionist narratives. This shift persists today, with a broader consensus and pride in the April Revolution and, according to Lobo et al. (2016), a clear dominance of left-wing parties in the new

political system. In fact, according to Lobo et al. (2016), about half of the population holds a predominantly negative view of the Estado Novo regime and 60% view the legacy of April 25 as mostly positive.

Today, the nostalgia for the Estado Novo regime and feelings toward the Revolution lost their strong ideological and partisan divides. According to Santana-Pereira et al. (2016), this is due to the economic crisis Portugal went through in 2014, leading many to view the past through a new lens and turning nostalgia for the dictatorship into a temporary protest against the current crisis rather than a deep ideological preference. This change was also deepened when different political groups began reframing the meaning of the Revolution to align with contemporary agendas. For instance, Cavaco Silva's presidency (2006-2016), marked by right-wing support from the CDS-PP, contained romanticized versions of the authoritarian past which were often characteristic of the right-wing rhetoric of the past. However, Silva's interpretation of the Carnation Revolution did not align with previous right-wing narratives. In fact, by emphasising economic freedom, anti-totalitarianism, and economic development as the Revolution's goals rather than its original socialist intents, Silva portrayed this event in a positive light (Lobo et al., 2016).

Overall, the persistence of 'imperial mystique' (Kalter, 2022) and colonial nostalgia in Portugal contrasts with the contested memory of the PREC, the Colonial War, and the Carnation Revolution (Lobo et al., 2016), which remain a cultural and political battleground where different factions shape national narratives by influencing what is remembered and what is forgotten (Silva & Ferreira, 2018). Despite these competing interpretations of the past, little research has examined how CHEGA leverages these historical memories. Most literature suggests that CHEGA focuses on law and order, corruption, and socio-economic issues, often framed through anti-Roma and anti-immigration rhetoric, rather than engaging with the past (Benitez-Baleato et al., 2024; Chamusca, 2024; Mendes, 2021; Prior, 2024). In contrast, other scholars, notably Dias (2022), Prior (2024), and Santos and Roque (2021) emphasise André Ventura's strategic use of historical memory and nostalgia in public discourse. According to Prior (2024), CHEGA exploits public memory

to reinforce nationalist sentiments by emphasising national symbols and portraying an idealised past as something to be restored. As Santos and Roque (2021) highlight, CHEGA draws from lusotropicalist ideology by invoking historical figures, military conflicts, and the legacy of military institutions to reinforce its nationalist stance. Despite existing research, a comprehensive analysis of how and when the party uses these strategies is still lacking. Given this gap, the differing perspectives in the literature, and the contested nature of Portugal's colonial and dictatorial memory, this research examines how CHEGA invokes colonial and dictatorial memory in its populist discourse.

3.6 Theoretical framework

To provide a broader lens for understanding how CHEGA engages with historical memory in constructing its political narrative, this research adopts the theoretical framework of social constructivism and situates itself within constructivist political theory and memory studies.

Alexander Wendt's (1992) theory of social constructivism within International Relations challenges the idea that state interests and identities are fixed or inherent. Instead, Wendt (1992) argues that these are shaped through intersubjective social processes, that is, through shared understandings, norms, and discourses. As Wendt (1992) puts it, 'regimes cannot change identities and interests if the latter are taken as given'. This means that political actors not only respond to the world as it is, but also actively participate in shaping how it is understood. Institutions, political movements, and state actors thus play a central role in constructing national identity, influencing how societies remember their past, and determining which narratives gain legitimacy. Foucault's (1969) discourse theory further connects to this notion of constructed identities. His theory focuses on how knowledge, language, and power are intertwined. For Foucault (1969), discourse is not just a way of talking about the world, but it actively shapes what can be known, said, and done within a given society. Through discourse, certain narratives become accepted as 'truth', while others are marginalised or silenced. This process is political, as those in power often control which historical interpretations are legitimised.

For this capstone, social constructivism in re-

lation to collective memory, discourse theory, and nationalism, provides a deeper understanding for how CHEGA constructs its political narrative through historical revisionism. This approach helps explain how history is not merely interpreted but strategically shaped to serve political purposes and forge specific visions of national identity.

3.7 Conclusion

This literature review has examined the interplay between populist far-right movements, memory politics, and the Portuguese political context. By analysing key characteristics of right-wing populist parties through Mudde's (2007) framework, focusing on populism, authoritarianism, and nativism, this chapter has established a foundation for understanding CHEGA's position within the broader European populist landscape. The exploration of supply and demand-side explanations for the rise of far-right support demonstrates that CHEGA's emergence is best understood through a combination of factors, including political opportunity structures, charismatic leadership, and strategic exploitation of grievances.

The chapter also highlighted how memory politics serves as a tool for far-right mobilisation across Europe, with parties strategically deploying historical narratives to construct nationalist identities and legitimise exclusionary policies. The frameworks proposed by Meijen and Vermeersch (2023), Cabrero and Sierp (2024), and Couperus and Tortola (2019) provide analytical approaches for examining how historical memory is used in populist discourse through victimhood narratives, crisis construction, and selective historical revisionism.

Within the Portuguese context, CHEGA's rise has challenged the long-held perception of Portugal as an exception to Europe's far-right emergence. Literature shows how the party has benefitted from recent political instability, as well as how André Ventura's charismatic leadership, media intelligence, and strategic use of religion have contributed significantly to the party's success.

The tensions in Portuguese collective memory regarding colonialism, the Estado Novo regime, the Colonial War, and the Carnation Revolution remain contested, with different political actors shaping competing narratives. Although some

scholars argue that CHEGA focuses primarily on contemporary issues rather than historical memory, others suggest that the party strategically employs historical revisionism and colonial nostalgia in its nationalist agenda. This divergence in the literature indicates a gap that this research addresses.

By adopting a social constructivist theoretical framework that draws on Wendt's (1992) and Foucault's (1969) arguments, this research will examine how CHEGA constructs a particular vision of Portuguese national identity through its selective engagement with historical memory. This scholarly context will guide the analysis of how and when CHEGA invokes colonial and dictatorial memory in its populist discourse, contributing to our understanding of memory politics in contemporary Portugal and its implications for democratic governance.

4 Thematic analysis of CHEGA discourse

4.1 Introduction

Chapter 3 of this research contextualised the ideological foundations and strategies of right-wing populist parties, as well as the role of public memory and colonial nostalgia in shaping political attitudes. It identified key gaps in the existing scholarship on CHEGA, particularly concerning its use of historical narratives, and outlined the theoretical framework guiding this capstone. Drawing on this foundation, this Chapter turns to the thematic analysis of CHEGA's discourse, which contributes directly to answering the question: How does CHEGA use historical memory of colonialism and fascism in its populist discourse?

A qualitative thematic analysis of CHEGA's founding manifesto, declaration of principles and ends, its 2021 political programme, as well as André Ventura's speeches and X posts will be employed to effectively analyse how CHEGA appeals to public memory of Portugal's past. This variety of sources will allow for a thorough analysis while maintaining the relevance of data.

This research will analyse CHEGA's approach to historical narratives through two major themes: the colonial period and the fascist period. Within the colonial period, the analysis will focus on

how CHEGA 1) promotes national pride in Portugal's colonial past, 2) emphasises the integration and dignity of Portuguese ex-combatants and returnees, and 3) highlights its relations with far-right parties in former colonies as a way to re-frame its historical positioning. Regarding the fascist period, this capstone will examine how CHEGA 1) reinterprets the dictatorship narrative by associating authoritarianism with the far-left, both in the present and during the Carnation Revolution of 1974, and 2) how it adopts a paradoxical stance on Salazar, selectively acknowledging both positive and negative aspects of his rule. Overall, this method of analysis is relevant because it clearly illustrates how the rise of public support for CHEGA may be attributed to the ways in which the party monopolises historical narratives. By constructing their own notion of a Portuguese identity, CHEGA uses a selective version of Portugal's past to frame itself as the only party capable of restoring the nation, which has consequences for Portuguese democratic values and national cohesion.

4.2 Colonialism

4.2.1 Pride in the colonial past

CHEGA's Political Manifesto states that:

CHEGA came to maintain. To maintain our long-standing values and our age-old traditions. To maintain our identity and our attachment to our roots; to maintain our way of discreetly 'giving new worlds to the world' and to maintain our pride, in the face of everyone and everything, of having done so and of still intending to do so (CHEGA, n.d., para 32).

This paragraph shows how CHEGA appeals to the colonial past of Portugal. By stating that the party will fight for Portugal to maintain its 'identity' and 'roots', CHEGA refers to the colonial history of Portugal as the time where it gave 'new worlds to the world', defining colonialism as a time in which Portugal 'discovered' new places, giving something new to the international community at large. Additionally, CHEGA states in this paragraph that it will maintain pride in the country's past and future, which showcases the idea

that Portugal should not feel apologetic about its colonisation efforts. In fact, it more clearly illustrates this idea in the next paragraph of its manifesto, stating that:

Finally, CHEGA does not ask, nor will it ever allow anyone to ask, for forgiveness for what we were, for our history, for our very own way of being in the world and in life. CHEGA will never apologise for us, the Portuguese, existing, having existed and intending to continue to exist for centuries to come (CHEGA, n.d., para 33).

CHEGA incites in its readers a sort of Portuguese 'pride' that instigates empathy and nostalgia for the colonial past, looking at it as something that the population should not be ashamed of, and that should in fact be celebrated. The party uses the past as a point of reference to what the country could be in the future, stating that:

CHEGA came to, in a transparent, democratic, courageous and effective way, return Portugal to the Portuguese; return the Portuguese to Portugal but, above all, return the Portugal of today to the Portugal of always (CHEGA, n.d., para 36).

CHEGA's political programme of 2021 further exemplifies the position CHEGA takes, stating that it will:

rescue the identity, historical and civilisational value of the national sentiment. Subjugated to the moral primacy of self-responsibility, [national sentiment] has generated, generates and will generate unparalleled collective virtues. The more than eight centuries of Portuguese nationality, including half a millennium of openness to the world, give it an exceptional human potential (CHEGA, 2021, part 1.17).

In this way, CHEGA defines the Portuguese identity as intrinsically connected to its colonial legacy, highlighting the 'half a millennium of openness to the world' as a key aspect of Portuguese exceptionalism. Here, CHEGA once again

refers to Portugal's colonial past as the time where it explored and discovered the world.

Finally, in his X account, André Ventura regularly discusses the Portuguese colonial period. Since Ventura's X account is often used in a personal and informal way compared to the official party's website, the discursive strategies used are different. In this platform, Ventura often comments on political developments that are ongoing, on news articles written about him or his party, and about policies and statements made by opposing parties.

A key example of how Ventura has used his X account to appeal to popular memory of colonialism was when the left-bloc attempted to condemn the country's actions during the Colonial War, appealing to the need for the Portuguese government to apologise for the atrocities committed and resources taken during the colonial period. Ventura looks at this as 'shameful' behaviour, arguing that the left-bloc is 'ridiculing our History and the Portuguese Armed Forces' and highlighting the need for parliament to 'defend' the country's history. By doing so, Ventura also redirects the conversation from the massacres done by the Portuguese to the 'positive' things colonialism brought with it, such as the money invested, the constructions made, and the 'civilisation' it brought to the colonies.



Figure 1: X post from December 7, 2021 ²¹

Translation: Does Portugal have to deal with the ‘brutality of its colonial past’? And everything we did there, everything we invested there, everything we built there? Some of the former Portuguese colonies should be the ones compensating us for the civilisation we brought to certain territories!

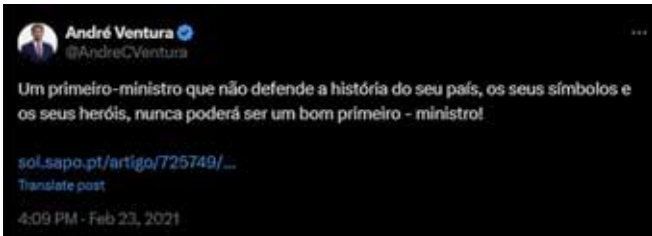


Figure 2: X post from February 23, 2021 ²²

Translation: A prime minister who does not defend the history of his country, its symbols, and its heroes can never be a good prime minister!

Another key example was when Ascenso Simões, one of the deputies from the PS, argued for the demolition of the monument ‘Padrão dos Descobrimentos’ (Monument of the Discoveries) in the same way that, during the Carnation Revolution, statues were toppled and the Salazar bridge changed its name to the ‘25 de Abril’ bridge. The deputy argued that this monument was a ‘monument to the dictatorial regime’ (para. 2) and that this lack of action showcased that not enough efforts were made during the process of decolonisation to come to terms with the actions Portugal had done. In fact, he argues that ‘In Portugal, Salazarism was very effective in constructing a private history, ensuring, to this day, the perpetuity of the myths of the Portuguese

²¹<https://x.com/andrecventura/status/146821764679356006?par6?s=48&t=VWnUeCZriOh-X3196rp3Nw>

²²<https://x.com/andrecventura/status/136423096293936334?par6?s=48&t=VWnUeCZriOh-X3196rp3Nw>

design, the discoveries, and the empire’ (para. 4) aligning with much of the academic conversations around Portuguese colonial memory (Dinis, 2021). This was then followed by another deputy, Joacine Katar Moreira, recommending the contextualisation of the problematic panels present in the ‘Salão Nobre’ (Noble Hall) as they ‘guarantee the prolongation of the vision of the Estado Novo’ (Lusa, 2016, para. 2).

In turn, Ventura positions CHEGA as an opposition to these ideas, arguing that these types of actions are ‘stupid’ and a betrayal to the Portuguese identity, inevitably leading to reparations for the colonial empire which, according to him, are unacceptable actions.



Figure 3: X post from February 20, 2021 ²³

Translation: This is what we have...either we vote for CHEGA to stop this madness, or we’ll all end up paying reparations for the Colonial Empire.

²³<https://x.com/andrecventura/status/1362932585966563334?s=48&t=VWnUeCZriOh-X3196rp3Nw>



Figure 4: X post from February 21, 2021²⁴

Translation: A PS deputy wants the demolition of the Padrão dos Descobrimentos, now it's the PAN deputy, Inês Sousa Real, who doesn't want the images in the Noble Hall of the AR. I don't know if it's because of the elephants or the black people on top of them, but I think that's enough of so much stupidity! Traitors!

On 24th of April, 2024, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, Portugal's current president since 2016, publicly restated what was first discussed during the solemn session commemorating the 49th anniversary of April 25th in the Assembly of the Republic in 2023. On that day, the president recognised the crimes committed by Portugal during colonisation, and stated that Portugal owed an apology, but above all that it ought to fully assume responsibility for the exploitation and slavery during the colonial period (DN/Lusa, 2024).

Faced with this speech, CHEGA decided to file a lawsuit against the president for 'treason against the country' (06:00), an unprecedented process in Portuguese political history. Ventura publicly discussed this decision in a live interview with the deputy Rita Matias on the 7th of May 2024 (CHEGA TV, 2024a). In this interview, Ventura argues that the president's actions were not only an expres-

sion of individual opinion, but also with real and 'serious' political consequences. Ventura further positions itself on the 'side of the Portuguese', saying that this type of behaviour is not only 'lamentable' but also 'self-inflicted pain' (05:21), and that many countries were not asking for reparations and compensations (that Portugal did not have the resources to give) in the first place. Ventura states "when I open history books, I want people to see that there was a president of the republic that said such nonsense (...) and that a party rose up and said they did not ascribe to it, that this is very serious, that this is an attack on our country, constitution, and sovereignty" (CHEGA TV, 2024a, 05:43). In this way, Ventura directly appeals to history and 'justice' as the main drive of CHEGA's actions, showing his desire to be on the 'right side of history' and to be a country that is 'proud of its history' (06:55). In the end, the parliament refused to open proceedings against Marcelo for treason, with CHEGA being the only party voting for this measure. However, this was a major development in the Portuguese political sphere, and many Portuguese citizens felt seen by Ventura's speech.

4.2.2 Focus on ex-combatants and returnees

Another focus of CHEGA's rhetoric regarding Portugal's colonial past is the effects the Colonial War had on the Portuguese population. Rather than focusing on the negative aspects colonialism had and the massacres committed by the Portuguese, Ventura argues that the Portuguese government should look inwards, and that the consequences faced by the MFA and the Portuguese returnees are a bigger priority to consider. By doing so, CHEGA appeals to the Portuguese population that has felt these consequences, for instance by emphasising the lack of re-integration efforts towards Portuguese returnees and families that lost their wealth, homes, or family during the Colonial War without receiving any compensation.

²⁴ <https://x.com/andrecventura/status/1363570525084278786?s=48&t=VWnUeCZriOh-X3196rp3Nw>



Figure 5: X post from December 17, 2022 ²⁵

Translation: Costa e Santos Silva should be tried for treason against the Homeland. Apologising for the actions of the Armed Forces in Mozambique is an insult to our ancestors and a humiliation to our History. Has anyone apologised for the Portuguese murdered after the independence of the former colonies?

Translation: Have we ever apologised to the millions who returned from the former colonies and whom we left abandoned? Have we ever apologised for the shameful way we treated the former combatants? Is António Costa the prime minister of Portugal or of some African country?



Figure 6: X post from September 5, 2022 ²⁶

²⁵<https://x.com/andreventura/status/160410962694912409?ts=48&t=VWnUeCZriOh-X3196rp3Nw>

²⁶<https://x.com/andreventura/status/1566843388703514624?s=48&t=VWnUeCZriOh-X3196rp3Nw>



Figure 7: X post from January 27, 2023 ²⁷

Translation: Yesterday, the Left Bloc tried once again, with the Colonial War, to ridicule our History and the Portuguese Armed Forces. But now Chega is in Parliament and won't let them get away with it!

In this X post, Ventura's intervention during the parliament discussion is also shown. He states that wanting to disqualify all the military documents from the colonial war is 'one of the biggest irresponsibilities ever done' since 'most of these men are alive' and 'fought for this country'. Ventura argues that this action would, essentially, be a way to 'stamp' these people with a warrant, thus ridiculing the Portuguese Armed Forces and putting at risk the life of ex-combatants. He argues that his behaviour is 'disgraceful', and that the parliament should be focusing on how to give dignity back to these groups rather than 'going after' them and 'have their blood in our hands', 'putting our History at risk'.

²⁷<https://x.com/andrecventura/status/1618924220955906048?s=48&t=VWnUeCZriOh-X3196rp3Nw>



Figure 8: X post from December 16, 2022 ²⁸

Translation: Today the President of the AR, Santos Silva, apologised for the actions of the Portuguese Armed Forces in Wiriyamu, during the Colonial War. Have they ever apologised for the thousands of Portuguese brutally murdered by the guerrillas? This does not represent us, it shames us.

In this X post, Ventura shows his intervention during the parliamentary discussion. He states that the actions of the president do not represent CHEGA or the Portuguese Armed Forces, and that this type of behaviour should not go toward the Wiriyamu massacre, but rather towards the returnees and ex-combatants who fought during the war and "died there with no justice being done to them." He shifts the conversation toward the number of Portuguese fighters that also died during this confrontation by the Mozambicans, highlighting that "Mozambique has never apologised for all the Portuguese families it also killed".

Another example was when, during one of CHEGA's congress events on the 29th of November 2021 (SIC Notícias, 2021), Ventura shouts that "We are the heirs of the Empire. We are the heirs of a country that believed and still believes that one day we will win in the entire world (..) I will

²⁸<https://x.com/andrecventura/status/160383325763574169?par7?s=48&t=VWnUeCZriOh-X3196rp3Nw>

not rest until PSD is out of government” (02:08). In this speech Ventura once again appeals to the people who ‘fought’ for Portugal during the Colonial War to stand with CHEGA, raising the need for prioritising those who suffered during decolonisation.

During the solemn session commemorating the 48th anniversary of April 25th in the Assembly of the Republic in 2022 (Tilly, 2022), André Ventura holds a speech stating that the Portuguese government should apologise to its citizens for “the empire it let dissolve, that let other countries at its mercy, and families on their own” (00:52). Among its focus on current middle-class struggles, Ventura appeals for the recognition of the victims of the regime change in 1974 that were expropriated, as well as the returnees and ex-combatants that came back to Portugal and did not get the necessary integration, now living under precarious conditions. In this way, Ventura appeals to those who have suffered from the fall of the colonial empire and the end of the dictatorship. He further appeals for the recognition of returnee families in his speech during the Solemn Session Commemorating November 25 in 2024 (CHEGA TV, 2024b), stating that they were the ones who “created the country we are today” and that “deserve our dignity, care, and homage” (07:50). He ends the speech by stating that the parliament should be focused “not in re-making History, but in ‘re-meeting’ history” (08:10).

4.2.3 Friendly relation with colonies

In its political manifesto, CHEGA uses history as a way to justify the party’s ideals and priorities. The party states that:

CHEGA defends Portuguese history, culture and language as constitutionally guaranteed values; it will defend the strengthening of Portugal’s role and the affirmation of the Portuguese-speaking world at various levels of international and community action; finally, it is committed to promoting and strengthening, effectively, ties between Portuguese communities spread throughout the world, especially within the Portuguese-speaking world (CHEGA, n.d., para 30).

CHEGA thus attempts to glorify Portuguese history and culture within the international sphere, highlighting the ways Portugal has ‘influenced’ the world at large. CHEGA looks at the colonial period as a time where Portugal was able to ‘spread’ its culture and language around the world, highlighting the need for continuous ties with former colonies.

Another example of this in its official declaration of principles (CHEGA, 2022) is when CHEGA highlights how it aims to achieve the ‘promotion and strengthening of ties between Portuguese communities spread throughout the world, especially within the Portuguese-speaking world’ (part 2.2).

In his X account, André Ventura further reinforces this idea by frequently making posts about the political climate of other Portuguese-speaking countries, often showing his support for other far-right parties. This connection with other far-right parties in previous colonies such as Brazil and Guinea-Bissau aim to frame CHEGA as welcoming and friendly with these countries, presenting the colonial period as a time in which Portugal expanded its foreign policy and international connections.



Figure 9: X post from April 28, 2024 ²⁹

Translation: We met with the President of

²⁹<https://x.com/andrecventura/status/1784623496456196536?s=48&t=VWnUeCZriOh-X3196rp3Nw>

Guinea-Bissau in Lisbon. There, too, they are fighting against various forms of communism and socialism that need to be defeated. Portugal does not have to apologise for its past! Pride in our History!



Figure 10: X post from October 25, 2023 ³⁰

Translation: It was a pleasure to receive Califa Soares, the representative and chief of staff of the President of Guinea-Bissau, in the Portuguese Parliament. The Portuguese-speaking space must rise again and assume its central role in the world.



Figure 11: X post from August 2, 2021 ³¹

Translation: This was in Brazil, in support of Bolsonaro and securing elections, while Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa was meeting with a former President convicted of corruption!

³⁰<https://x.com/andrecventura/status/1717228109613715516?s=48&t=VWnUeCZriOh-X3196rp3Nw>

³¹<https://x.com/andrecventura/status/1422174627321815040?s=48&t=VWnUeCZriOh-X3196rp3Nw>



Figure 12: X post from January 2, 2024 ³²

Translation: I thank the former President of Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro, for the message of support for the 2024 legislative elections. They know well how the left turned their country into a den of misery.

4.3 Dictatorship

When it comes to Portugal’s dictatorial past under Salazar, CHEGA presents a different approach. Rather than appealing to nostalgia and pride of this past, CHEGA connects the ‘dictatorship’ rhetoric to the far-left and attempts to distance itself from Salazar’s regime.

4.3.1 Connections with left-wing politics

André Ventura frequently portrays far-left and centre-left Portuguese political parties as leading the country toward another dictatorship. He often claims that Portugal is on the path to a ‘socialist dictatorship’ where freedom of speech and individual liberties are at risk. Some examples of this can be seen in Ventura’s X account, where multiple warnings about this possibility are made.

³²<https://x.com/andreventura/status/1742164483487809584?s=48&t=VWnUeCZriOh-X3196rp3Nw>



Figure 13: X post from October 25, 2020 ³³

Translation: We cannot go to the cemetery next weekend to honour our loved ones, but we can freely watch, live and in colour, motorsport spectacles. Where is Covid-19 now? What’s the criterion? CHEGA will not let the socialist dictatorship pass!



Figure 14: X post from December 22, 2020 ³⁴

Translation: We are dangerously heading toward a dictatorship, where freedom of expression is worth very little when it comes to persecuting an opposition political leader.

³³<https://x.com/andreventura/status/1320405096174321671?s=48&t=VWnUeCZriOh-X3196rp3Nw>

³⁴<https://x.com/andreventura/status/1341400874934005775?s=48&t=VWnUeCZriOh-X3196rp3Nw>



Figure 15: X post from November 21, 2020 ³⁵

Translation: Illegalise an opposition party? Illegalise the only party that stands up to them? We've never been closer to a genuine dictatorship!

In addition to the connection made with present political parties, Ventura also makes this connection to past radical-left movements during the PREC. At the solemn session commemorating the 48th anniversary of April 25th in the Assembly of the Republic in 2022, Ventura asks for the president to look at its history and acknowledge the ones who “committed terrorist acts and promoted nationalisations and expropriations as the bandits that they are” (Tilly, 2022, 03:49). He asks the president to acknowledge that the revolution would ‘not mean anything’ without the 25th of November having existed, and that the president should not be ‘ashamed’ of celebrating that date since it was “the one who in fact brought Portugal its freedom and democracy” (04:20).

In fact, the 25th of November is a key date for Ventura. In the speech made during the Solemn Session Commemorating November 25 in 2024 (CHEGA TV, 2024b), Ventura states that the April revolution was a time that ‘forgot to create proper citizens’ (00:10). He argues that the time after the revolution was marked by land occupation, destruction of factories, and “blank mandates that arrested, made escape and created more politi-

cal prisoners in the following months” (00:40). He discusses this period of time as a near “soviet dictatorship” (02:50), where left-wing civilians put the parliament under “kidnapping,” and there was a total lack of law and order (03:48). He dedicates his speech to the right-wing commandos that fought during the PREC, saying that Portugal ‘owns its democracy’ to these figures. He uses the comparison of a “past soviet dictatorship threat” to the “current illegal immigration threat,” arguing that both have the risk of taking away the Portuguese identity (02:50).

Ventura thus uses the past to evoke emotions about the current state of the country, arguing that the 25th of November was a time that should be remembered, and that the values it advocated for are being “ignored”, leading to the prioritisation of “bandits” over legitimate security forces. He looks at present day Portugal as the “come-back” of corruption and disorder that existed before the 25th of November, and that, according to him, “April created”. In all, Ventura rewrites this key historical moment in Portugal, illustrating the revolution of 25th of April as a socialist threat, and the coup of the right-wing military forces in 25th of November as the salvation of Portugal. He thus compares the past with the current political climate, arguing for the need of another right-wing intervention to combat the current ‘elitist democracy’. He ends his speech saying “Just as Jaime Neves said during the Ultramar War, it was just like that, ‘When they told us to clean, we cleaned everything.’ We have already started, let’s keep going” (08:43).

4.3.2 Distance from Salazar

In tandem with connecting the dictatorship period with the left, CHEGA attempts to distance itself from this part of Portugal’s past. However, Ventura does this in a nuanced way. Although he condemns the undemocratic nature of Salazar’s rule and states this was not in line with CHEGA’s ideals and principles, Ventura argues that some measures taken during the fascist period should be brought back. CHEGA attempts to show that the party is ‘picking out’ the ‘good’ policies of Salazar, but doing so democratically. Whenever these comparisons are made, Ventura does not explicitly refer to this period of time as a ‘dictatorship’ or uses the term ‘fascism’, but rather ap-

³⁵<https://x.com/andrecventura/status/133016036307836109?s=48&t=VWnUeCZriOh-X3196rp3Nw>

peals to the name of Salazar himself, showcasing his refusal to connect the party with these labels due to their historical relevance.



Figure 16: Figure 16. X post from April 2, 2021 ³⁶

Translation: Have I said things that Salazar would identify with? Maybe! But I've also said things that Francisco Sá Carneiro would identify with. Or Ramalho Eanes. Or Sidónio Pais! I want to be the voice of decent Portuguese people, without complexes! That's the difference with CHEGA!

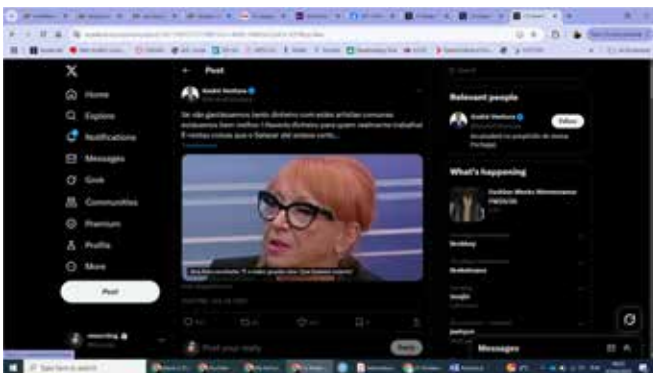


Figure 17: Figure 17. X post from December 21, 2021³⁷

Translation: If we didn't spend so much money on these commie artists, we'd be much better off! There'd be money for those who actually work! It's in these things that Salazar was actually right. . .

³⁶<https://x.com/andrecventura/status/1378000226942869504?s=48&t=VWnUeCZriOh-X3196rp3Nw>
³⁷<https://x.com/andrecventura/status/1451186512712798214?s=46&t=VWnUeCZriOh-X3196rp3Nw>



Figure 18: Figure 18. X post from August 2, 2020³⁸

Translation: Just as with Salazar, I will crush the far left. The difference is that I will do it democratically, with the strength of the people's will. Everyone to Praça do Município, in Lisbon, at 5:30 PM.



Figure 19: Figure 19. X post from February 17, 2022³⁹

Translation: I maintain full personal and political confidence in the deputies Pedro Pinto and Pedro Pessanha. There is no nostalgia for Salazar in CHEGA, but there is also no ideological blindness. Salazar had good things and bad things. Soares did too. Our democracy does as well!

Nonetheless, Ventura still takes inspiration from Salazar's motto "God, homeland, and family," for instance by appealing to this motto in the congress events on the 29th of November 2021 (SIC Notícias, 2021, 01:55), adding the word 'work' in the end to highlight CHEGA's goal of prioritising the nation's workers, and going against

³⁸<https://x.com/andrecventura/status/1289925994233511938?s=46&t=VWnUeCZriOh-X3196rp3Nw>
³⁹<https://x.com/andrecventura/status/1494280406476390400?s=46&t=VWnUeCZriOh-X3196rp3Nw>

those who ‘never did anything and took everything from those who work with dignity’.

Ventura comments on this motto in an interview podcast with Miguel Milhão (Guru Mike Billions, 2024) saying that it was actually not inspired by Salazar but simply the set of values that have been established by CHEGA, and that are so ‘impressive and accurate’ that many other right-wing parties in Europe have adopted it. He highlights for instance the use of a similar motto by the party VOX in Spain.

Nonetheless, when asked whether or not the dictatorial regime was ‘all bad’, Ventura offers quite an impartial response, stating that no regime is ‘all bad’, and that although it did have its problems, Salazar had done a lot of good for the country.

Contrary to what he often does when looking back at the colonial period, Ventura argues that CHEGA’s aim is not to ‘look backwards’ but rather look into the future, and that the past is only important to understand the current political climate. In fact, Ventura and Miguel discuss the fact that the Estado Novo was still part of a period of ‘degeneration’ that began in the 16th century, where the Portuguese lost its economic and commercial hegemony due to the privatisation of the Dutch and English colonisation, and that was made worse with decisions by Salazar. The goal of Ventura is thus to get out of this period, and put the ‘best people’ together to bring back the ‘great Portugueseness’ (Guru Mike Billions, 2024).

4.4 Conclusion

Overall, CHEGA’s monopolisation of historical narratives operates through several key mechanisms: celebrating colonial expansion as a source of national pride while downplaying its violence; reframing the concerns of returnees and ex-combatants as uniquely represented by their party; maintaining friendly relations with former colonies to legitimise colonial narratives; and distancing themselves from Salazar’s regime while selectively embracing certain aspects of it.

This chapter has illustrated how CHEGA strategically employs selective historical narratives to construct and promote a particular vision of Portuguese identity, gaining support from those discontent with the current political climate. By glorifying aspects of Portugal’s colonial past while re-

framing its dictatorial history, CHEGA positions itself as the sole guardian of ‘true’ Portuguese values and traditions. The party’s rhetoric demonstrates a clear pattern of historical revisionism that serves its contemporary political agenda. By constructing this selective version of Portugal’s past, CHEGA creates an exclusionary definition of Portuguese identity that undermines democratic values of inclusivity and pluralism, which ignores a significant percentage of the voting population by alienating people from a colonised background (Kalter, 2022).

5 Discussion

5.1 Introduction

The thematic analysis of CHEGA discourse has demonstrated how CHEGA strategically employs two major historical periods in its political campaign: the colonial era and the fascist period. By selectively invoking these pasts, the party constructs a narrow and exclusionary vision of Portuguese identity, positioning itself as the sole custodian of national restoration. This chapter, as outlined in Chapter 1, situates these findings within the broader theoretical and scholarly frameworks outlined in the literature review, highlighting how CHEGA’s use of historical memory aligns with other patterns observed in right-wing populist movements. In doing so, it answers the research question: How does CHEGA use historical memory of colonialism and fascism in its populist discourse?

5.2 Luso-tropicalist discourse

CHEGA presents colonialism as a period when Portugal expanded its international influence and strengthened its foreign policy, while distancing itself from negative portrayals of colonisation. By reviving the notion of Portuguese exceptionalism and luso-tropicalism (Meuer, 2023; Peralta, 2022; Vala et al., 2008), CHEGA constructs a sanitised version of the colonial past that erases histories of violence and hierarchy. This is not simply a nostalgic gesture, but rather a strategic move that, as Wendt’s (1992) social constructivism suggests, actively shapes the boundaries of who is considered truly Portuguese. The significance of this finding lies in how CHEGA’s discourse normalises

exclusion and justifies conservative sentiments under the guise of historical pride, illustrating the process by which national identity is redefined to serve populist goals.

Moreover, CHEGA's manipulation of memory operates as a form of identity politics, echoing but also innovating upon the strategies of other European populist parties (Couperus & Tortola, 2019; Wodak, 2015). Like Italy's FdI and the Netherlands' Freedom Party, CHEGA deploys nostalgia to counteract national shame and foster pride in Portugal's historical achievements. By tapping into luso-tropicalist narratives, CHEGA is able to claim a special status for Portugal, a nation that, in this particular lens, was inherently tolerant and multicultural, thus deflecting accusations of racism or xenophobia. By monopolising national memory, CHEGA positions itself as the guardian of an exclusive, 'authentic' Portugal, effectively redrawing the boundaries of national belonging. Ventura amplifies this message through charismatic, informal social media communication, sustaining what Meijen and Vermeersch (2023) call the 'illusion of underdogism', a critical populist device that allows CHEGA to maintain its outsider appeal even as it enters the mainstream (Brown et al., 2021). This finding is significant because it demonstrates how historical memory can be weaponised to mainstream far-right ideologies, a phenomenon that Mudde (2007) and Wodak (2015) identify as central to the populist radical right.

5.3 The rebellion of memory

CHEGA employs a more complex strategy when it comes to Portugal's fascist period, capitalising on the historical revisionism surrounding Portugal's perception of the PREC (Silva & Ferreira, 2018). CHEGA's deliberate alignment with the anti-PREC rhetoric of post-revolution right-wing governments represents a strategic attempt to reframe the legacy of the Carnation Revolution, shifting public blame for contemporary economic hardship and political volatility onto the revolutionary process itself. This calculated intervention in the ongoing discussions over national memory is crucial for CHEGA's ideological positioning. By depicting the PREC as a period of chaos and extremism, CHEGA seeks to delegitimise the role of the Carnation Revolution in establishing Portuguese democracy and position itself

as the corrective force against what it portrays as the enduring failures of leftist governance. This strategy directly challenges the recent scholarly and societal efforts to reclaim and valorise the democratic achievements of the revolution, going against what Loff (2000) terms the 'rebellion of memory'.

The significance of this reframing lies in its capacity to mobilise discontent and foster a sense of collective victimhood, echoing the demand-side explanations of far-right success outlined by Golder (2016) and Rydgren (2007). By recasting the revolutionary era as the origin of Portugal's decline, CHEGA not only legitimises its exclusionary and authoritarian policy proposals but also amplifies the polarisation of national identity. This process exemplifies Mudde's (2007) model of populist discourse, wherein the party divides society into a virtuous 'people', those who reject the revolutionary legacy, and a 'corrupt elite' responsible for national decline.

5.4 The reframing of decolonisation and the returnees

Another key finding of this research is that CHEGA redirects attention away from Portuguese atrocities during the fascist and colonial periods, focusing instead on the consequences for Portuguese returnees and ex-combatants. By actively reshaping public memory of the Portuguese Colonial War, CHEGA transcends the established dichotomies in post-1974 discourse identified by Campos (2017) and Cardina (2023).

Whereas mainstream narratives have depicted the war as wasteful and best forgotten, CHEGA deliberately appeals to the over half-million returnees and ex-combatants who experienced decolonisation as a period of loss, dispossession, and erasure (Kalter, 2022). This is not just a reflection of collective memory, but a targeted strategy to mobilise a demographic whose grievances have been largely marginalised in public debate.

As Kalter (2022) argues, the return of settlers from the former colonies around the time of the Carnation Revolution significantly altered Portugal's demographic landscape, increasing the population by an estimated 5 to 9 percent. Their integration into Portuguese society was far from seamless, facing systemic barriers related to citizenship, socio-economic status, race and gen-

der. These demographic transformations did not stop with the returnees. Between 1985 and 2007, the number of African nationals living in Portugal grew from about 35,000 to 148,000. Similarly, the Brazilian population rose from approximately 3,600 in 1980 to over 107,000 by 2008, ultimately becoming the country's largest foreign community, with nearly 370,000 residents by the end of 2023 (Kalter, 2022). These subsequent waves of migration increased the difficulty for careful assimilation of Portuguese returnees, further diversifying Portuguese society and intensifying anxieties about national identity and belonging.

Many returnees experienced their relocation not as reintegration, but as the collapse of what these groups had viewed as a harmonious, multi-racial colonial society (Kalter, 2022). The ideals and efforts they had associated with developing the overseas territories were seen as erased, and the homes they had built and fostered were taken from them.

CHEGA draws on this unresolved historical tension, exploiting the contrast between the dominant narrative of the Carnation Revolution and the experience of returnees. This strategic exploitation mirrors tactics seen in other countries with colonial legacies, where groups like the French *pid-noirs*⁴⁰ tend to support far-right parties due to shared nostalgia for an empire that fosters support for a strong state, an ethnically defined nationality, and hierarchical racial divisions (Veugeliers et al., 2015). In Portugal, CHEGA's mobilization of returnee grievances and anxieties about demographic change serves to reinforce exclusionary definitions of national identity and to legitimise its broader populist rhetoric.

This finding is significant because it demonstrates how CHEGA's memory politics are not merely retrospective, but actively shape contemporary political cleavages and voter alignments. It also highlights the party's ability to transform marginalised historical experiences into a source of political capital, fuelling its rapid ascent to the third-largest parliamentary force in 2024 (Chamusca, 2024). While the full social and political consequences of CHEGA's rise remain to be

seen, this research shows how the manipulation of historical memory can serve as a means for the mainstreaming of far-right ideology and the reconfiguration of national identity in Portugal.

5.5 Implications

5.5.1 The construction of Portuguese identity

The findings show how CHEGA constructs a specific vision of Portuguese identity through selective historical narratives. Drawing on Wendt's (1992) theory of social constructivism, it is possible to see how CHEGA claims exclusive ownership of national pride in Portugal's colonial past, presenting itself as the only political force capable of restoring Portugal's perceived former greatness.

This monopolization of historical narratives has several implications for Portuguese democracy. By redefining collective memory and public perception of its political opponents, CHEGA portrays contemporary political conflicts as continuations of past ideological struggles. The party frames left-wing parties as threats to democracy while simultaneously presenting itself as the guardian of 'true' democracy, exemplified by its emphasis on historical moments like the 25th of November as instances when Portugal was 'truly' Portuguese.

Aligning with Foucault's (1969) concept of discourse as a socially constructed system of knowledge and power, CHEGA's historical narrative is not about recovering objective truth but about shaping memory to serve political goals. Like similar movements across Europe (Couperus et al., 2022), the treatment of colonialism and dictatorship in CHEGA's rhetoric reflects strategic calculations based on differences in public perception. While the dictatorship remains widely viewed as a dark period of human rights violations and repression, the colonial period is often remembered by Portuguese citizens as a 'golden age' that brought international prestige. By identifying with those elements of history that resonate most positively with the population, CHEGA maximises support while minimising potential backlash, going from a peripheral to a mainstream party in Portuguese politics (Brown et al., 2021).

⁴⁰French returnees from Algeria. After Algeria gained independence in 1961–1962, the vast majority of its European settler population, numbering around one million, departed the country. Approximately four-fifths of them fled, with most resettling in mainland France.

5.5.2 Democratic repercussions

The consequences of CHEGA's selective historical narratives extend beyond political discourse to affect national cohesion. By constructing an exclusionary definition of Portuguese identity based on pride in colonial achievements and selective interpretations of the fascist era, CHEGA divides the population between those who align with this particular vision and those who challenge it. This division is central to CHEGA's populist political aims, and it potentially threatens the foundations of Portuguese democracy by legitimising exclusionary policies, normalising the marginalization of dissenting voices, and undermining democratic values of inclusivity and pluralism.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated how CHEGA's strategic manipulation of historical memory serves multiple political functions: it legitimises exclusionary policies through seemingly non-racist luso-tropicalist narratives, positions itself as a corrective to the enduring failures of leftist governance, and mobilises previously marginalised historical experiences, particularly those of returnees. These strategies contribute to CHEGA's broader aim of presenting itself as the authentic defender of Portuguese identity and securing mainstream political legitimacy.

CHEGA's success in exploiting the gap between official narratives of decolonisation and the lived experiences of returnees illustrates how populist movements can transform historical grievances into contemporary political capital. Similarly, by reframing Portugal's fascist past through selective interpretation and projection, CHEGA creates a narrative environment where authoritarian tendencies can be normalised under the guise of national restoration.

These discursive strategies reflect the constructivist processes through which national identity is contested and redefined. Rather than engaging with historical complexity, CHEGA presents a simplified version of Portuguese history that divides society between those who align with its particular vision and those who challenge it. Understanding these mechanisms is crucial for recognising how populist and far-right movements can exploit national memory to advance politi-

cal agendas, making it possible to identify and counter attempts to monopolise the interpretation of national history for political gain.

6 Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This capstone has examined how CHEGA strategically employs historical memory of colonialism and fascism in its populist discourse to construct a specific vision of Portuguese national identity and advance its political agenda. CHEGA's engagement with Portugal's contested past is neither random nor incidental but rather a calculated approach to mobilise support and legitimise its position within the Portuguese political landscape.

6.2 Summary

Chapter 1 of this research provided an introduction to the topic of CHEGA's use of historical memory in Portugal. It posed the research question: How does CHEGA use historical memory of colonialism and fascism in its populist discourse? And it explained the relevance of this research both within academia and in policy issues.

Chapter 2 explained and justified the methodology used in this research, detailing the multi-method qualitative approach that combines literature review with thematic analysis of official documents and social media communications. It addressed key limitations and acknowledged researcher positionality while outlining measures taken to ensure analytical rigor and transparency.

Chapter 3 examined the interplay between populist far-right movements and memory politics within the Portuguese context. It analysed right-wing populism through Mudde's (2007) framework of populism, authoritarianism, and nativism, while exploring both supply and demand-side explanations for CHEGA's emergence. The frameworks proposed by Meijen and Vermeersch (2023), Cabrero and Sierp (2024), and Couperus and Tortola (2019) provided analytical approaches for examining how historical memory is strategically deployed in populist discourse through victimhood narratives and selective historical revisionism. The chapter highlighted how CHEGA has challenged Portugal's perceived immunity to far-

right politics, benefitting from political instability and Ventura's charismatic leadership.

Chapter 4 presented the results of the thematic analysis of CHEGA discourse, demonstrating how CHEGA monopolises historical narratives through several strategic mechanisms. These include glorifying colonial expansion, positioning itself as the unique representative of returnees and ex-combatants, maintaining seemingly positive relations with former colonies to legitimise colonial narratives, and selectively embracing aspects of Salazar's regime.

Chapter 5 situated the research findings within broader theoretical and scholarly frameworks. Drawing on social constructivism, the chapter demonstrated how CHEGA strategically employs colonial and fascist memory to construct a Portuguese national identity shaped through intersubjective social processes (Wendt, 1992). It showed how CHEGA's historical narratives function as deliberate forms of revisionist discourse that do not aim to recover historical truth, but rather to reshape collective memory in ways that serve the party's ideological agenda. Through luso-tropicalist discourse (Meuer, 2023; Peralta, 2022; Vala et al., 2008), CHEGA reconstructs a version of colonial history that normalises exclusion under the guise of historical pride. Its reframing of the PREC period and the broader legacy of leftist governance challenges the 'rebellion of memory' trend (Loff, 2000), aiming to delegitimise the democratic achievements of the Carnation Revolution and the subsequent political order. Furthermore, the party mobilises the grievances of returnees who, as Kalter (2022) argues, have been marginalised in public discourse, echoing patterns seen among groups such as the French *pied-noirs* (Veugelers et al., 2015). The Chapter concluded that CHEGA's manipulation of historical memory contributes to social division, normalises authoritarian tendencies and poses a threat to democratic pluralism.

6.3 Positionality and limitations

As outlined in Chapter 2, my positionality as a Portuguese citizen with familial ties to the country's colonial history shaped both my access to and interpretation of CHEGA's discourse. My cultural and linguistic proximity facilitated a more nuanced engagement with the party's rhetoric and

provided a historically embedded perspective on how these narratives continue to resonate in contemporary Portuguese society.

However, several limitations constrain the scope and generalizability of this research. First, the focus on official party communications such as manifestos, speeches, and selected social media posts means that the analysis privileges top-down articulations of identity politics. This leads to a lack of interpretation of the ways in which CHEGA's discourse is adapted or contested by supporters at the grassroots level. Second, while the research includes social media content, it is limited to publicly available posts. Thus, private groups, direct messages, and face-to-face interactions remain inaccessible. Third, the temporal scope of the research captures a specific political moment, and does not account for the longer-term evolution of the party's identity strategies, the reception across different regions and demographic groups, and the consequences their use of memory might have in the future of Portuguese politics.

6.4 Scholarly contribution and future research

The findings of this research contribute to broader scholarly understandings of memory politics in contemporary Portugal and its implications for democratic governance. By examining how CHEGA selectively engages with historical memory, this research addresses a significant gap in the literature regarding the party's use of colonial and dictatorial memory in its populist discourse. While some scholars have argued that CHEGA focuses primarily on contemporary issues rather than historical memory, this research demonstrates that the party strategically employs historical revisionism and selective memory to advance its nationalist agenda.

Future research could expand on these findings by examining how CHEGA's historical narratives are received and interpreted by different segments of Portuguese society, particularly among younger generations with no direct experience of colonialism or dictatorship. Additionally, comparative studies exploring similarities and differences in how populist far-right parties across Europe engage with historical memory could provide valuable insights into broader patterns of memory use in contemporary European politics.

As CHEGA continues to gain political prominence in Portugal, understanding how the party leverages historical memory remains crucial for comprehending its appeal and assessing its potential impact on Portuguese democracy and identity. By critically examining these dynamics, it is possible to better understand the relationship between memory, identity, and politics in Portugal.

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Humanities

Canine Accounts:

Nationalism, Violence and Postcolonial Resistance in *The Dog of Tetwal* and *Old Man Slave and the Mastiff*

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Tug of War. Photographed by the author.

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Abstract

From mythical hounds to man's best friend, canine figures traverse in and out of our daily landscapes. They are employed in postcolonial literature as metaphors for, and subjects to, colonial control. This capstone analyses the role of the dog in representing nationalism, violence and resistance in postcolonial literature from India and Martinique. I close read *The Dog of Tetwal* by Saadat Hasan Manto and excerpts from *Slave Old Man* by Patrick Chamoiseau, analysing both the figure of the dog as well as the landscapes it is placed in. This capstone builds off frameworks by Giorgio Agamben, Achille Mbembe, Sundhya Walther, Frantz Fanon and Edouard Glissant to situate implications of political conflict within the postcolonial. It provides insight into how the dog shatters reductive binaries and encourages relational modes of postcolonial resistance. I look at how without speaking, the dog creates its own counter-hegemonic modes of representing subjugation under colonial rule, depicted by both Manto and Chamoiseau through descriptions of the senses and interactions with the surroundings. Through a close reading and literary analysis of the dog, this capstone argues how Manto and Chamoiseau subvert dominant colonial discourse, serving as a multispecies critique of colonial violence and resistance.

Keywords and phrases: *Posthuman, Oppression, Bare life, Anthropomorphism, Créolité, Political landscapes*

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1 Introduction

I do not admit that the dog in the manger has the final right to the manger, even though he may have lain there for a very long time. I do not admit, for instance, that a great wrong has been done to the Red Indians of America, or the black people of Australia. I do not admit that a wrong has been done to those people by the fact that a stronger race, a higher grade race, or, at any rate, a more worldly-wise race, to put it that way, has come in and taken their place

— Winston Churchill

Winston Churchill said this at a 1937 Palestine Commission referring to Palestinians. Churchill made this claim to assert that indigenous peoples do not have a right to their land, justifying occupation and settler colonialism. These are not words of a layman, but of a head of state. Such statements from the prime minister of the British Empire legitimise centuries of colonial violence. With this proclamation, Churchill establishes a confronting hierarchical binary between indigenous peoples and the white European ‘higher grade race’. Churchill’s declaration positions not only indigenous people as expendable but non-humans as well; it reflects how the coloniser perceives and thus justifies its tyrannies. Literary works by Saadat Hasan Manto and Patrick Chamoiseau have transformed Churchill’s metaphorical reference to the dog into a protagonist of lived historical postcolonial landscapes. They have taken the colonisers’ logic and positioned it in their literature. The presence of the dog through its creative imagery functions as a dismantling of the colonial apparatus through its own terminology. Manto’s narration of the devastations of the partition of India in 1947 displays a world where “even dogs will have to be either Hindustani or Pakistani,” dogs that, like the one in Churchill’s quote, have coexisted with people in the terrain long before and despite political conflict (83). The mastiff in Chamoiseau’s literary landscape too has been treated like a tool from the master’s arsenal, reduced to the utility it provides; a weapon “he had ordered [...] directly from Europe” (8). Manto and Chamoiseau take typical notions of the dog (like Churchill’s) and subvert its

positionality through their representations of canine figures. They place the dog into political climates and demonstrate how it is not merely a passive element of the landscape but holds discursive potential within anthropocentric fields. This analysis explores how Patrick Chamoiseau and Saadat Hasan Manto conceive of the dog’s potential and illustrate it within their respective literary realms.

This analysis examines the extent to which the canine works as a representational device, which I use to explore larger themes such as nationalism, violence, and resistance. While there has been literature exploring each of these pieces separately, current scholarship neglects to extract a common theme/pattern around canine representations across literary landscapes. Therefore, this study focuses on two fictional works that employ the canine figure in a postcolonial setting, yet within different contexts. The two stories that this project focuses on are *The Dog of Tetwal* by Saadat Hasan Manto and excerpts from *Old Man Slave and The Mastiff* by Patrick Chamoiseau. This project demonstrates how the use of the figure of the dog in *The Dog of Tetwal* and *Old Man Slave and The Mastiff* is a site upon which violence is exerted. This offers insight into collective experiences of violence, resistance and nationalism across postcolonial landscapes.

2 Setting the Stage

The Dog of Tetwal is set against the backdrop of the partition of India and Pakistan and features a dog that has found himself caught between the borders of the two newly instated nations. The story showcases this dog interacting with both the Indian and the Pakistani military camps and being prescribed a national identity by them, despite being oblivious to the political tensions between the two states. The dog is a representation of the millions of people who had to suddenly pick a side to belong to despite never having associated with these national identities before. This imagery raises several questions, such as ‘Why make the dog the protagonist, not just a person? Is the dog merely a placeholder for the human, or does it hold separate value?’. Susan Haris explores the question: “What if Manto had presented a woman or a child instead of a dog? Perhaps it would have been then read as a depiction of gra-

tuitous violence instead of this subtle tale of patriotism" ("Cafe Dissensus"). Through attempts at answering these questions, one can uncover not only the role of the dog but also gain a further understanding of the manifestation of patriotism during the Indian Partition. Readers gain insight into the impact of coloniality and nationalism on colonised peoples and how it forces them to confront their identities at individual, collective and societal levels.

Patrick Chamoiseau's *Old Man Slave and The Mastiff* follows an enslaved old man and a mastiff, both of whom were forced to endure the atrocities of the slave ships before being subjected to work on a plantation. The mastiff, despite being forced to endure the terrors of the boat, had found itself becoming an extension of the master, tasked with attacking any slave who tried to escape the plantation. This duty makes the dog hated and feared by the slaves whilst remaining subjugated by the master. This text depicts both the traumas and collective memories of the enslaved in Martinique, as well as the lingering impacts of subjugation. By existing in a space in between, the mastiff makes readers question the extreme binarism with which ideas surrounding freedom and captivity, the self and the other, and subjugation and resistance are explored. It layers these themes to show how violence accumulates and functions in colonial regimes. Of course, this operates under the assumption that the dog would experience subjugation the same way a human would, which once again poses the question of what a dog, in particular, has to offer a story like this one, and what would change if this were not an inter-species interaction. Kristen Meylor writes, "Despite the molosse's instinctual desire to devour bloody flesh, he is the slave's cross-species twin: an animal representation of the man's suffering" (85). Meylor leaves room to uncover whether the animal, by being a representation of the man's suffering reduces its own, or whether it possesses a relational existence. Through similar existing analyses and a close reading of this story, this paper demonstrates the impacts of the slave trade, the experiences of the oppressed, and what it means to resist.

3 Methodology

This capstone conducts a close reading of the two literary works, analyzing the canine figures through critical frameworks of postcoloniality, the posthuman, nationalism, and violence. In her work, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak mentions that 'the notion of what the work cannot say becomes important' (28). With this, Spivak asserts the potentials of silence, pointing out how the Subaltern is rarely the one with the voice, making their absence all the more necessary to be acknowledged. This close reading of these stories explores how the dog walks the silent space of what cannot be said and still, without verbalising the experiences of the colonised, depicts them in ways that hegemonic discourse cannot. The first chapter analyses *The Dog of Tetwal*, combining intensive close reading, pre-existing analyses of the story, and frameworks by scholars like Giorgio Agamben and Achille Mbembe. Similarly, the second chapter analyses *Old Man Slave and The Mastiff* through a synthesis of self-conducted close reading, pre-existing analyses of the story, and scholarly works by Edouard Glissant and Frantz Fanon amongst others. The literature review outlines the various scholarly perspectives on terms like nationalism, violence, resistance and the posthuman, furthermore contextualising their use throughout the capstone. The conclusion acts as a synthesis of ideas explored through both chapters, identifying similarities and differences in the authors use of the canine within their respective literary landscapes.

4 Literature Review

4.1 The Nation and Nationalism

The notion of a nation and, in turn, nationalism has been explored by a great number of influential scholars (Anderson; Chatterjee; Suleri; Gandhi). For example, George Orwell explores the fallacies of nationalism in "Notes on Nationalism", describing it as "habit of identifying oneself with a single nation or other unit, placing it beyond good and evil and recognising no other duty than that of advancing its interests" (Orwell Foundation). In his diaries, Orwell explains that there is nothing wrong with having affiliations or attachments to

particular beliefs, but he problematises nationalism in particular for holding certain beliefs as the absolute standard by which all other truths are measured against. While essential to discourse on nationalism, one cannot ignore Orwell's background as an English writer, emerging from a colonial state. Both the notion of a nation and of nationalism are colonial impositions, yet the research has been dominated by Eurocentric voices (Chatterjee 4). When analysing nationalism within the postcolonial landscape, it is necessary to expand the canon to incorporate voices from theorists who themselves have navigated postcolonial spaces. For example, in her work *A Rhetoric of English India*, Sara Suleri develops structures of feeling associated with the postcolonial identity. She explains: "In colonial encounter, a disembodied nation of cultural exchange merges 'love' with 'fear and loathing,' thus creating a historical context where nationalism is synonymous with terror" (4). Here, she showcases how in a postcolonial context (in this case, India), the love for one's nation is inextricable from the loathing for the coloniser, thus creating a sense of nationhood that is rooted in terror and anxiety. Suleri's assertion both builds on and in doing so contradicts Orwell's more simplistic definition of nationalism, by portraying it not only as an idealisation of a state but a more affectively loaded experience.

Partha Chatterjee is furthering this notion by exploring nationalism through the spiritual and the material domain. In *The Nation and its Fragments*, Chatterjee sets anticolonial nationalism apart from the Eurocentric gaze it is usually perceived through. He starts by positing that nationalism is an "European import"; a product of colonialism (4). Chatterjee formulates two different types of anticolonial nationalisms: the 'material domain', which comprises technology, the economy, and science and the 'spiritual domain', which comprises cultural history (4-5). Chatterjee states, "the greater one's success in imitating Western skills in the material domain, therefore, the greater the need to preserve the distinctness of one's spiritual culture" (6). Chatterjee's ideas, while functioning in a different framework, affirm the relationship between Western influence and decolonial nationhood established by Suleri in the affective dimension.¹

¹Which I would've loved to explore further had I the time, word count or resources!

Michael Billig introduces the concept of banal nationalism, elucidating on a nationalism that is more institutionalised in the modern context. Billig explains, "The metonymic image of banal nationalism is not a flag which is being consciously waved with fervent passion; it is the flag hanging unnoticed on the public building" (8). Banal nationalism is envisioned as that which is inculcated into daily life; it is existing not only in performative bursts but, instead, within the domain of the quotidian. Billig points to Arendt's suggestion that "banality is not synonymous with harmlessness", which suggests that while banal activities may appear passive, they produce a collective power that supports state violence (qtd. in Billig p.7).

This background on nationalism is essential to conduct a close reading of *The Dog of Tetwal*, where patriotism is almost synchronous with belonging. Nationalism holds prevalence in postcolonial criticism, especially in the context of this story, since the patriotism imposed on the dog is a product of British colonialism and rule. Therefore, these theoretical frameworks are essential to thoroughly understand the story in its entirety, and particularly, the role of the dog.

4.2 Violence and Resistance

Violence as a theme is often presented alongside discourse on the colonial. It is not only physical but rather presents itself institutionally, with lasting sociological and psychological effects. In his seminal work, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon delves into how violence is inherent in colonialism and, therefore, a necessary element of resistance. He states that "colonialism is not a thinking machine, nor a body endowed with reasoning faculties. It is violence in its natural state, and it will only yield when confronted with greater violence." (Fanon 61). Considering the historical contexts of these two literary pieces, violence permeates as a precondition. An example of this is the transatlantic slave trade. The middle passage, as Edouard Glissant describes it in the opening paragraph of his book *The Poetics of Relation*, evocatively showcases a very literal form of this violence:

Imagine two hundred human beings crammed into a space barely capable of containing a third of them. Imagine vomit, naked flesh, swarming lice,

the dead slumped, the dying crouched. Imagine, if you can, the swirling red of mounting to the deck, the ramp they climbed, the black sun on the horizon, vertigo. (5)

In this section Glissant illustrates the unfathomably violent reality of colonialism, confirming Fanon's assertion of the necessity for resistance to be violent. In *Discourse on Colonialism*, Aimé Césaire discusses the violent nature of colonialism as not only inflicted upon the colonised but as a mechanism that "works to decivilize the coloniser, to brutalize him in the true sense of the word, to degrade him, to awaken him to buried instincts, to covetousness, violence, race hatred, and moral relativism" (35). Césaire showcases how colonial violence is two-sided, degrading its subjects and its perpetrators. This exploration of violence is especially relevant to understanding the mastiff in *Old Man Slave and The Mastiff* (see chapter 2). Walter Benjamin in *A Critique of Violence* creates a distinction between law-making and law-preserving violence. Referring to the state, he claims that it

fears this violence simply for its law-making character, being obliged to acknowledge it as lawmaking whenever external powers force it to concede them the right to conduct warfare, and classes force it to concede them the right to strike. (241)

Here, lawmaking defines a type of violence that establishes legal order, while law-preserving is violence that is employed to preserve a preexisting legal order. Lawmaking violence permeates through *The Dog of Tetwal*, evident when Harnam Singh states, "Like the Pakistanis, Pakistani dogs will be shot" (Manto 83). A soldier asserting that all Pakistanis will be shot validates committing violence, whether necessary or not, simply by justifying it with the 'law'. Slavoj Žižek builds on Benjamin's frameworks for violence to distinguish between subjective, objective, and systemic violence. Žižek defines subjective violence as the most visible of the three. It is the type of violence described in the paragraph above from *The Poetics of Relation*: violence that is evident. Žižek claims that "we should learn to step back, to disentangle ourselves from the fascinating lure of

this directly visible 'subjective' violence, violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent." (1). He redirects focus instead onto objective and systemic violence. In the context of *Old Man Slave and The Mastiff*, close reading helps to uncover the violence that is hidden beneath the subjective violence of the mastiff towards the slaves. These frameworks portray the expansive and multidimensional forms violence presents itself. They are essential lenses to close read this genre of literature, where violence is not explicitly presented to the reader but rather needs to be dug out.

4.3 The Posthuman

Donna Haraway in *The Companion Species Manifesto* (2003) explores the relationship between nature and culture, using the intersection of dogs and people as a way to understand how they are bonded in "significant otherness" (8). She describes the relationship between human and animal through an Althusserian lens, stating that

Today, through our ideologically loaded narratives of their lives, animals "hail" us to account for the regimes in which they and we must live. We "hail" them into constructs of nature and culture, with major consequences of life and death, health and illness, longevity and extinction. (17)

This interweaving forms a bond that makes animals appealing subjects for literary pursuits as they are not a separate category from the human but rather co-established through their relationship with each other (17). In their work *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering and Queer Affect*, Mel Y. Chen furthers Haraway's argument by integrating it into the political realm: "The anima, animus, animal, and animate are, I argue, not vagaries or templatic zones of undifferentiated matter, but in fact work as complexly racialized and indeed humanized notions" (7). While Haraway situates the animal as co-existent with the human, Chen radicalises this notion by positioning it within humanistic hierarchies, including race and gender. This assertion is necessary to contextualise the canine figure in Manto and Chamoiseau's work, both of whom explore these hierarchies within and beside the spectrum of the oppressor and the oppressed.

Animals find themselves protagonists of a vast variety of stories with differing genres from Franz Kafka's novella of existentialist dread, *The Metamorphosis* (1972), to George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1946), to Aesop's Fables, such as *The Fox and The Hare*. Using what Haraway refers to as "cohabitation or co-evolution" stories (4), this capstone project analyses how the canine figure is employed to disrupt humanist boundaries and colonial narratives central to the postcolonial literary landscape. This literature review offers a contextual foundation for the recurring terms mentioned in this capstone. The first chapter focuses on nationalism within *The Dog of Tetwal* and the second chapter navigates violence and resistance in the *Old Man Slave and the Mastiff*.

5 Chapter 1: Becoming and Unbecoming; Chapad Jhun-Jhun and an emergence of nationalism

After 300 years of British rule, India gained Independence in 1947. After independence, the British divided the country in two separate states: a Hindu Majority (India) and a Muslim Majority (Pakistan). This division resulted in one of the largest and most gruesome migrations in history as millions of people fled their homes to move to the state that they "belonged" to (Britannica; Talbot 420). The Partition of the Indian Subcontinent uprooted and massacred millions of families and their histories (Britannica; Talbot 420; Ali 115). Saadat Hasan Manto, an Urdu writer born in an undivided India, represents the loss, violence, and trauma of the partition in his works. Throughout his short yet prolific career, he wrote 22 short story collections, a novel, several radio plays, and three collections of essays, many of which play a central role in conveying the pain of the partition. His political work, specifically *Thanda Gosht*, was charged with obscenity, for which Manto had to face trial (Gazelle). While most of his work is fictional, Manto himself was impacted by the partition. He was forced to migrate from Bombay, where he felt he belonged, to Lahore, a move that left him with trauma and anguish (The New Yorker). His satirisation of the nationalism that emerged post-independence and

post-partition reflects these feelings in his stories.

The Dog of Tetwal is one of these short stories. Set in the village of Tetwal, the contested territory of Kashmir, a dog moves between the newly established borders of India and Pakistan. Ending up at their respective military camps, it befriends soldiers on both sides. However, when each side discovers the dog's fraternisation with the other camp, they ostracise him and eventually shoot him dead. This story is one of Manto's most famous works, accredited by the Washington Independent Review of Books "perhaps as a metaphor for Manto himself" (Washington Independent Review of Books). Susan Haris states

The politics of reading a story with an animal almost always dissolves into an examination of imagery, and critical discussion has focused on obvious tropes such as the innocent confusion of the dog to stand in for the helplessness of victims under Partition. (Cafe Dissensus)

As Haris points out, the notion of the protagonist being an animal is typically perceived as imagery for the experiences of victims under the partition. This proves helpful in representing the helplessness of the lives uprooted due to a geopolitical identity prescribed to them. Depicting it through the experience of a 'stray' dog with no such identity tethered to it depoliticises the conflict. It focuses specifically on the inanity of the experience and its impact on lives. Manto's ability to create this powerful imagery that applies to the suffering of both sides of the border makes this story a seminal read and an impactful literary work. However, the reading of this story runs the risk of being reduced to just an examination of imagery and, in the process, neglecting the dog as a site of violence in itself. This story necessitates a multi-dimensional analysis that ventures beyond reading the dog solely as metaphorical. This essay attempts to explore the same.

Written from a third-person omniscient point of view, *The Dog of Tetwal* avoids anthropomorphising the dog or attributing it a distinctly human voice. The language used in the original version also provides insight into the story's context. Urdu is the primary language in the story. However, Manto ensures not to use 'High Urdu' or academic Urdu but instead uses colloquial swear words and

slang to represent the working-class backgrounds of the soldiers and the vernacular of their region (Singh 5). Some examples are 'keede makawde', which in English has been translated to "creepy-crawly" (Manto 85) and 'moti si gaali', which in the story translates to "mighty oath" (82). 'Moti si gaali', directly translated, would mean 'fat abuse'. The translation into English homogenises significant cultural linguistic elements. Rosy Singh explains, "Only a storyteller with Manto's cultural background and linguistic competence (Urdu, Punjabi and English), broadmindedness and boldness could have done this kind of extensive mixing, particularly in those dark days of extreme intolerance" (5). Manto uses Urdu in most of the story's prose, while the poems incorporated are all in Punjabi, as is the occasional use of slang (Singh 5). An example is the recurring use of "oye" by both the Indian and the Pakistani soldiers: Harnam Singh asks, "Oye, show me the identification" (82), and Himmat Khan exclaims, "Oye, where were you last night" (83). This term is not translated but left as is in the English version of the story. The closest interpretation of 'oye' in English is an informal way to address someone. The use of the English language in the original version of the story includes several military terms like "wireless operator" and "platoon commander" (83). While these words don't exist in Urdu or Hindi, them being in English also distances them from the familiarity and comfort of the soldiers. It creates a division between the language they speak naturally and the 'official' language they were taught, emphasising how this conflict seems even more artificially imposed. It could also portray the partition as more of a colonial product.

Despite the dog's central role in the narrative, the story's first half focuses on the soldiers' lives in their respective camps and the life that continues beyond them. The following quote exemplifies how nature, through its elements such as the wind, birds and flowers, remains untouched by the political strife at the border. Manto writes:

Oblivious to the battle on the peaks and slopes, nature was immersed in its necessary work—the birds chirped as before, the flowers continued to bloom, and lazy honey bearing bees sleepily sipped nectar in the old, time-honoured way. (80)

Descriptions like this one are not divided by a border; it is here that he sets the same scene for both sides, showing that nature does not express itself differently as an effect of these newly established borders (80). The ability of nature to do its "necessary work", for the bees to be able to continue their lives "sleepily", exists in stark contrast with the soldiers in their camps (80). He describes "The soldiers on both sides of the mountains had been restless, as no decisive action was taking place. Lying in their positions, they would get bored and then attempt to recite shers to one another" (80). Unlike the bees, the soldiers' reverie arises from being unable to do their "necessary work." Words here, such as "restless" and "bored," suggest a lack of fulfilment, confronting the typical associations attributed to the role of soldiers, whom patriotic narratives would depict as heroic and brave. The names of the head Lieutenants, Harnam Singh and Himmat Khan, are also worth noting here. Their first names are both Punjabi and not specific to either religion. They represent a merged culture and a past that does not identify differences between Hindu and Muslim or Indian and Pakistani. Their last names, however, showcase their side. Khan is a Muslim surname, and Singh is a Hindu surname. Kanupriya Arya notes that "'Himmat' followed by Khan becomes a Muslim name, and if 'Singh' comes after Himmat, it would acquire a Hindu connotation" (740). This points to differences between the two nations being a difference not intrinsic to the nations themselves but lying in labels given to their inhabitants.

Another notable theme is the *shers* or the poems/songs that the soldiers sing. One draws from the Punjabi folktale *Heer Ranjha*.

Heer said, The jogi lied; no one placates a hurt lover.

I have found no one—grown weary, looking

for the one who calls back the departed lover.

A falcon has lost the crane to the crow—see, does it remain silent or weep?

Happy talk and stories to entertain the world are not for the suffering one...

(Manto 82)

This folktale is one of four traditional Punjabi folk tragedies well known on both the Indian and

the Pakistani sides of Punjab. Written by 18th-century poet Waris Shah, it is allegedly based on a true story from the 1500s (Wikipedia). The tale is a canonical aspect of Punjabi culture and "...is popular across religious communities as a story perceived to be quintessentially Punjabi. When Punjabis refer to this tale, they see it not as a justification for ancient hatreds but as a demonstration of ancient ties" (Ayres 65). This quote showcases how the use of Heer Ranjha often functions as a requiem to the unity of the past. The use of this song, which originates from a time before the partition, is a contextualisation of shared historical cultures and origins between both sides. The use of a tragic love story like Heer Ranjha also works as an allegory for the modern political division of India and Pakistan and the separation between the Hindu and Muslim faiths. In Heer Ranjha, Heer and Ranjha are from different tribes and are slain because of their illicit love for each other (Medium). This section of the song that Banta Singh sings encaptures grief and loss through the use of phrases like "no one placates a hurt lover" and "A falcon has lost the crane to the crow" (82), phrases which bear a resemblance to the pain and anguish of the loss of the partition.

The music merges with the soldiers' general melancholy as both sides sing of aching love and loss. The dog's arrival in both camps coincides with their singing. The dog entered the Indian campsite just as Banta had finished a verse of *Heer Ranjha*.

Just as abruptly as Banta Singh had begun to sing, he fell silent. It appeared as if the soil-tinted mountains also had taken on the mantle of grief. After a while, Jamadar Harnam Singh let out a mighty oath at an imaginary object, then lay down. Suddenly, in the melancholy stillness of the last quarter of the night, the barking of a dog began to resound. (82)

In this paragraph, silence is associated with melancholy, while singing and sound act as a brief respite from it. The dog enters the sonic landscape and automatically fills the void left by the song's ending, breaking the 'melancholy stillness' of the night. Subsequently, on the Pakistani side, Bashir is shown singing a love song and then redirecting it to the dog upon noticing

it. He sings, "Where did you spend the night my love, where did you" (Manto 84). As Amit Baishya explains, "...the subsequent call-and-response of songs and barking show that the dog is not simply a 'reactive' being, but one that responds to the call of the other" (156). This "call and response" is an act of recognition. When Harnam Singh cannot fall asleep, all the soldiers wake up and sing to pass the time. By being heard before being seen, the dog enters this collective sonic space with its bark and, in doing so, is recognised by the soldiers as one of them.

In the story's second half, the sound of bullets and gunfire replaces the sound of music. This is apparent in the lines, "He let out a great oath at the dog's mother, raised the gun, aimed, and fired" (Manto 86). The story's soundscape becomes more aggressive and confrontational, marked by loud gunfire instead of soothing and community-oriented singing. Even the pace of the firing has changed. At the beginning of the story, the soldiers "let off a round or two" (80), and by the end, they "took careful aim and fired" (86). The latter suggests precision and intent, making purposeful violence visible and enacting soldierliness. The transition from singing to the sounds of violence parallels the dog's behavioural changes from barking to "its cry [piercing] the sky" (86). His barking becomes part of the natural soundscape, and his cry an intrusion within it.

Considering the crisis of national identity imposed onto people due to the partition, Manto's story signifies how the dog is a symbol or a placeholder for those forced to uproot their lives. Krishna Bera writes, "The death of the dog at the arbitrary will of the soldiers of the two camps stands for the homeless and uprooted people during partition" (60). This is evident when Harnam Singh declares, "Wait... he could be a Pakistani" (Manto 82). This proclamation is the first of a series of statements allotting the dog as 'Hindustani' or 'Pakistani' and consequently as 'traitor' or 'friend'. These labels are not extended to the rest of nature. The birds are not forced to be Indian or Pakistani, i.e., "birds chirped as before," and exist in tandem with the landscape (Manto 80). By labelling the dog, the soldiers extract it from the natural landscape and place it within the political one. Initially, the soldiers mock the idea of a dog being Indian or Pakistani, as "Jamadar Harnam Singh laughed and, looking at the dog,

said, "Oye, show me the identification!" The dog wagged its tail. Harnam Singh laughed heartily. "This is no identification... All dogs wag their tails." (Manto 82). These lines function on several levels, the most explicit one being the irony of asking a dog for identification documents. Harnam Singh seemingly recognises this irony because he laughs as he says it. He laughs at the inanity of the situation and his demand from the dog. This laughter also suggests that Harnam Singh identifies that the dog does not belong to the same landscape as humans and that the borders do not apply to it. The second line, "All dogs wag their tails," is allegorical for the unanimity of lived experience on either side of the border, which is now artificially differentiated. If all dogs wag their tails regardless of the side of the border they are on, then all humans can be perceived to act the same regardless of the border. While Harnam Singh recognises the futility of this question for the dog, this statement simultaneously shows how he fails to recognise it for humans.

After these moments of humour, the dog enters the political landscape. This occurs not when the soldiers are jokingly asking for identification but rather when Harnam Singh assertively states, "Like the Pakistanis, Pakistani dogs will be shot" (83). Harnam Singh's statement works twofold; first, it seals the idea of a 'Pakistani dog' existing, which places the dog into a landscape where it too can be persecuted for being the enemy. Second, it asserts that Pakistanis are an enemy that can be killed inconsequentially. Amit Baishya elucidates, "The chilling imperative in this statement is that the enemy other is like a dog that can be non-criminally put to death" (Baishya 157). Baishya's idea aligns with Giorgio Agamben's framework of the Homo Sacer, one "who may be killed and yet not sacrificed" (8), situating the dog within the landscape of the sovereign. Returning to the story, the dog, as well as the Pakistanis in the eyes of Harnam Singh, can be killed but not sacrificed. The partition of the nation strips them of political existence that must be protected but instead places them equal to bare life that can be discarded. Bare life (*zoe*) is positioned as animal life or biological life that simply exists, while the political existence (*bios*) is the human, with rights and social inclusion (Agamben 8). Both sides perceive the dog as a traitor, noted by Himmat Khan saying, "The punishment for a traitor is death" (Manto

85) and Harnam Singh uttering, "he's coming from there... the enemy camp..." (86). Classifying the dog as a traitor showcases how Indians have become Homo Sacer to the Pakistani state and vice versa despite the recent division. The Homo Sacer refers to the *bios* that has been reduced to the *zoe* and can therefore be killed. Manto sets this emergence of an enemy within consistent references to the culture shared by both sides, like the *shers* and the use of shared language mentioned earlier. This renders the creation of the Homo Sacer as incredibly ironic.

Nevertheless, reducing the dog to a mere symbol of the displaced or of the enemy, as Harnam Singh declares, overlooks claims of relational agency, risking a reductive reading. After all, the dog manages to do what the human is not allowed to: cross the geopolitical boundaries between India and Pakistan. Sundhya Walther, in *Multi-species Modernity: Disorderly Life in Postcolonial Literature*, discusses the canine figure in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*. She explains "This dog's movement across caste boundaries, however, demonstrates the contingent nature of those boundaries, and thus prepares the ground for the challenge to naturalised caste structures" (2). Walther's reading of *Kanthapura* can be applied to *The Dog Of Tetwal* as well since, despite the dog's eventual death, it manages to not only cross national boundaries forbidden to humans, but also gain the affection of the soldiers in both camps. This is showcased in the Indian camp as, "Banta Singh came forward, stroked the dog on its back" (82) and on the Pakistani side as "Bashir sat on one side with the dog, speaking lovingly and harshly by turns" (85). The dog's movement and the soldier's corresponding reaction to it demonstrate, as Walther puts it, the "contingent nature" of the boundaries created (2). It also sets the foundation for reading the dog beyond the imagery it offers to depict human suffering. Using Walther's ideas of the dog inhabiting a space the human cannot, Pramod K Nayar explains that

Manto's dog disturbs the territorial controls and ideas of ownership, producing a new terrain. It is this terrain that the soldiers wrest control against: a terrain that is defined by the dog rather than the humans, by animal movement rather than the polit-

ical technology of mapping, barracks, surveillance, and guns. (5)

Not only does the dog cross the national boundaries, it redefines the landscape, transforming it from being governed territory to just terrain, as depicted by Nayar above. The dog works as a confrontation for the soldiers, acting as a mirror for their jingoistic fixations. Therefore, the killing of the dog reasserts the control it had taken from the soldiers, by unintentionally defying these human-made boundaries. As the dog gets shot at, both Harnam Singh and Himmat Khan gain amusement from its disarray: "Its fear gave both Subedar Himmat Khan and Jamadar Harnam Singh a great deal of pleasure, and they began guffawing" (Manto 86). Nayar's notion of disturbances to territorial control explains why a creature that so recently was a welcome source of joy in their otherwise melancholic reverie was suddenly the target of their cruelty ie. "Everyone was taking a keen interest in the dog, as if all wanted to make it a friend" (82). In many ways, fondness for the dog can be construed as a momentary subversion from the soldiers' usual stoic, duty-oriented selves. This is even noted in the chronology of the soldiers' interaction with the dog when it arrives. When they first notice the dog, they affectionately name it "Chapad Jhun Jhun", and automatically reach for biscuits for it to snack on. It is only after a momentary pause, when they realise that "Wait... he could be a Pakistani" (82). This prescription of national identity is not a thought that comes naturally to them. It is a reality they have yet to get used to, a reality not intrinsic to them but learned. What is natural to them is to show affection to a dog and offer it food. The eventual killing of the dog is a destruction of their natural reaction; the instinct that makes them feel affection instead of their sense of 'duty,' however arbitrary it may be. Achilles Mbembe's essay titled *Necropolitics* can prove insightful here. Mbembe examines

... trajectories by which the state of exception and the relation of enmity have become the normative basis of the right to kill. In such instances, power (and not necessarily state power) continuously refers and appeals to exception, emergency, and

a fictionalised notion of the enemy. (16)

The state of exception is the space where law is suspended, forming a void between what is legal and what is not. A characteristic of the sovereign is the ability to decide when and where to create such indeterminate states of exception. As stated by Carl Schmitt, "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception" (5). Mbembe refers to this exception in the quote above and elucidates how it justifies the state's right to kill. In *The Dog of Tetwal*, this notion of the exception is inverted. The momentary affection shown by the soldiers to the dog becomes the exception, and the norm becomes the labelling and subsequent killing of the dog. By talking about the state of exception becoming 'the normative basis of the right to kill', Mbembe also posits that the state of exception is not a temporary creation but rather something maintained by the sovereign to retain its control and power, portrayed through the death of the dog in the story (16).

The death of the dog provokes two very distinct reactions from the soldiers. Upon brutally killing the dog, Himmat Khan says, "the poor thing became a martyr" (Manto 87). The original Urdu reading of this text uses the word 'shahid' for martyr. Baishya, in context to the religious definition of 'shahid', explains

What is common to the wide semantic range of the word is that to be shahid is to be inserted into an economy of sacrifice. Sacrifice presupposes value, an aspect that can be contrasted with the value-less kill of the dog. (157)

Baishya's definition offers insight into Himmat Khan's comment by revealing the contradiction between being a 'shahid' and the 'value-less' killing of the dog. A shahid or a martyr is a death from a sacrifice to a higher cause. The entertainment of the soldiers as they shot at the dog, "they [the soldiers] began guffawing" (86), is evidence of the fact that there was no higher cause beyond entertainment. This lack of a higher purpose for this killing gives rise to two readings. First, the dog had nothing to do with the political disputes between the two states, so its death did not impact the cause. However, the real irony lies in the

second reading: there are no martyrs in the cross-fire between the two states because this dispute has no higher purpose. A parallel exists between the absurdity of the dog being a martyr, but simultaneously anyone killed in this crossfire being a martyr. Mbembe's ideas develop the description of the body as it is:

[the body] becomes the very uniform of the martyr. But the body as such is not only an object to protect against danger and death. The body in itself has neither power nor value. The power and value of the body result from a process of abstraction based on the desire for eternity. (38)

Through this quote, Mbembe explores how, through martyrdom, the body loses its biological value and becomes instead a symbol for the abstraction of an external value imposed upon it. By prescribing a martyr's death to the dog, Himmat Khan absolves himself and the situation from having to confront the actual biological death in front of them and replaces it with a value system or, in this case, a national cause.

On the other hand, Harnam Singh, after shooting the dog, says, "he died a dog's death". In Urdu, Manto uses the words 'kutte ki maut' for a dog's death. This term in Urdu is used to describe a demeaning death. The Urdu term for dog (kutte) is typically used as an insult. Using it to describe one's death seems like an eternal, irreversible degradation. This degradation starkly contrasts with Himmat Khan calling the dog a martyr. The two statements invalidate each other and unveil yet again the arbitrariness of violence and death along this contested landscape. As Baishya describes it,

a mere natural being whose ephemeral juridico-legal persona is stripped away, rendering it faceless and devoid of relationality. It is abandoned as meaningless matter in a no-man's zone. The fragile possibility of hospitality and interspecies cohabitation is shattered by the imperatives of hyper-masculine predatory nationalisms. (158)

Baishya's statement showcases how the dog's killing shatters any remaining possibilities of both

interspecies and interstate cohabitation. Harnam Singh classifies the death of the canine as a dog's death, returning it to the status of bare life it began with, devaluing its death by sidelining it as inconsequential biological matter. The dog dies in the district of Tetwal, the no man's zone between India and Pakistan, which situates it within a liminal space of many forms. It has physically died in this uncharted territory. It exists between the transcendence of a martyr and the meaninglessness of a 'dog's death'.

The Dog of Tetwal illustrates a landscape that is culturally tied and historically unified and juxtaposes that with the brutal killing of a dog along that same landscape. Manto portrays this unity using the Punjabi dialect, common to both sides and shared cultures, like the poetry they sing. He contrasts this unity by showcasing the jingoism of the soldiers that eclipses the history they share. The dog represents the many innocent lives forced to assign their loyalties to a specific side, regardless of where they belonged earlier. It also functions beyond its role as a placeholder to portray the possibilities of a non-fragmented existence by crossing borders that seem legitimised by the two states. Using frameworks like Agamben and Mbembe, this analysis uncovers how both the dog and the terrain of Tetwal function as sites of exception where the boundaries of legality are blurred, allowing the state to inconsequentially exert their power, like the killing of the dog. The death of the dog reveals the way language and words, like 'martyr' and 'dog's death', are used to justify unnecessary killing and, therefore, continually propagate violence. The affection shown by both sides towards the dog showcases temporary potential for unity, and the story's tragic ending forces the reader to return to a disjointed reality.

6 Chapter 2: Recognition and Resistance in *Old Man Slave and The Mastiff*

The Transatlantic Slave Trade remains one of the most gruesome products of coloniality, where 10 - 12.5 million Africans from different parts of the continent were captured and transported to the Caribbean/Americas to work on cane, cotton and tobacco plantations of, amongst others (Eltis 8; Rawley 16; Diouf 9). The voyage was espe-

cially inhumane, as enslaved people were tied together with no room to breathe, let alone move. Between 10 to 15 percent of the enslaved people died in the Middle Passage (Colonial Williamsburg Foundation; O'Malley 126). Martinique was one of the Caribbean islands where the European colonisers established their plantations. It was initially colonised by Spain, followed by France in 1653, and then Britain around the end of the 18th century (Our History; Modlin Jr 180; Schloss 2). Its indigenous population was either enslaved or eradicated by the colonisers. The imposition of the colonisers' language (in this case, French) and the indigenous African languages of the enslaved people led to the creation of Creole. Édouard Glissant (1928-2011) in his essay "Free and Forced Poetics" classifies Creole as "an idiom based on a French-derived vocabulary and an original syntax mixing African structures from the Sudanese with speech habits from the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Norman sailors" (95). Glissant's definition shows the vast variety of contexts that interacted with one another to create the Creole language. Over time, Creole gained legitimacy by being dispersed across regions via oral traditions, which is why the preservation of Creole history and culture often presents itself in prose and poetry. Some prolific authors in this field include Édouard Glissant, Aimé Césaire, Paulette Nardal, Frantz Fanon, Maryse Condé and Patrick Chamoiseau, amongst several others.

Despite their writing focusing on postcoloniality specific to the Caribbean, these thinkers have developed differing and often contrasting theoretical frameworks to explore and preserve the cultural identity that emerged from the transatlantic slave trade and the resistance movement. Two significant movements within this conversation include Negritude and Créolité. Aimé Césaire coined Negritude and first mentions it in his 1939 book, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, in which he explains,

My negritude is not a stone, its deafness
hurlled against
the clamor of the day
my negritude is not a leukoma of dead
liquid over the earth's
dead eye
my negritude is neither tower nor
cathedral

it takes root in the red flesh of the soil
it takes root in the ardent flesh of the
sky
it breaks through opaque prostration
with its upright patience. (41)

For Césaire, Negritude speaks to black culture and identity, and the Negritude movement focuses on reclaiming and affirming this identity. In this stanza, Césaire asserts that his blackness is not static, small, or unchanging but rather fertile, organic, and constantly growing. He elaborates on these ideas in an interview with René Depestre conducted in 1967:

Until that time, until my generation, the French and the English but especially the French had followed the politics of assimilation unrestrainedly. We didn't know what Africa was. Europeans despised everything about Africa, and in France people spoke of a civilised world and a barbarian world. The barbarian world was Africa, and the civilised world was Europe. Therefore the best thing one could do with an African was to assimilate him: the ideal was to turn him into a Frenchman with black skin. (88)

Césaire positions Negritude as a reclamation of the black identity through a resistance to the politics of assimilation, which he reflects in his poetry above, where he says that his Negritude is "neither tower nor cathedral", both European structures representing Western traditions that Césaire, through the Negritude movement, aims to reject. (41)

The next significant literary movement that emerged in conversation with Negritude was Créolité. Founded by Patrick Chamoiseau, Jean Bernabé and Raphaël Confiant in their 1989 essay titled *Éloge de la Créolité* (translated to *In Praise of Creoleness*). They define it as "the interactional or transactional aggregate of Caribbean, European, African, Asian, and Levantine cultural elements, united on the same soil by the yoke of history" (891) This definition differs from Negritude in that it does not reject assimilation into Western civilisation but instead embraces the amalgamation of

contexts (including the Western) and the collective suffering that led to the formation of the Creole identity.

“Negritude replaced the illusion of Europe by an African illusion. Initially motivated by the wish of embedding us into the actuality of our being, Negritude soon manifested itself in many kinds of exteriority: the exteriority of aspirations (to mother Africa, mythical Africa, impossible Africa) and the exteriority of self-assertion (we are Africans). It was a necessary dialectical moment, an indispensable development. But it remains a great challenge to step out of it in order to finally build a new yet temporary synthesis on the open path of history, our history.” (889)

While Chamoiseau acknowledges the importance of Césaire’s Negritude movement by stating “Césaire’s Negritude is a baptism, the primal act of our restored dignity. We are forever Césaire’s sons” (888), he also points out its limitations. He talks about how Negritude is a necessary dialectical step, an antithesis to the imposition of the hegemonic Western identity. However, the enslaved identity has synthesised with this colonial order. It is futile and reductive to extract just the African from a more complex, aggregated being, therefore Chamoiseau’s assertion of the movement Creolité. Stuart Hall also describes the nuances of this movement and highlights how the exploits of slavery and its emerging traumas are necessary conditions for creolisation to emerge and create its own ‘third space’ from the fusion of various cultural elements (19).

So there are also, always, within creolité, the recurring tropes of transplantation and forced labor, of mastery and subordination, the subjugations of plantation life and the daily humiliations of the colony, as well as the whole range of survival strategies [...] (19)

Here, Hall outlines how Creolité incorporates the subjugation and resistance of the Caribbean people into its literature and asserts that the Creole identity has not emerged despite this tumultuous past, but because of it. Literature must represent and celebrate that. He describes the sense of community built through resisting and forming a new language.

One of the co-authors of *Éloge de la Créolité*, Patrick Chamoiseau, created an anthology of just that, representing the Creole culture through his writing and work. Chamoiseau is a prolific Martinican author born in Fort-de-France in 1953. He is known for exploring the Creole identity and incorporating French Creole into his works, shining light on oral traditions’ significance within the Martinican context. In his first novel, *Chronique Des Sept Misères*, written in 1986, he incorporated colloquial Creole stylisation and narrative traditions within his French writing. While known mainly for his novels, such as *L’esclave Vieil Homme et Molosse* and *Texaco*, he has also worked on folktales and written for theatre. Chamoiseau is also the recipient of a series of awards like the Prix Kléber Haedens, Prix Goncourt, Prix Carbet de la Caraïbe and the Special Prize of the Jury RFO for several of his seminal works (Internationales Literaturfestival Berlin).

The novella *L’esclave Vieil Homme et Molosse* (*Old Man Slave and The Mastiff*), published in 1997, follows an old man slave on a plantation in Martinique who decides to flee his cruel reality and disappear into the woods. The master of the plantation tracks and punishes the rebelling slaves by letting trained dogs loose to hunt for them. Shortlisted for the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction and Winner of the 2019 Scott Moncrieff Prize for Translation as well as the 2019 Best Translated Book Award for Fiction, it was lauded by the New York Times as being a “cloudburst of a novel, swift and compressed—but every page pulses, blood-warm” (New York Times).

The novella follows the journey of both the slave and the mastiff as they embark on this life-threatening venture into the woods. The novella is written from the third-person omniscient point of view, except that the reader is made explicitly aware of the presence of the storyteller through lines such as “I will, without fear of lies or truth, tell you everything I know. But it’s not a lot” (Chamoiseau 14). This interaction with the reader mirrors the storytelling aspect of the Creole language. It positions the contents of the story as dependent on the memory and ability of the narrator instead of something absolute and unchanging. This cre-

olisation exists in the narrator's voice as well as the description of the characters and their experiences. When the old slave man as he accompanies the Master-Béké to the harbour,

The old man slave sensed that they were still in thrall to the gods he remembered vaguely without words. And the ship also moved him. He no longer knew whether he had been born on the Plantation or whether he had known this crossing in the hold, but each tilt of a slave ship in the calm waters of the harbor triggered a primordial reeling inside him. (Chamoiseau, 9)

Here, the old man slave finds it challenging to trace back his origins and recollect even his place of birth (9). He experiences recognition not in remembering the experience of being on the ship but by resonating with the sensation of the rocking ship (9). This shift into the sensory resembles the collective Creole identity, as mentioned earlier in Stuart Hall's description of Creolité, since the experience of being uprooted and moved to the Caribbeans led to the enslaved connecting less over shared cultures and distinct origins, but rather the sensation of fragmentation and subjugation that was common among them all.

The novella explores both the subjugation and survival of the enslaved, and subsequently legitimises Creole as a culture and as an identity in itself. This is well illustrated in the section about the Papa-storyteller:

He breathed in the life around him in order to sustain his speech. And with this speech he roused life. He spoke and made people laugh. And laughter opened up people's chests, made them expand. His tongue expressed the hates, desires, lost cries, and silences that everyone experienced. (14)

These "hates, desires, lost cries and silences" are borne out of shared suffering and resistance. They form the Creole culture of shared stories and music. The slaves are not the only characters with a creolised identity; the mastiff, too, is explored through an ambiguous understanding of its

origins. Chamoiseau writes, "No one even knows the exact colour of its fur. It likely changed with the wind." (8). This 'changing with the wind' resembles the transformative nature of the Middle Passage that several Caribbean writers mention in their work. It shows how, beyond their subjective experience, their transformation transcends the epistemes they would use to cope with such a change. They are not just experiencing change but are being changed beyond their awareness. With this transformation, black fur turns white, whether it physically changes or not. Edouard Glissant, in the opening chapter of his book *The Poetics of Relation*, writes,

The asceticism of crossing this way the land-sea that, unknown to you, is the planet Earth, feeling a language vanish, the word of the gods vanish, and the sealed image of even the most everyday object, of even the most familiar animal, vanish. (7)

This paragraph represents the knowledge lost during the Middle Passage. Due to the unfamiliarity the enslaved were forced into, the ship and the sea acted as an abyss, where their pasts were lost and a future prescribed was to them. Even if the enslaved could recognise elements of their new surroundings, they had no language or common epistemes to relate to each other. This vanishing of all familiarity is experienced both by the old man slave and by the mastiff. They lose their ability to communicate their pains, even the familiarity of belief and religion no longer remains with them. This inability to retain their sense of self is reinstated by the narrator constantly referring to the man as the 'old man slave' as opposed to a name he can claim, and the same applies to the mastiff, which the narrator refers to through its breed, as opposed to possessing an identity explicitly reserved for it. All descriptions of the mastiff emerge through the positionality of the ones perceiving it. This is evident in the lines,

The ship's papers listed the dog as white with a black patch between its eyes. The sailor who slipped its water and salted leather between the bars of the steerage hold described it as black with a white patch on its muzzle. At

the Plantation, it seemed black, shimmering, almost a lunar blue, with several white spots that may have grown larger over time. But the slaves the dog caught sometimes saw it (as it tore the tendons out of their legs) as red, or blue-green, or even vested with the orange strength of the heart of a burning fire. (Chamoiseau, 8)

The passage shows how the dog's description changed as it traversed different stages of its journey from the Americas to the Caribbean. The dog may have changed physically, but the description reflects its rapidly changing environment. This is, once again, a portrayal of the changing landscapes, both physical and discursive. The ship's papers are official documents- the artefacts that get preserved. The varying perceptions of the mastiff showcases how the colonial archives that are so often relied on are only one of several perspectives. One also notices the difference between how the enslaved experienced it and how the oppressors did. The view of the enslaved was significantly more supernatural, with colours like blue-green, red, orange. The parentheses in this quote are more clinical and detached than the sentence itself. The apathy of the parentheses normalises the violence at the plantation and accentuates the mystical perceptions of the enslaved. They view the mastiff through the lens of their pain because they do not get to experience it outside of that realm.

Despite not necessarily having a name, the term 'molosse'² seems significant. Several more commonplace terms for 'dog' exist in French, such as *chien* and *dogue* (Meylor 88). Chamoiseau's choice to refer to the dog specifically as a *molosse*, which most translations to English choose to interpret as 'mastiff', can be interpreted as intentional. The etymology of *molosse* comes from the canine inhabitants of an Ancient Greek civilisation called Molossie. These canines used to hunt and guard the herds of shepherds (Meylor 88-89). Kristen Meylor explains

In these ways, the very name of Chamoiseau's animal justifies his own potential to be humanised; *molosse*

²French Noun for hound or big ferocious dog (Collins dictionary).

implies an etymological connection with ancient man, departs from historical accounts of canine warfare that characterise the hunting dog as pure animal, and suggests a relationship working alongside a human companion. The anthropomorphous quality of the *molosse* is embedded in his very name. (89)

Meylor explains that Chamoiseau's choice of term for the dog is an attempt to anthropomorphise it, as, "*molosse* connotes identification with a human cultural group, even though it embodies the image of a bestial monster" (89). The anthropomorphism of the mastiff makes it more susceptible to be placed within the dichotomies between the master and the slave. Perceiving it within the Anthropocene³, it walks the discursive landscape crafted by the oppressor and the oppressed, whilst still not directly fitting either binary. The mastiff is hated and feared by the slaves yet still not able to escape subjugation by the master. This juxtaposition is evident in the opening lines,

The mastiff was a monster. It had also traveled on a boat, endured weeks of a kind of terror. It had also experienced the abyss of a journey on a slave ship ... like all those who came to the islands, the mastiff had suffered through the constant undulation of the sea [...] The mastiff had also experienced brief moments of fresh air (hoisted up onto the bridge by a strangling chain), when, under the sting of the whip, it was forced, like the black captives, to turn in circles to stretch its muscles and to inhale a little iodine from the open sea. (Chamoiseau 7)

These lines depict the mastiff's experience of the Middle Passage as parallel to the experience of the enslaved. The repeated use of "also" suggests

³"The Anthropocene' is a term that is increasingly used to define a new planetary era: one in which humans have become the dominant force shaping Earth's bio-geophysical composition and processes... the Anthropocene is not simply a natural scientific phenomenon, but a methodological, conceptual, and ethico-political challenge for scholars across a range of disciplines" (Anthro Encyclopedia).

that the mastiff's suffering is an extension of the violence done to the captives, though the violence was not originally intended for it. This rhetorical choice makes the systemic violence done to enslaved peoples visible, as it establishes the maltreatment of the slaves as systematic and the dog as collateral damage. This portrays the maltreatment of the mastiff and the extreme inhuman "othering" of the slaves to the point of treating them like dogs. The fact that the dog was "forced like the black captives, to turn in circles to stretch its muscles" (7), rather than the reverse, where the captives were treated like a dog, also portrays the normalisation of the subjugation of the enslaved and the anthropomorphisation of the dog. This inversion highlights the dehumanisation of the slaves by emphasising that even an animal that is normatively considered inferior within an anthropocentric landscape is not meant to experience the extent of violence that has been normalised towards the slaves. By choosing to position these ideas in this inverted form, Chamoiseau critiques both the tyrannies of the slave trade and anthropocentric thought that automatically positions animals as inferior.

In his work *Open: Man and Animal*, Giorgio Agamben explores the dichotomies between the human and the animal. In this analysis, he describes the 'anthropological machine'. He states

If, in the machine of the moderns, the outside is produced through the exclusion of an inside and the inhuman produced by animalising the human, here the inside is obtained through the inclusion of an outside, and the non-man is produced by the humanisation of an animal. (Agamben 37)

Agamben situates the notion of the 'inhuman' in the animalisation of the human or its reduction to bare life (37). The non-man functions in reverse; it begins not as a reduction of the human, but as an elevation of the animal to being humanised (37). This elevation validates the foreign reality of the non-man but still does not equate it to the 'proper' human. This parallels the enslaved and the mastiff in Chamoiseau's *Old Man Slave and The Mastiff*. The oppressor perceives the enslaved as inhuman and the mastiff a non-man. These distinctions create what Agamben calls 'zones of indifference', where neither

human nor animal exists but "only a life that is separated and excluded from itself— only a *bare life*" (38). The enslaved and the mastiff embody this bare life. The perceived inhumanity of the old slave man works to explain the Master-Béké's treatment of him, referring to him not by name but as "black flesh" (Chamoiseau 10), so not even dignifying him to a human title but rather just a biological entity. The mastiff is a non-man in the way that the master treats it with more endearment than he does the slaves but never relinquishes his authority over him. This becomes evident in "the Master opened the cage, carried in meat and bloody organs, smiled at the dog, and petted it" (Chamoiseau 13). Here, the master cares for the dog, feeds it well, and even pets it while still ensuring it exists as a weapon of his colonial control.

In the opening lines, Chamoiseau says, "The mastiff was a monster" (7). This statement urges the reader to reconsider the typical reductive dichotomy between victims and aggressor. The mastiff is very much the victim but simultaneously exists as the aggressor. It is conditioned to tear "the young slave apart more savagely than the fiercest of whips or the most hostile of planks with nails could have done" (Chamoiseau 13). This strength and aggression make it a monster, but it has also simultaneously been "as weak as a jellyfish" and entrapped in "the hold that was a tomb [its cage]" (8). These contradicting forms of being showcase that the mastiff has transformed; neither its weakness nor its strength is inherent to it. Chamoiseau states that the "mastiff was a monster because it had known this despair" (8), situating the trauma experienced by the mastiff as fuel for its aggression. It acts as an allegory for the trauma of oppression as a whole and how it places itself within the biology of its victims and transforms them. This speaks to the shared experience of Creole identity which exists as an established culture because this 'despair' is so fundamental to the experience of enslavement that it reconfigures the enslaved structurally and becomes an inherent part of their culture (Glissant 18).

The monstrosity of the mastiff is parallel to the 'surges' experienced by the slaves. Surges are described as "an evil kind of impulse vomited up from a forgotten place, a fundamental fever, a curdling of the blood, a malicious seizure, a vibrant voice that threw you off track" (Chamoiseau 11).

These surges are waves of resistance, a physiological need to free oneself from the confines of colonial oppression. These forms of resistance are depicted as "desperate attacks inflicted on the commanders: the slave hands that clutched at the commanders' throats, the machete that sliced through air, despite the pistol with which the commanders would shoot the knife-wielding madman hopelessly down" (Chamoiseau 12). When the narrator describes the surge, he positions it as an ailment that has overtaken the enslaved, not as an intrinsic element within them. They say, "the surge could hit you at any moment" (Chamoiseau 12) as if it is a sensation from the outside that can overcome them without warning. This metaphysical urge to resist is a response to the immense tyranny of the coloniser and, therefore, would explain why the surge isn't intrinsic to the enslaved but instead builds up over time and eventually consumes them.

Frantz Fanon, in his book published in 1961 *The Wretched of the Earth*, explains, "At the level of individuals, violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect" (94). Fanon positions violence as a necessary condition of decolonisation. Jean-Paul Sartre, in the preface for *The Wretched of the Earth*, agrees with Fanon and illustrates,

... this irrepressible violence is neither sound and fury, nor the resurrection of savage instincts, nor even the effect of resentment: it is man recreating himself. I think we understood this truth at one time, but we have forgotten it—that no gentleness can efface the marks of violence; only violence itself can destroy them. The native cures himself of colonial neurosis by thrusting out the settler through force of arms. (21)

Reading the surge through this lens, it would be reductive to just call it a projection of resentment and misplaced to call it a savage instinct. For the enslaved person who has systematically been made to feel inferior and experience such persisting despair, the surge is momentary liberation; it briefly restores in them the agency that they otherwise cannot have. This surge must be violent because their subjugation has been violent.

If, then, instead of antagonising the mastiff's violence and perceiving it as an extension of the coloniser, the perception of the mastiff shifts when one regards it as a projection of its surges. This ties into the earlier statement, "The mastiff was a monster because it had known this despair" (Chamoiseau 8). The despair of the middle passage and the suffering it incurred within it made the mastiff a monster. A significant difference between the mastiff and the slave is that, by being weaponised by the master, the mastiff is given an outlet to enact its surges, even if they are misplaced. Therefore, the hatred the slaves feel toward the mastiff can be read as resentment as it experienced the same cruelties of the ship, yet is never reprimanded for reclaiming its agency afterwards. The mastiff will never be able to find the same solace the enslaved find in each other. Forced to be an extension of the master, yet not at par with him, and simultaneously subjugated like the slaves yet not empathising with them, the mastiff walks a liminal space in between. The enslaved create a community for themselves on the plantation with "slave parties" and "storytelling sessions" (Chamoiseau 14). The mastiff does not get to create a community through its form of subjugation. It does not get to relieve itself of its surge at any moment because the master has weaponized its resistance.

The gaze is a recurring symbol present in the novella (Meylor 83). For the slaves, the eyes of the mastiff are a site they make sure to avoid. Their aversion to the mastiff's eyes is illustrated through "better not even to mention its eyes" (Chamoiseau 8). Not only do the slaves avoid its eyes, but the narrator also avoids talking about them. The narrator's restraint reinstates the role of the storyteller within the Creole traditions by asserting their subjectivity. The narrator chooses not to dwell on the mastiff's eyes because they are a site of trauma, and the story is not separate from the lens through which it was experienced. While primarily centred around the visual sense, this concept of being recognised extends briefly to the olfactory. The story states, "Because each of them, even the craziest, tried to avoid having his smell 'taken' by the dog" (Chamoiseau 13). This notion of "taking" a smell implies that once it is taken it cannot be returned. Since smell is not a tangible object, by presenting it as something that can be taken, the story places the dread not in the

act of smelling, but of smelling again and as a result, recognising. The mastiff becomes an entity that the slaves do not want to be recognised by.

While most slaves steer clear of the mastiff, the old man discreetly "walked alongside the kennel. Et cetera times a day, without ever looking directly at the mastiff" (Chamoiseau 13). Occasionally, he "shot it a look, a furtive and dull look. And their eyes met for seven nths of a second" (Chamoiseau 13). The old man's defiance of the slaves' norm demonstrates a curiosity in the mastiff that the others do not have. By emphasising the brevity of the looks, the reader also notices the significance of the briefest moment and the caution with which the old man resists. It sets resistance up to not always be sporadic and explosive but a long, cumulative, strenuous process of microscopic defiances. By choosing to look at the mastiff, despite the danger it poses to him, the slave old man cultivates a recognition of the mastiff's despair as well as his own. Florence Burgat, in an essay exploring Sartrean and Levinasian ethics, discusses Levinas' understanding of animal suffering because

... their situation, in regard to suffering, is comparable, as far as we can judge, and to the extent that we can judge any suffering that is not our own, to that of humans who cannot speak of their suffering. (188)

Burgat's claim elucidates the relevance of the interaction between the old man and the mastiff even further. With this statement, she likens the situation of the mastiff to the situation of the old slave man who, due to his subjugation, cannot vocalise his suffering. The story says, "He recognises in the mastiff the disaster that possesses him. A fury without eyes that attacks from far away" (Chamoiseau 16). After repeatedly mentioning how the rest of the slaves fear the mastiff's eyes, the old man slave calls it 'without' eyes, contrasting with the reader's image of it. This also contradicts an earlier sentence in the story where Master Béké was "convinced black flesh excited the dog's appetite" (Chamoiseau 10). Both the other slaves and the master have painted the mastiff as a seeing being that chooses its victims. However, the old man slave, choosing to look the mastiff in the eye, sees that

its rage is impersonal; it is not attacking individuals but functioning within and through the system it has been placed in. The old slave man recognises that "the mastiff is like him, but it has at its disposal a wealth of instincts that gives the illusion of meaning to it all" (Chamoiseau 17). This quote references the mastiff's ability to act on its surges instead of repressing them like the old man must. Using Hegel's concept of dialectics, Agamben mentions that man is not a biological species but a field of dialectical tensions. He states that

Man exists historically only in this tension; he can be human only to the degree that he transcends and transforms the anthropomorphous animal which supports him, and only because, through the action of negation, he is capable of mastering and, eventually, destroying his own animality. (12)

According to Agamben, to be human or considered human, one must transcend the animalistic urges within them. The colonial order primarily defines this demarcation between what comprises animality versus humanity, where the coloniser is the human who justifies othering the colonised because of their inability to transcend animality (the terms of which are defined by the coloniser). Within the relationship between the old slave man and the mastiff, one can interpret the slave old man's attempts to make eye contact, as him slowly claiming his humanity, forcing the mastiff to see him not as prey but as possessing his authority. This perspective shifts how the reader sees the aggression of the mastiff, which Agamben proves is not static but constantly shifting as its relationality with its surroundings shifts. While the other slaves dread recognition, the slave old man yearns for it. The mastiff's animality reminds him of his humanity, and he feels the urge to assert his agency even more. He notices that "since the animal arrived, the surges have become terrible. He, who had thought himself in control of this chaos, finds himself submerged in it. He comes to fear the surge" (Chamoiseau 18). The surge is his urge to resist his oppression at the plantation and to reclaim his humanity, but since this reclamation often comes at the cost of his life, he fears even having this urge at all. However, that eventually leads to him choosing to leave, "not to run away but to go" (18).

Old Man Slave and The Mastiff demonstrates the entangled relationship between man and animal as both navigate the strife of oppression. Chamoiseau manages to situate the role of the dog not as a placeholder for the human (either master or slave) but rather as a tool to challenge the typical binary presented of the coloniser and the colonised. He also portrays the ongoing fight for freedom from oppressive colonial regimes. Chamoiseau, through this novella and his theoretical work regarding Creolité, depicts the making of the postcolonial identity not as straightforward but rather as a messy process of learning and unlearning experiences. Through the old man slave's and the mastiff's transformation, he illustrates the enduring process of finding oneself within and despite established colonial structures. Through an exploration of the Creole identity, concepts surrounding recognition and the dynamics between man and animal, this chapter unveils the complexities of resistance and the lingering legacy of trauma that will remain.

7 Conclusion

The works of Patrick Chamoiseau and Saadat Hasan Manto present the dog as an allegory for political conflict while embodying its own internalised pain, as a body subject to violence inflicted upon it. Initially, I planned to focus solely on the dog as a symbol, but as I proceeded with my research, I realised the dog functions within a “web of relations” and its identity is in constant dialogue with its surroundings. The dog in Manto's literary landscape functions through the juxtaposition of shared cultures and warring nations. It retains its identity, simultaneously satirizing the soldier's interactions with it. The mastiff in *Old Man Slave and The Mastiff* is not only a product of colonial rule but a nonhuman creolised identity. It shares with the enslaved the despair and fragmentation that are formative to their culture and sense of community. The mastiff goes from being perceived as a monster, to a subjugated entity unable to partake in the collective suffering shared by the enslaved. The soldiers reduce the dog to bare life, exercising their sovereign power. The master in Chamoiseau's story exerts colonial control by weaponizing the dog's resistance. Both stories showcase a repression of the dog through a recontextualization of its biological existence. Prescribing names is a significant element in both stories; observable in the religiously oriented surnames in *The Dog of Tetwal* and the lack of proper names in *Old Man Slave and The Mastiff*. Names establish the readers' first impressions of the characters and affirm that even a moniker cannot be depoliticised. Both Manto and Chamoiseau use sensory elements to foster recognition. In *The Dog of Tetwal*, the dog enters the soldiers' space sonically, it barks in tandem with the soldiers' singing. In Chamoiseau's novella, the enslaved interact with the mastiff by avoiding or seeking its gaze. Returning to Spivak's “notion of what the work cannot say”, these interactions with the senses transcend normative humanistic communication, offering a bark and a gaze its own depth and the dogs their own domain of meaning making (28).

These readings of the canine figure reframe colonial binaries and explore resistance through the nonhuman. They encourage postcolonial discourse that decentralises the human as the only site of political violence while providing insight

into the dehumanising treatment of the colonised. Both stories offer a framework of understanding postcoloniality that is not hierarchical but relational, rooted in shared struggles and collective resistance.

Circling back to the introduction with Churchill's statement of the dog in the manger, a representation of archaic colonial logic that still exists today. In a time when heads of state continue to suppress populations by calling them 'human animals' (No Comment TV, 0:12), it is evident that not much has changed. Manto and Chamoiseaus' works remain just as essential today as when they were published decades ago. They counter hegemonic discourse and elevate subaltern voices, both human and nonhuman, paving the path for a resistance whose effects will resonate far into the future.

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I would like to dedicate this capstone to my canine sister, Copper, without whom I wouldn't have cared enough about dogs to have spent four months writing about them.

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Humanities

Through the Veil, Behind the Lens

Photographic Dissensus through the Works of Hengameh Golestan and Yalda Moaiery

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Abstract

This thesis investigates how photography in post-revolutionary Iran functions as a politically disruptive force under a regime defined by censorship and enforced invisibility. Drawing on Jacques Rancière's concepts of the *distribution of the sensible* and *dissensus*, it argues that photography interrupts the sensible order at the moment of capture and operates as a dynamic and multilayered site of *political subjectivisation* and resistance. Through this intervention, photographs generate an *archive of dissensus* that describes how certain images continue to disrupt dominant perceptual regimes well beyond the moment of their creation. Implementing a qualitative and interpretative methodology, this thesis focuses on the photojournalistic work of Hengameh Golestan and Yalda Moaiery. It uses formal visual analysis to analyse images taken at moments of protest, exploring how both photographers enact dissensus through the subjects they depict and through the conditions of image-making under threat. Particular attention is given to recurring iconographic elements such as raised fists and unveiled hair, which carry symbolic weight and resonate across decades as a living iconography of dissent. The images do not simply mark a break in *the distribution of the sensible*; they continue to fracture it in different ways, generating an enduring temporality of *dissensus*. This study contributes to discussions on visual resistance, censorship, and political aesthetics by extending Rancière's theory within the specific context of Iranian photography. It also offers insights for Middle Eastern studies and feminist visual culture, highlighting how photography can allow for a reclamation of power and challenge state narratives.

Keywords and phrases: *Post-Revolutionary Iran, Photography, Hengameh Golestan, Yalda Moaiery, Distribution of the Sensible, Dissensus, Archive of Dissensus, Resistance*

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1 Introduction

“Every picture that you took had a
 bad influence for the Islamic Republic
 of Iran’
 ‘Oh, really?’
 ‘Yes’
 That moment, I thought I could die
 happy.”

- Yalda Moaiery.

Sitting in an interrogation cell, Iranian photo-journalist Yalda Moaiery recalls the moment she realised her images were more than documentation. They were, and continue to be, disruption. Moaiery’s account is not an exception but part of a longer history in which photography in Iran has never been a neutral act.

The 1979 Islamic Revolution radically transformed public life in Iran, inaugurating a new regime of censorship that extended across cinema, literature, art, and photography (Fatehrad 22; Sreberny 2). Visual culture became a site of ideological control in which all visual media had to either conform or be erased. An institution called The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG) policed all visual media, censoring any content deemed a threat to the Islamic Republic (Bankston et al. 50). To this day, the MCIG continues to reject the majority of works submitted (Bankston et al. 57; Rahimi 371). In this tightly policed visual order, visual media face new limitations: Who can be seen? How can they be shown? Must a woman be veiled? Can a man and woman appear together? These questions become political, especially as religiously motivated rulings disproportionately affect women as subjects and photographers (Abbas 73; Viviani 95). In this regime of controlled visibility, photography assumes an urgent and politically charged role. It becomes disruptive by making visible what the state seeks to obscure, offering a unique political force among art forms through its direct link to reality and perception.

Theories of photography and visuality have long challenged the idea of the camera as a neutral tool, framing it instead as an active participant in shaping perception. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes argues that photography is inherently tied to reality and time, describing the photograph as a mechanical reproduction of what

“could never be reproduced existentially” (4). It carries the force of the “that-has-been”, affirming that what it shows truly existed (Barthes 77). Susan Sontag builds on this idea by arguing that photographs are not merely reflections of the world but can also construct competing realities (153). Unlike paintings, she contends, photographs are not just interpretations but physical traces of reality, an index of what was there (Sontag 155). Nicholas Mirzoeff adds a further dimension, asserting that the *right to look* is central to the relationship between power and knowledge, shaping who may see, who may be seen, and how visibility is distributed (475). Considered together, these thinkers reveal that photography is rooted in reality and imbued with the power to shape perception.

While they ground photography’s power in relation to reality and visibility, Jacques Rancière demonstrates how this claim to visibility is political under conditions of enforced invisibility. Coining the term *distribution of the sensible*, he refers to the system that determines what is visible, sayable, and thinkable in a given order, demonstrating the state’s control over visual culture (Rancière 12). I argue that by capturing realities that do not classify as part of the sensible, photographers interrupt the distribution of the sensible and change the field of visibility. In Iran, photography thus functions not only as a medium for documentation but as an inevitable political intervention: an act of redistributing the sensible.

2 Research Context

The political significance of photography in Iran becomes increasingly evident when situated within its distinctive historical trajectory. Photography was initially introduced in Iran as an elite and tightly regulated practice, confined to the royal court and removed from public view (Fatehrad 110; Mohammadi Nameghi and Pérez González 48). Nasir al-Din Shah¹, captivated by the medium’s novelty, primarily used photography to produce intimate images of his harem women and children, embedding the practice within a regime of exclusion and private representation (Fatehrad 111). For decades, social

¹The *Shah* (King) of Persia (now Iran) from 1848 until 1896 (Fatehrad 111).

and religious conventions further circumscribed the medium, rendering women largely invisible as both subjects and practitioners (Mohammadi Nameghi and Pérez González 49-55). Although Iranian women increasingly engaged with photography in the early twentieth century, their participation continued to be shaped by gendered restrictions, as they predominantly photographed other women within segregated settings (Mohammadi Nameghi and Pérez González 56). Even moments of apparent transformation, such as the forced unveiling under Reza Shah in 1936, which integrated women more explicitly into public and photographic representation, did not emancipate the medium but re-inscribed it within nationalist and modernist imperatives (Kalazadeh).

Across these shifting contexts, photography has consistently reflected and reinforced structures of visibility and exclusion. It is precisely this tension, I will argue, that endows the medium with political charge. In a regime where visibility is carefully controlled, photography's capacity to capture and reveal obscured realities transforms it into a site of potential contestation. This latent tension between visibility and control became even more pronounced after the 1979 Revolution when the institutionalisation of censorship redefined photography as an explicitly political act. No longer governed solely by social conventions, photography now directly confronted a state-enforced perceptual regime. In this new context, to photograph is to intervene in the distribution of the sensible itself, to challenge who may appear, what may be seen, and whose realities may circulate.

Building on this understanding of visibility as a political battleground, scholars have paid significant attention to the role of censorship in shaping artistic production in Iran, building a consensus that censorship is a pervasive tool of state control in post-1979 Iran, shaping visual, literary, and performative arts (Abbas 73; Halasa 14; Karimi-Hakak 21; Mottahedeh and Saljoughi 499; Rahimi 359; Rezai-Rashti 193; Rizi 3; Shirazi 1; Sreberny 2; Viviani 95). While censorship aims to suppress dissent, it often fuels subversive creativity, making Iranians "well-versed in reading between the lines" and developing strategies to embed resistance within ambiguity (Sreberny 6). Everyday imagery and symbolic motifs, such as the veil, are reconfigured into hidden acts of resistance, enriching Iranian art by the necessity to conceal

meaning in symbols (Fatehrad in Darvishzadeh 1029; Foroutan 900; Halasa 15-19). This body of scholarship reveals how censorship reconfigures rather than merely suppresses artistic expression.

While the history of photography, the mechanisms of censorship, and the aesthetics of resistance have all been subject to scholarly attention, they often remain treated in isolation. There remains a need for an integrated approach that theorises photography in Iran not merely as documentation but as an act that reconfigures what can be seen and perceived. Moreover, due to the political sensitivity of the topic and the risks faced by photographers and researchers, scholarly engagement with the intersection of aesthetics, censorship, and political theory in Iran remains limited. Few scholars have begun to engage with the application of *the distribution of the sensible* to Iran (Akhavan; Gotink; Kirsanova; Touzelitti). However, its application to post-revolutionary photography in Iran remains unexplored.

This thesis addresses this gap by applying Jacques Rancière's theory of *The Politics of Aesthetics* to post-revolutionary Iranian photography. It particularly focuses on Rancière's concepts of *the distribution of the sensible*—the system that determines what is visible, sayable, and thinkable in a given order—and *dissensus*, the disruption of that order through acts that make excluded experiences perceptible (12, 85). By asking how photographs intervene in what is seen under censorship, this research situates photography as a record of resistance and as a force capable of actively reshaping the field of visibility itself.

3 Methodology

To explore how photography intervenes in regimes of visibility, this thesis turns to the works of Hengameh Golestan and Yalda Moaiery, whose images powerfully enact dissensus across different historical moments. These photographers have been chosen in particular because their photojournalistic approach frames their work as documents of reality. In Iran, where photography is dangerous and art is censored, they refuse self-censorship and depict reality unfiltered.

Golestan's photographs, taken during the early days of the Islamic Republic, offer a rare visual record of dissent at the very moment when com-

pulsory veiling was being introduced (Hamilton). As one of the few women photographing at the time, her perspective is both historically and politically unique. Beginning at eighteen, Golestan began taking pictures alongside her husband, Kaveh Golestan, a renowned war photographer. Unlike him, she was denied the opportunity to photograph war in Iran. However, when she assisted her husband, she captured images he could not, particularly those taken inside women's homes, spaces from which he, as a man, was excluded (Global Prayers - Redemption and Liberation in the City).

Decades later, Moaiery continues this lineage of visual resistance within a progressively more entrenched censorship regime. She has been taking photos since the age of seventeen, documenting events such as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and covering the experiences of women in the Middle East (Bankston et al. 76; "Yalda Moaiery | World Press Photo"). The photographs examined in this thesis, taken during moments of protests in 2017 and 2022, have subjected her to severe state retaliation. Nevertheless, "the nature of showing is important for [her], to tell the truth, and [show] reality" (Moaiery 54), making her images invaluable contributions to the visual archive.

With selected works of these two photographers as central case studies, this thesis adopts a qualitative and interpretative methodology to explore how their images intervene in Iran's visual regime. This approach draws on formal visual analysis, contextual research, and Rancière's *Politics of Aesthetics*. Close attention is given to compositional and iconographic elements, such as raised fists, unveiled hair, and bodily gestures that carry symbolic weight and reappear across decades. These visual motifs are read in their immediate context and in relation to their broader cultural and political circulation. The analysis is further informed by biographical and experiential insights, including a personal interview with Yalda Moaiery, whose testimony underscores the lived risks and stakes of photographic resistance.

By integrating theoretical grounding, visual analysis, and lived testimony, this methodology enables a multilayered reading of photography as a site of *political subjectivisation*. Interpreting photographs from post-1979 Iran through the lens of Rancière and expanding upon his definition of

dissensus given in *The Politics of Aesthetics*, this thesis proposes that photography does not simply interrupt the sensible order at the moment of capture. Instead, it operates as a dynamic site of resistance, creating what I will term an *archive of dissensus* that continues to fracture the state's visual and ideological control.

This inquiry is explored across three chapters. The first chapter lays out the key theoretical concepts that inform the subsequent chapters, situating them in relation to post-revolutionary Iranian photography and visibility in Iran. Chapter Two outlines the veiling laws instituted in 1983, showing how they contribute to the state's distribution of the sensible. It then reveals how dissensus becomes visible within the frame of a photograph. The final chapter explores how the act of taking a photograph in Iran constitutes dissensus in itself. It underscores how these images come together as what I will term an *archive of dissensus*, tracing how their symbolic and iconic power continues to generate ruptures long past the moment of capture. In lieu of a conclusion, this thesis closes with an expansive afterword that explores the transformation of the archive into performative and embodied iconography within collective protest.

4 Chapter 1 – Framing the Sensible

Examining the political dimensions of photography within the specific socio-political context of post-revolutionary Iran, this chapter draws on Jacques Rancière's theoretical framework of *The Politics of Aesthetics*. It argues that in a Rancièrian sense, photography in Iran is political not because it carries a message but because it interrupts the consensus, breaking into the space of the seen and the said. It creates dissensus: a rupture in the visual order that allows new subjects, stories, and truths to appear. To comprehensively understand the implications of this political intervention, this chapter first elucidates Rancière's key concepts, then analyses how censorship operates within Iran's institutional and legal frameworks, and finally, examines how photography uniquely emerges as both a site of resistance and a critical form of political subjectivisation, capable of contesting the boundaries of visibility imposed by the state.

4.1 The Politics of Aesthetics

In his book *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Rancière proposes a radical reconceptualisation of the relationship between aesthetics and political life. Central to this project is the concept of the *distribution of the sensible*², which refers to a system that defines what is commonly perceived as real or normal while simultaneously drawing boundaries that determine who belongs where and what roles or positions they hold within that shared reality (Rancière 12). It establishes an invisible order that decides who is visible and what can be thought or said, dividing society by assigning roles, identities, and hierarchies of importance (Rancière 13). Thus, the distribution of the sensible defines both what is held in common and who is excluded from that shared space (Rancière 12, 103).

Against this backdrop, Rancière defines the *police*³ as the authority enforcing the distribution of the sensible and *politics* as the disruption of this distribution (89, 90). This disruption is engendered through acts of *democratic emancipation* manifested in forms of *subjectivisation*. This is done by those he calls *the part with no part*, those excluded from the established order, who assert themselves as equals and reconfigure the shared field of the sensible (Rancière 86, 92). This reconfiguration occurs through *dissensus*, which, for Rancière, is not mere disagreement but a rupture that interrupts the dominant distribution of the sensible by making visible those previously excluded (85). It forces recognition of political subjects who disrupt consensus, exposing the constructed nature of what can be seen, said, and thought (Rancière 83). By opposing the police order's drive for perceptual stability, dissensus brings politics into existence as a reconfiguration of visibility and possibility (Rancière 52, 56, 65, 85). This conceptual schema reveals politics as the contestation of the structures that govern perception, participation, and the constitution of the shared world.

While the application of this conceptual vocabulary to the Iranian post-revolutionary context remains limited, several scholars have begun to

do so generatively (Akhavan; Gotink; Kirsanova; Touzelitti). Mazyar Lotfalian, for instance, engages directly with Rancière's notion of the distribution of the sensible to analyse transnational Iranian visual art, arguing that artistic gestures function as meta-political interventions that unsettle fixed regimes of legibility and challenge interpretive binaries, such as resistance versus compliance (Akhavan 2–4). Similarly, Dafne Gotink is concerned with how artistic practices unsettle dominant perceptual frameworks, shifting the focus from interpretive binaries to the embodied and symbolic ruptures that occur within the state's aesthetic regime (8). She adopts the concept of dissensus, applying it to contemporary visual works that subtly undermine dominant aesthetic codes (8). Gotink particularly focuses on how symbolic and bodily expression introduce fissures into the state's aesthetic regime, disrupting the alignment between form and content (Gotink 29, 55).

This application of Rancière's terms is echoed in other media as well. Expanding the scope from visual art to performance and film, Daria Kirsanova emphasises political subjectivisation through the case study of performance art emerging from a critical moment of protest: the 2009 Green Movement (2). She argues that these works enact Rancièrian politics by staging collective dissensus and making new political subjects perceptible (Kirsanova 3–5). Similarly, Rim Touzzelti draws on Rancière's definition of politics as disruption in her comparative study of Iranian and Palestinian cinema (7). She suggests that dissensus occurs when filmmakers reveal what authoritarian regimes render invisible, thereby breaking through established perceptual boundaries (Touzzelti 49–52). Although she focuses on cinema, her analysis highlights the central role of visibility, speech, and exclusion (Touzzelti 90–98).

Together, these scholars illustrate how artistic practices in Iran contest and reconfigure perceptual orders defined by the state, enacting dissensus by disrupting the distribution of the sensible. They collectively highlight that this disruption is particularly significant in the context of Iran, where censorship, as both an institutional and aesthetic regime, plays a central role in regulating the field of visibility (Akhavan 4; Gotink 54; Kirsanova 3; Touzelitti 62). The following section, therefore, defines censorship in the Iranian context, examining its operation as an agent of the

²Italics will denote key terms the first time they are used, and then I will continue without italics.

³Italics will be used when talking about police in the Rancièrian sense to distinguish it from the regular police. *Police*, in the Rancièrian sense, can be used interchangeably with the police order.

distribution of the sensible.

4.2 Defining Censorship: Control and Ambiguity

Given the varied interpretations and applications of censorship across different cultural and political contexts, defining the term for this analysis is pertinent. The working definition adopted here is from Babak Rahimi:

Censorship can be broadly defined as the obstruction and the arbitrary suppression of discourse with the objective of manipulating public knowledge and, accordingly, shaping public opinion in favor of state power. Censorship is the coordinated and sometimes random effort for information management and promotion of distinct communication practices to ultimately legitimise state power through formal and informal measures, legal or otherwise, primarily with the aim to stifle dissent and prevent free diffusion of critical discourses. (358)

This definition is particularly suitable in the Iranian context, as it emphasises the arbitrary silencing of public dialogue to manipulate collective understanding and reinforce state authority. Furthermore, it draws attention to the strategic promotion of communication methods designed to validate governmental power while curbing dissent, making it especially relevant to the socio-political landscape of Iran. Another reason this definition is well-suited to Iran's context is the inclusion of the word "random," which underscores censorship's arbitrary and unpredictable nature within the country's regulatory practices. Thus, this definition of censorship will inform the analysis of the distribution of the sensible throughout this work.

4.3 The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance

In post-revolutionary Iran, censorship is constructed through formal institutions which collectively function as agents of the police order (Gotink 3; Touzzelti 57). In 1987, the regime established a new governmental institution called The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance

(MCIG), tasked with overseeing Iran's cultural matters and advancing Islamic principles (Bankston et al. 50). New rules were imposed to dictate what could be shown in public and who could be seen. (Fatehrad 23). Although censorship existed before the Revolution, it became significantly more institutionalised and expansive (Sreberny 2). To this day, "every single (artistic) work produced in Iran, if it wants to be seen or read or presented to the public, must go through this censor organisation" (Soltani in Bankston et al. 56; see also Touzzelti 57). With this, "the Iranian state [...] embedded censorship into the creative sphere by placing all arts and cultural institutions under the purview of the MCIG" (Bankston et al. 50). To date, their official responsibilities involve establishing rules and policies for cultural activities to ensure their compliance with Islamic values and censoring cultural content that contradicts Islamic beliefs (Bankston et al. 50).

In Rancièrian terms, the MCIG does not merely regulate cultural production. Instead, it enforces the distribution of the sensible, deciding who belongs in the shared space of visibility and who must remain unseen. Therefore, censorship in Iran is repressive and aesthetic, shaping the images, narratives, and styles that circulate. Here, censorship operates as a regime of the sensible. This regime reinforces itself through its governance: by cultivating ambiguity. The regulatory framework of the MCIG lacks clarity and transparency, solidifying their control over the distribution of the sensible (Rahimi 369; Gotink 3). Their decisions to censor content are often vague and unexplained (Bankston et al. 50). To date, the MCIG has not issued any publicly accessible standards or guidelines for artistic production (Bankston et al. 51). As a result, artists have no clear framework when preparing proposals for the MCIG, leaving them uncertain and exposed to continuous state censorship (Bankston et al. 50). This vagueness is not accidental: it produces uncertainty and self-censorship, thus maintaining the status quo of perceptual exclusion. It renders it extremely difficult for artists to navigate the system (Rahimi 371; see also Touzzelti 60). By deliberately blurring the boundaries between what is permitted and what is not, the government ensures a redistribution of the sensible is prevented.

Furthermore, two types of censorship are used: proactive and reactive (Rahimi 360). While

proactive measures aim to regulate content before publication, additional constraints are frequently introduced afterward through reactive mechanisms. These include the MCIG's deliberate use of its oversight powers to obstruct the careers of artists it deems politically subversive (Bankston et al. 51). The reactive measures are "distinctive since [they] generate an environment that establishes pervasive control of what individuals or groups may be able to say or do in a public setting" (Rahimi 358), enabling the government to maintain its hold over the distribution of the sensible.

4.4 The Police, Politics, and the Legal Architecture of Control

By maintaining this imposed structure of perception, the MCIG and the broader regime of the Islamic Republic function as the *police* in the Rancièrian sense. As Rancièrè defines it, the *police* are "an organisational system that establishes a distribution of the sensible or a law that divides the community into groups, social positions, and functions" (Rockhill 3). This law, often implicit, draws lines between those who belong and those excluded from participation in shared social space. In light of the legal and institutional frameworks outlined above, it becomes evident that the Iranian government, particularly the MCIG, enacts this police order. Their constitution and penal codes institutionalise this order, ensuring that the distribution of the sensible remains intact. Through these mechanisms, the state divides society into those who comply and those who defy. The consequences are severe for the latter, namely artists who challenge the regime through their aesthetic practices. In this way, censorship becomes more than content regulation; it functions as an instrument of exclusion, targeting those who transgress the state's narrowly defined norms and thereby threaten to disrupt its dominant narratives.

Beyond institutional oversight, the Iranian legal framework fortifies the distribution of the sensible through codified laws that regulate artistic expression, bodies, and everyday appearances. Several articles in the Iranian Constitution are particularly significant in the context of censorship, as they reveal the specific legal mechanisms through which the government justifies the deten-

tion and persecution of artists. Notably, many of these provisions contradict Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), constituting clear violations of internationally recognised human rights (Bankston et al. 69).

The most significant articles are Articles 499, 500, 513, and 514 of the Second Book of the Iranian Penal Code (Constitute). These are blasphemy laws that serve as a cornerstone of the legal system, closely intertwined with the Sharia-based judiciary (Bankston et al. 70). These laws define "blasphemy" as "any act or expression that insults or shows disrespect towards the religion of Islam, its Prophets, or the religious leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran, notably the country's founder, Ayatollah Khomeini⁴" (Constitute). While presented as measures to protect religious values, these provisions are, in practice, instrumentalised to suppress dissent and preserve the authority of Iran's theocratic regime (Bankston et al. 70).

Additionally, Article 638 of the Iranian Penal Code imposes a dress code on women rooted in strict interpretations of Islamic law (Constitute). It reflects a broader strategy to restrict the freedom of expression of women and girls by mandating that they wear religious attire, regardless of their personal beliefs or consent (Constitute). These dress codes apply not only in public life but also in any representations of women in media, including on-screen depictions and photography (Viviani 100). Thus, Article 638 functions as a mechanism that preserves the existing distribution of the sensible. Regulating women's appearance in public enforces their perceptual exclusion. It ensures that their visibility as autonomous subjects does not disrupt the state-sanctioned boundaries of who may appear within the dominant social order.

These restrictions extend into verbal and political realms, as seen in Article 500 of the Iranian Penal Code, which is related to spreading "propaganda against the government" (Constitute). Here, it states that "anyone who engages in any type of propaganda against the Islamic Republic of Iran or in support of the opposition groups and associations shall be sentenced to three months to one year of imprisonment" (Bankston et al. 64). Once again, the term "propaganda" remains undefined and thus employed as a blanket category,

⁴Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was Iran's religious and political leader until his death in 1989 (BBC).

encompassing any speech or expression deemed to be a threat (Bankston et al. 65). Iranian authorities have routinely invoked Article 500 to silence dissenting voices across artistic, legal, and journalistic communities, thereby policing speech as well as the boundaries of visibility within the public sphere (Bankston et al. 66).

In doing so, the state actively works to foreclose politics itself. In Rancièrian terms, the dissenting voices engage in *politics* not by holding power but by interrupting the established order of perception and participation (Rockhill 3). For Rancière, politics emerge when the excluded, meaning those without a recognised part in the community, assert their equality, contest who may be heard and seen, and unsettle the dominant “aesthetico-political” arrangement (Rockhill 3). Article 500, in this sense, does not merely suppress speech; it seeks to foreclose dissensus itself, denying space to those who challenge the hierarchical distribution of roles and voices.

Artists become crucial political actors by intervening in the distribution of the sensible and reconfiguring the “aesthetico-political” field of possibility through their work. They enact *democratic emancipation* through acts of *political subjectivisation*: moments in which they extract themselves from dominant categories of identification and classification and, in doing so, open up new ways of seeing and being (Rockhill 3; Rancière 92). In this sense, artistic interventions do not simply represent the excluded; they allow those without a recognised part in the perceptual order to claim visibility and speak as equals. These interventions unsettle the existing consensus by enabling those rendered ineligible to participate in asserting their equality (Žižek 70; see also Touzzelti 9). In this way, artistic practices operate as momentary acts of dissensus, breaking into the realm of the visible and disrupting the police order’s control over the distribution of the sensible.

However, the political nature of artistic subjectivisation does not remain on the level of theory. In Iran, it carries profound consequences. By disrupting the sensible order and insisting on visibility, artists expose themselves to the full force of the regime’s repressive apparatus. In practice, the regime detains, tortures, and tries thousands of artists for expressing themselves creatively under a court demonstrably partial to government authority (Bankston et al. 62). Those

prosecuted are often subjected to extreme and punitive sentencing by the judiciary, ranging from extended incarceration to flogging, limb amputation, or even execution (Bankston et al. 72). As the United Nations declared in 2022, these actions target peaceful expression and aim solely at silencing dissenting voices (“Iran: UN Experts Condemn Execution of Protestor, Raise Alarm about Detained Artists”). As a result, some artists face execution simply for the content of their work, while others, despite having fled abroad, continue to be targeted by the regime in an effort to instill fear and enforce self-censorship (Bankston et al. 63). This makes it unmistakably clear that the true purpose of the MCIG is the establishment of a systemic mechanism through which the state controls who is permitted to create and disseminate culture (Bankston et al. 57). In this way, the legal and institutional censorship apparatus not only suppresses art but also enacts the police order in its most violent form, ensuring that dissensus is brutally silenced. What emerges is a perceptual regime enforced through legal and institutional means controlling who and what may appear. As a medium inherently tied to visibility, photography is deeply entangled in this struggle.

Considering photography’s unique political role elaborated on in the introduction, photography in post-revolutionary Iran must be understood as a critical political practice that intervenes in the state’s distribution of the sensible. Operating within a landscape shaped by institutional censorship, vague legal restrictions, and pervasive control over visibility, photographic practices do more than depict—they disrupt. By making visible the subjects and experiences the regime seeks to erase, photography stages dissensus and challenges the perceptual boundaries enforced by the police order. As such, it emerges as a site of political subjectivisation that contests and reconfigures the conditions of appearance and recognition. The following chapter builds on this framework to examine how photography, specifically, disrupts the distribution of the sensible within a regime of enforced visibility.

5 Chapter 2 – Appearing Against the Order

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the regulation of women's visibility in Iran has been central to the state's effort to enforce ideological conformity. Among the most powerful tools of this visual regime are the hijab laws, which mandate not only bodily coverage but also the structure of who may appear and under what terms. By tracing the historical evolution of hijab laws and their effects on public space, this chapter establishes how visibility in Iran is not merely a cultural norm but a political boundary that enforces a specific distribution of the sensible. Against this backdrop, the work of photographers like Hengameh Golestan and Yalda Moaiery emerges as visual dissensus: an intervention in the state's tightly policed aesthetic order. Their photojournalistic approaches not only document this contested history but also actively intervene within it. Through their lens, both photographers challenge and destabilise the state-imposed visual order.

5.1 The Veil and the Regulation of Visibility

The hijab laws are the primary mechanism of visual censorship in Iran. Their enforcement can be divided into three distinct phases (Fatehrad 9–10). The first phase lasts until the reign of the two Pahlavi monarchs in 1925 (Fatehrad 10). The second phase stretches from approximately 1925 to 1979, and the third phase encompasses the period since 1979, which continues to this day (Fatehrad 11).

Before the monarchical shift in 1925, "middle and upper-class urban women typically wore full-length, head-to-toe garments, occasionally adding a face covering" (Fatehrad 11). In contrast, peasant and tribal women, primarily working in the fields, wore a more practical hijab, often consisting of a colorful *rusari* (headscarf) paired with loose-fitting clothing. This attire provided greater mobility and was more comfortable than the full-length chador urban women wore (Fatehrad 11–12). Thus, "at the turn of the century, the more covered a woman was, the higher her social status was deemed to be" (Fatehrad 12).

Under the reign of the two Pahlavi monarchs, regulations around women changed drastically.

They fought for women to be educated to enable them to enter the workforce and gain independence (Fatehrad 8). On January 7th 1936, Reza Shah introduced *The Unveiling Act*, a law where hijabs were forcibly removed to fight backwardness and move towards modernity (Anehagen et al. 4; Fatehrad 8). This was an attempt to draw women out from behind the curtain, remove their covering, and ensure they do not remain invisible (Badr al-Mulūk Bāmdād 21). It symbolised modernisation, and more importantly, the use of visibility as a tool of governance.

This dynamic was reversed through the Islamic Revolution of 1979, which brought radical change by enforcing veiling (Kalahzadeh). This was a visible expression of Islamic fundamentalism's radical ideology regarding women's bodily coverage (Fatehrad 23; Kalahzadeh). The hijab laws that took effect in April 1983 enforced "a strict dress code, punishable by fines or imprisonment, mandating that all females over nine must cover their hair (usually with a headscarf) and dress in a chador or modest clothes" (Sotoudeh 14). At the base of this law is the belief that women must veil themselves to prevent sexual tension in society (Fatehrad 23). Ayatollah Khomeini specifically stated that "Islamic women should appear with Islamic hijab not to degrade themselves, [they should] change their appearance" (in Sotoudeh 14). Since then, the hijab has symbolised ideological identity and allegiance to the Islamic Republic (Kalahzadeh) but remains a violation of women's bodily autonomy and freedom (Amnesty International; Anehagen et al. 5; Kalahzadeh; Sotoudeh 15; United Nations, "Iran: UN Experts Call for Strict New Hijab Law to Be Repealed").

Beyond the imposition of the veil, women are further disadvantaged by the institutionalised segregation of sexes. As Fatehrad illuminates, the "segregation of sexes is one of the primary Islamic laws to be enforced on society. Men and women [were] separated on public transport, in queues at the supermarket, and in the overwhelming majority of other everyday life activities" (56). Moreover, between 1979 and 1981, women were monitored at workplace entrances for dress code violations, including the use of makeup, while public space became increasingly segregated, from transportation and queues to cinemas (Fatehrad 29; Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board; Sotoudeh 14).

As established in the previous chapter, the regime's censorship apparatus operates to suppress content and structure perception itself, resembling Jacques Rancière's distribution of the sensible. Within this framework, the hijab laws and segregation of sexes emerge as a paradigmatic expression of how the state governs visibility. By legislating women's appearances in public through compulsory veiling, the regime enforces a normative visual order that delineates who may appear and under what conditions. Women who transgress this aesthetic and political boundary by refusing or resisting veiling become disruptive figures who threaten to unsettle the regime's carefully maintained perceptual order. As such, the veil functions as a material object, a disciplinary mechanism, and a symbolic marker of inclusion within or exclusion from the social order. In this way, compulsory veiling operates as a mechanism of perceptual governance, enforcing the state's monopoly over who is allowed to be visible and under what terms dissensus is preemptively foreclosed.

5.2 Dissensus Seen

The dynamics of regulated visibility find concrete expression in the photographic interventions of Hengameh Golestan and Yalda Moaiery. Golestan's *Witness '79* series and Moaiery's *Standing in the Dust* from 2017 stage dissensus. Dissensus, in the Rancièrian sense, is not a dispute over interests or opinions (Rancière 85). Instead, it constitutes "a political process that resists juridical litigation and creates a fissure in the sensible order by confronting the established framework of perception, thought, and action with the 'inadmissible', i.e. a political subject" (Rancière 85). Rancière, therefore, characterises dissensus as a process enacted through specific interventions. These acts interrupt consensus by forcing recognition of those previously invisible within the dominant distribution of the sensible and can emerge intermittently within a given order (Rancière 90). In doing so, dissensus brings politics proper into existence, not only reflecting opposition but staging politics itself (Rancière 83).

The following image is part of Golestan's *Witness '79* series, which was first published in Syria in 2010 (Sian Cain; see fig. 1). The photograph was taken on 8 March 1979, after the Islamic Rev-

olution, when women took to the streets to protest the announcement of the hijab laws (Fatehrad 24; Hamilton). Over 100,000 women took to the streets the next day to protest (Hamilton). The protests continued for six days, growing in scale with each coming day (Fatehrad 24). This movement marked one of the most significant feminist uprisings of its time, drawing participants from numerous countries (Fatehrad 25). However, despite the vehement resistance, the law was ultimately enacted. Hengameh's photographs remained unpublished and have not been publicly exhibited in Iran since (Hamilton). That day marked the last time women could appear in public without wearing a hijab (Sian Cain).

The image depicts a crowd of women and men gathered around a vehicle, their fists raised in solidarity. In the centre, a man stands elevated, facing away from the viewer. His stance is still, observing. Just behind him, two figures stand atop a white vehicle. On the left is a man, identifiable as a *mullah*⁵ by his attire, holding a piece of paper and addressing the crowd. To his right stands a woman—unveiled, defiant, and powerful. She faces forward, her fist raised. While he turns his back to her, addressing the people to the left of the image, seemingly dismissing her presence, she addresses the public to the front of the image with clarity.



Figure 1: Hengameh Golestan, *Untitled*, Photograph, 1979.

Their elevation above the crowd positions them as figures of attention but simultaneously

⁵When the Revolution began, the *mullahs* were the people fighting for the enforcement of Islamic fundamentalist rulings.

symbolic equality as they are both raised from the rest of the crowd side by side. The surrounding crowd looks in multiple directions, making it unclear whom their attention is directed toward or where their support lies. However, the visual evidence that men and women stood side by side in the fight for women's rights gives this image significance. This juxtaposition stages a moment of visual equality, even if transitory. With this image, Golestan "penetrate[s] the police order via a mode of subjectivisation that transforms the aesthetic coordinates of the community by implementing the universal presupposition of politics: we are all equal" (Rockhill 3). This equality is captured visually, giving the woman a political presence she no longer has. In this sense, the photograph renders dissensus visible by disrupting the normative order of perception and asserting an equality the regime seeks to erase.

Despite the *mullah* turning his back to her, her presence destabilises the very logic he represents. In a regime where men are granted a voice and women are often erased, this image, captured by a woman, reverses the norm. It does not ask who holds the power but who dares to claim it. Moreover, the posture and orientation of the two figures reveal something more complex: while he performs authority, she embodies resistance. The woman in the image "put[s] forward [her] claim to speak for herself, to effectuate a change in the global perception of social space, so that her claims would have a legitimate place in it" (Zizek 69). In this moment, dissensus becomes visible by being seen where one is not meant to appear.

Golestan's image further depicts dissensus as her lens constructs an alternative reality that used to exist but no longer does. In defiance of a regime that censors visibility and suppresses expression, she brings the political agency of women into view. The image shows Iranian women in protest, subjects who are in the present day policed and excluded from public-political life. The woman in the image, standing firm, her fists raised, is engaged in what Rancière would call *anaesthetic dissensus*, staging the unseeable. The photograph makes perceptible a form of political subjectivity that had been rendered invisible and interrupts the police order simply by appearing, thereby staging politics itself. With images like this, Golestan visually gives a place to those sought to

be removed from the "aesthetico-political" field, namely women asserting political presence. By visually asserting women's political presence, defiance, and agency in public space, the image ruptures dominant representations of passive or domesticated femininity propagated by the regime.

This image stages dissensus by not only capturing women asserting political presence, but doing so unveiled, an act that would soon be illegal. As discussed earlier in the chapter, despite these protests, the mandatory hijab laws were ultimately enforced, making the visibility of women as they appear in this photograph politically potent and historically fleeting. This photograph documents this scene and transforms it. Once framed, it becomes part of a new regime of visibility that reconfigures what is remembered about Iranian women and political agency. Thus, seen content interrupts consensus through the ordinary radicality of appearance. Being present becomes political when appearance itself is forbidden. In doing so, the image exemplifies how photography in post-revolutionary Iran operates as a dissensual force that challenges the state's visual order by asserting presence where absence is enforced.

5.3 The Part with No Part

While Golestan photographed women at the moment preceding the institutionalisation of hijab laws, Moaiery documents her subjects under a regime in which their very visibility is already regulated. This temporal and legal shift alters the stakes of representation as she depicts *the part with no part*, referring to those who have no share in the communal distribution of the sensible (Zizek 70). By capturing the lives, struggles, and bodies of those censored or made invisible, Moaiery gives presence to *the part with no part*. "Politics, in its strict sense, involves the intervention of this part with no part to supplement the police order and modify the aesthetico-political field" (Zizek 70). By asserting their presence as political subjects, they disrupt the prevailing order of perception, thought, and action, enacting the assumption of equality among all (Rockhill 3). In this sense, Moaiery enacts politics, as someone who belongs to the part with no part and renders visible those likewise excluded from the dominant order.

In 2017, small protests erupted in Iran due

to corruption and deteriorating economic conditions (Moaery 52). One of the most iconic images of that period is *Standing in the Dust*, taken by Moaery in September 2017 as a woman exited Tehran University surrounded by tear gas (Bankston et al. 77). Approximately 500 protesters had gathered that day (Damavandi). As they exited, tear gas from the police scattered the crowd (Damavandi). When one woman turned back, blocked by the closed gates, Moaery captured the moment. That moment would come to symbolise the spirit of resistance in Iran (Damavandi; see fig. 2).



Figure 2: Yalda Moaery, *Standing in the Dust*, Photograph, 2017.

At the centre of the image is a woman in motion, walking through a thick cloud of smoke. Her left fist is raised. She pulls her headscarf over her mouth, shielding herself from the tear gas. She is placed at the centre of the composition, commanding the viewer's attention. This is an uncommon representation within censored Iranian visual culture, where women are often marginalised or erased from public representation. Here, she is not only present but also dominant. Moreover, the woman's covered face renders her anonymous, transforming her from an individual into a collective figure. This image could be of any woman. Thus, the photograph's symbolic reach is broad: one woman standing in for thousands of women in Iran, magnifying the regime's crimes from singular repression to systemic violence. The image is slightly blurred, likely due to the chaos of the moment, further enhancing the woman's anonymity and the image's symbolic power. This draws the viewer's attention to what defines her in the moment: she is a woman, and she is raising her fist

in resistance.

The tear gas dominating the composition enhances her anonymity, visually separating her from the viewer, blurring the surroundings, and obscuring the background. It functions as both medium and message. Tear gas, while deceptively categorised as less lethal, has long operated as a violent instrument of state repression, capable of causing serious harm and death when deployed excessively (Cachelin 523; De Larrinaga 524; Physicians for Human Rights; SITU; Yildiz). Here, however, it not only shows the physical violence deployed by the state but also becomes symbolic of the larger suppression that looms over Iranian women. It obscures the frame just as the regime seeks to obscure reality.

Designed to generate chaos and erode collective resolve, the use of tear gas extends beyond mere crowd control, often disorienting and breaking the spirit of uprisings (Feigenbaum in Yildiz). By filling space with blinding, suffocating smoke, tear gas alters the perceptual field, indiscriminately targeting protesters and bystanders alike, anonymizing bodies, and fracturing collective visibility (Cachelin 521; Dakwar). This sensory assault erases the presence of dissent from public view while simultaneously producing political disunity, enforcing "an asymmetric relationship" between police and protesters, weakening oppositional force, and reinforcing state dominance (Cachelin 524).

As such, tear gas is a symbol of the attempts of the *police* to influence the field of visibility, trying to keep the distribution of the sensible intact. It symbolises the *police's* violent attempts at stopping dissensus by blurring the "aestheticopolitical" field of visibility. Consequently, the woman in the centre of the image disrupts the blurry field of visibility by forcing herself into the visual field of the image and ensuring that she is seen. This disrupts the carefully curated distribution of the sensible, enacting politics in the Rancièrian sense. This woman becomes "a singular which appears as a stand-in for the Universal, destabilizing the 'natural' functional order of relations in the social body" (Zizek 70). In this moment, she does not represent herself alone; instead, she stands in for all those excluded from the visible order. She challenges the assumption that only certain bodies belong in public spaces or within the frame of political life, embodying the

universal claim to equality and freedom that the regime denies.

The deployment of tear gas against anti-colonial women's uprisings in Nigeria illustrates how state violence can be exercised in ways that obscure its brutality (Feigenbaum in Yildiz). As Feigenbaum observes, British colonial forces used tear gas precisely because it allowed them to suppress female-led resistance without appearing to engage in overt violence against women (in Yildiz). The goal was to harm without being seen to harm, ultimately preserving the illusion of legitimate, nonviolent authority (Feigenbaum in Yildiz). Similarly, in Moaiery's depiction, the aesthetics of protest reveal this tension. She renders visible both the presence of those excluded from representation and the mechanisms through which the state attempts to control what may appear.

Moaiery, thus, offers more than documentation. She creates visual politics that challenge the official aesthetic narratives of order and Islamic virtue. Her image exposes the fault lines of power, gender, and state control in Iran. In doing so, she actively resists what the regime allows to be seen, refusing self-censorship, what she calls "collaboration between the people and regime" (Moaiery 55). When asked when Moaiery realised the power of photography within the context of Iran, she described a moment when she was in solitary confinement. In an interview, Moaiery recalls being told by her interrogator that every single photograph she had taken had harmed the Islamic Republic (57). This was a moment that, rather than frightening her, affirmed the subversive power of her work (Moaiery 56). It demonstrated that her images are disruptive and dangerous to a regime built on the suppression of reality through control over visual perception (Moaiery 56).

Both what Golestan and Moaiery depict break the police order and interrupt the distribution of the sensible by dismantling the visual codes of obedience. They insist that even under censorship and surveillance conditions, visibility is still possible, and resistance is powerful. Here, a photojournalistic image becomes a disruption the regime works to prevent at all costs precisely because it undermines the narrative they seek to uphold. Their photographs underscore that in post-revolutionary Iran, photography is a means of intervening in the state's control over visibility. The next chapter will illuminate that this applies not

only to the content of the images but also to the act of taking the photograph itself, forming an archive that sustains their political force over time.

6 Chapter 3 – To Capture and to Continue

As established in the previous chapter, visibility in Iran is tightly regulated through laws that dictate what may appear and who is allowed to be seen. However, not only does the content of images disrupt this regime, but also the act of taking them. As Jacques Rancière asserts, dissensus is "less a state of being than an act of contention," underlining that the political lies not only in what is shown but in the act of making something visible (84). This chapter examines how Hengameh Golestan and Yalda Moaiery enact such dissensus by taking photographs under censorship and threat, intervening in the distribution of the sensible, and asserting visibility for those denied presence. This visual resistance continues into the present, as recent protests⁶, especially following the death of Mahsa Amini, demonstrate the political force of images. As this chapter will show, the photographs of Golestan and Moaiery become part of what I will term an *archive of dissensus*. This archive consists not of official records but of images that endure as visual symbols, extending dissensus through memory, circulation, and collective iconography.

6.1 Dissensus Enacted

The following image is another one from Golestan's *Witness '79* Series, taken on 8 March 1979, after the Islamic Revolution (see fig. 3). At first glance, one can see many different women, all seemingly walking in the same direction on *Vali Asr Street*⁷ in Tehran. It is snowing, and many of the women are holding umbrellas over their heads. Women across various ages and beliefs appear united in purpose. This becomes clear when observing how they cover their heads: some

⁶An elaboration on these protests will be given towards the end of this chapter.

⁷This is the name of the most important street in the capital, Tehran, in Farsi. It is 18 km long, running from north to south Tehran, making it the longest in the Middle East ("Valiasr Street").

wear headscarves or religious coverings, others wear hats to shield themselves from the snow, and some have no head covering. Moreover, most women appear with open mouths, presumably chanting demonstrative slogans. Looking toward the back of the image, one can see that the crowd thickens: a sea of women and umbrellas continuing into the distance. These are thousands of women protesting for their rights of freedom, choice, and equality.



Figure 3: Hengameh Golestan, *Untitled*, Photograph, 1979.

Golestan's act of taking this photograph is not a neutral or documentary gesture but a political action. This is because she captures a vital political moment in Iran's history and confronts the state's monopoly over visibility, breaking through the perceptual order that aims to erase dissent. Her photograph is a claim to visibility for those whose visibility has been denied, intervening directly in the distribution of the sensible, claiming space for the excluded (here: protesting women) to appear as political subjects. Here, giving presence challenges the structured order of visibility, constituting an act of democratic emancipation (Rockhill 3). Through taking the picture, Golestan makes the claim that there is something and someone worth capturing and showing, redistributing the *police's* sensible coordinates. Especially at a time when women are being segregated, and rules that deny women their equality and visibility are about to be imposed, her decision to photograph them shows the importance of their visibility, enacting dissensus.

Golestan's act of photographing the event is shaped by the political constraints on image-making at the time. As she notes, "taking pictures

in the crowd was not easy, most of the time [she] was running and hiding from the government officials who did not want images to be taken" (in Davies). The state's attempt to prohibit the production and distribution of such images reflects a regulation of the distribution of the sensible, of the limits of what can be seen and perceived in public. Precisely because of this suppression, Golestan's act of photographing these scenes becomes a rupture that disturbs the new Islamic police logic. It ruptures the police order at the level of perception itself: the photographer assumes the position of an unauthorised witness, making visible what is officially kept hidden.

This intervention takes on additional significance in the gendered context of post-revolutionary Iran, where both women's visibility and their authorship of public narratives were actively curtailed. A woman photographing other women protesting amplifies the described rupture: Golestan occupies a doubly excluded position (as a woman and a photographer), challenging the masculine and state-controlled authorship of public imagery. By claiming the right to show, Golestan enacts democratic emancipation, her presence behind the camera becoming a political act (Ranci re 86). She witnesses the demand for equality and enacts it, asserting through her lens that she, too, has a part in shaping what may be seen and remembered.

Moaiery continues this lineage using her camera to confront and expose the state's ongoing attempts to suppress political visibility. Taken in September 2022, shortly after the Mahsa Amini protests erupted, this image depicts a woman from behind, standing in the street and raising her hair high with one hand (see fig. 4). Her body is small but central in the frame. Her face is not visible, suggesting she could be anyone. During these protests in Iran, countless women took to the streets. Her anonymity allows her to become representative of all of them. She is standing not just for herself but for the collective. She holds in her raised fist not a weapon, not a banner, but her hair, the very part of her body that the regime demands she conceal. In this gesture, her womanhood becomes a protest. Her hair, typically hidden by the compulsory hijab, becomes her banner of defiance.

The simplicity of the composition of the image lends it symbolic power. There is only a sin-



Figure 4: Yalda Moaiery, *Untitled*, Photograph, 2022.

gle woman to be seen, holding a forbidden part of her body in an exposed and elevated gesture. By capturing this moment from behind, Moaiery creates a visual space in which resistance is depersonalised and universalised. This could be the shadow of any protester, any citizen asserting her bodily autonomy. This woman becomes symbolic of the part with no part as her anonymity allows her to transcend individuality and become a visual placeholder for the collective struggle. By holding her hair up and demanding it be seen, she gestures toward the political exclusion of women from visibility and public voice. The elevation of her hair, a symbol of feminine identity and a target of state control, asserts presence precisely where the state declares absence.

Initially, Moaiery published the image anonymously, fearing government retaliation against her family. It eventually circulated widely and then-President Donald Trump reposted it to comment on forty years of Iranian oppression (Mata-moros). This appropriation angered Moaiery, and she eventually claimed the image publicly to reclaim its meaning (Moaiery 59). Her fear of retaliation underscores the extent to which the regime deploys intimidation to suppress disruptions to its dominant narrative. Her reclamation of authorship is inherently political, marking an assertion of agency by someone excluded from the dominant perceptual order. Moaiery's insistence on showing reconfigures the field of perception even though it has earned her the title "the victim of showing" (Moaiery 54). This reveals that, in a regime

premised on concealment, to show is to risk victimhood, violence, and enforced silence.

As becomes evident, Moaiery's endeavour has not been without struggle. During an interview, she described:

I tried to look like men through my outfits and behaviors. I did not have any makeup or jewelry, and I didn't wear the clothes that women wear. So until I was 30, I was like a unisex person because I had to stay in this job and had to protect myself [...] I was arrested for the first time twenty years ago when I [began] my career as [a] photojournalist and I [have] been in prison five more times since. (Moaiery 57)

Each time she was imprisoned, it was in response to an image the regime sought to suppress (Moaiery 61). The last time she was in prison was after this specific image (see fig. 4). She took the image on the first day of the protest and was arrested immediately after (Roshan). The government's attempts at silencing her dissent uncover the efforts of the *police* to keep their carefully curated distribution of the sensible intact. Moaiery, similar to Golestan, ruptures this distribution by the simple act of taking an image.

In prison, Moaiery's interrogators expressed their intent to turn her into a symbol of a photojournalist striving to expose reality so that others would be deterred through her capture and persecution (Moaiery 56). By denying her agency and casting her as a cautionary tale, the regime sought to control the meaning of her visibility. However, Moaiery refused this imposed symbolism. She transformed symbolic violence into symbolic power by reclaiming authorship over her image and continuing to publish her work despite the risks. Through her lens, she resisted the erasure of others and the attempted erasure of herself, renegotiating visibility and making space for those rendered unseen.

6.2 Dissensus Remembered

As has become evident, Rancière's framework offers a powerful lens through which to understand how these images do more than just depict dissensus—they enact it. However, a closer look

at the photographs' afterlives reveals that the images articulate something beyond his formulation. Rancière defines dissensus as "a political process that resists juridical litigation and creates a fissure in the sensible order by confronting the established framework of perception, thought, and action with the 'inadmissible', i.e. a political subject" (85). While he describes dissensus as a "process", his framework often centres on scenes of sudden rupture, moments in which visibility and speech are seized by those excluded from the political order or the part with no part (Rancière 83–84, 90–92). He writes that "a community of equals is, therefore, a precarious community that implements equality in intermittent acts of emancipation" (90), signaling that emancipation takes place through "acts" that are moment-bound, even if intermittent. This chapter builds on this claim by arguing that dissensus, particularly in the context of post-revolutionary Iran, is not confined to the moment of appearance or the act of dissensus. Instead, it reoccurs over time through the images' continued circulation and symbolic reactivation.

While Daria Kirsanova gestures toward this idea through her emphasis on the historical quality that images gain through the application of Rancière's notion of dissensus, I argue that the images discussed in this thesis speak to the potential of aesthetics to produce ongoing disruption: interruptions that do not conclude with the initial act of visibility or protest (9). As such, they become part of an *archive of dissensus*, referring to the enduring aesthetic and symbolic traces of political ruptures, such as images, gestures, and acts that continue to disrupt dominant regimes of visibility and perception long after their initial emergence. The images do not simply mark a break in the distribution of the sensible; they continue to fracture it in different ways, generating an enduring temporality of dissensus.

This enduring force is exemplified by the photographs of Golestan and Moaiery, which document what once was in the case of Golestan, and what continues to be in the case of Moaiery. Their images outlive the moment of protest and become persistent ruptures within the regime of historical narration and memory. They acquire archival power beyond the moment of capture and preserve what was intended to be ephemeral, extending dissensus into the future. In this way, Golestan's images not only disrupted the distri-

bution of the sensible in 1979, and Moaiery's in 2017 and 2022, but both continue to do so today, exposing the regime's ongoing attempts to monopolise the historical narrative. The temporality of the photographs, their ability to preserve and circulate the past, enables a prolonged dissensus, extending the rupture beyond the event.

Illustratively, Golestan's image (see fig. 3) fractures the regime's narrative, inserting an archive of collective memory that does not conform to the state's ideals. Though its visibility is fleeting in historical time, Golestan's image refuses to be erased. It becomes a historical document that continuously disrupts the distribution of the sensible as a reminder of what once was. In an interview with the *British Journal of Photography*, Hengameh stated, "In the days before selfies, Photoshop, and citizen journalism, photos were vital, a visual document that might otherwise not be seen" (in Hamilton). Golestan captures a moment that could otherwise be forgotten and keeps alternative political memories and realities alive. Thus, she does not simply document history; she contests it, her images surviving not in official state histories but in black-and-white testaments to what was and what could have been.

The black-and-white quality of both of Hengameh's images discussed thus far underscores their archival character and the fact that they capture a reality that no longer exists. Their monochrome palette evokes the aesthetic of historical archives, firmly anchoring them in a past era. In doing so, the images carry historical weight. Moreover, in a regime where visibility is censored, images are erased, and colour is suppressed, both in public life and personal expression, monochrome becomes a visual echo of repression. It is a metaphor for lives compressed by state control and histories that endure not in vivid clarity but in fragments and shades of grey.

Beyond that, the absence of colour heightens the viewer's attention to compositional contrasts, body language, and facial expressions, directing focus toward the photograph's most potent elements: its visual symbols. Stripped of distraction, these symbols emerge with clarity and remain etched in the memory of those who encounter them, extending the force of dissensus beyond the moment of capture. This enduring resonance is also evident in Yalda Moaiery's images (see fig. 2; fig. 4). Her photographs have become

emblems of protest, repeatedly invoked in subsequent demonstrations. Their visual simplicity makes the image not only memorable but iconic. They distill resistance into a single gesture or singular frame. In capturing these shots, Moaiery both documents and creates a historical artifact that resists erasure. As Roland Barthes observes, a photograph affirms reality (77). Moaiery ensures that this reality remains within the “aesthetico-political” field. Even if the image itself fades, its symbolic power endures in the minds of millions of Iranians world wide—one woman, surrounded by tear gas, her fist raised in resistance.

Rancière’s framework of dissensus in *The Politics of Aesthetics* is thus extended by the archive of dissensus, highlighting the image’s capacity to rupture not only in the moment of dissensus but repeatedly through circulation and memory. While still a “political process”, dissensus shifts from intermittent acts of emancipation to a sustained unfolding that extends past the initial rupture. This becomes vital in the context of protests, where images take on lives of their own in an increasingly digital era. They persist, reappear, and ensure the recurrence of aesthetic rupture. Yalda Moaiery’s *Standing in the Dust* (see fig. 2), discussed in the previous chapter, exemplifies this power. As she reflects,

the picture became the symbol. After the Mahsa Amini movement, we saw a lot of pictures of different kinds of women, the people, and some political groups, and they still use my picture [...] The subject in the picture is a woman which is very important. The way that she raised her hand [...] is also important. (Moaiery 52)

Her image extends the political force of dissensus into new spaces and temporalities through repetition, circulation, and symbolic condensation.

6.3 Archival Continuity: Symbols, Circulation and Afterlife

When one looks closely at Moaiery’s image alongside that of Golestan, a visual and symbolic thread that stretches across decades of resistance begins to emerge (see fig. 1; fig. 2). In Golestan’s photograph (see fig. 1), the raised fist of a woman standing beside a mullah anticipates what is to

come: a quiet but forceful resistance at the onset of the Islamic Republic’s repressive politics. That same gesture reappears thirty-eight years later in Moaiery’s *Standing in the Dust*, refracted through a new generation yet carrying the same sentiment: the unveiled woman and the raised fist (see fig. 2). These motifs echo across their images, forming a lineage of cohesive visual dissensus. Together, they map a history of protest and aesthetic continuity, where symbols endure, mutate, and reassert themselves in the face of persistent oppression.

This continuity becomes unmistakable in the symbolic afterlife that emerged during the 2022 Mahsa Amini protests. The uprising, “apart from its feminist edge and the extraordinary bravery of the youth, [is distinguished] from the previous ones [by] the copiousness of its art” (Karimi, “Art of Protest in Five Acts” 585). Emerging from this artistic abundance is a proliferation of symbols and artworks, many of which trace their visual and ideological origins to the images of Golestan and Moaiery (see fig. 5). Their photographs, once capturing isolated moments of dissent, have become reservoirs of collective memory.

These enduring motifs resurfaced after 16 September 2022, when the morality police arrested a 22-year-old Kurdish woman named Jina Mahsa Amini in Iran (Bankston et al. 16). Upon being arrested, she was violently hit and shortly after taken to the hospital where she died only three days later (Bankston et al. 16). Following her death, months of nationwide protests broke out under the slogan *Jin, Jiyan, Azadi* or in English *Woman, Life, Freedom* (United Nations, “Justice and Accountability: Woman, Life, Freedom Protests”). The protests began as solidarity but quickly advanced into a “more comprehensive movement denouncing the government’s systemic discrimination against women and girls, [and the] employment of violence to stifle dissent” (Bankston et al. 16). In the wake of the protests, the Iranian authorities responded with severe repression, leaving over 500 demonstrators dead (Centre for Human Rights Iran). Many were deliberately maimed, including hundreds who were blinded, while tens of thousands were subjected to arbitrary detention (Centre for Human Rights Iran).

The movement sought not only to overthrow the Islamic Republic but also to transform the sym-

bolic order. This is seen in acts of iconoclasm, such as the destruction of monuments and banners honoring regime figures, alongside the emergence of new symbols that expressed the movement's ideals (Dorna Safaian). These adapted symbols included "figures of women who stand up, strong and proud, determined and united, their hair loose or mutilated, like fleeces emblematic of this struggle for their freedom" (Rabiot). As the protests advanced, progressively more visual imagery began to emerge in support of Mahsa, the protests, and the women of Iran. A majority of the imagery used symbols that occurred during the protests (see fig. 5; fig. 6). As reported by one of the protesters, none of the protesters "had weapons; [their] only weapon [was their] mobile phones, capturing and sharing images" (Centre for Human Rights Iran).



Figure 5: *Collection of Mahsa Amini Graphic Design Art, 2023.*

A particularly striking aspect of the emerging imagery was its symbolic representation, allowing the artists and their works to remain anonymous (Karimi, "Woman, Art, Freedom"). Karimi explains that "anonymity is not just for protection, which it does not guarantee anyway. Many women remove their identities from the story of their creative acts of protest to amplify the political message of their work" ("Woman, Art, Freedom"). She further highlights that non-artists' protest gestures and performative acts often carry an aesthetic dimension beyond their political intent (Karimi, "Woman, Art, Freedom"). Whether or not they are consciously artistic, these actions operate on multiple levels: as forms of resistance, as symbolic expression, and as powerful modes of public engagement (Karimi, "Woman, Art, Free-

dom").

The recurrence of the symbolic gestures of raised fists and unveiled hair across protest art in 2022 is not coincidental. It reveals that Golestan's and Moaiery's images have become part of a living iconography of dissent (see fig. 1; fig. 2; fig 4; fig 5). Their photographs, once singular moments of rupture, now echo through collective action and artistic practice. This capacity for symbolic recurrence grants these images their enduring political force, transforming dissensus into a shared aesthetic language of resistance.

This chapter shows how photography operates as a dissensual intervention in post-revolutionary Iran. Golestan and Moaiery perform dissensus, each act of capturing the unseen becoming a disruption of the state's visual order. Moreover, by focusing on the afterlives of images, this chapter extends Rancière's concept of dissensus beyond momentary acts to include how visual archives continue to disrupt the sensible over time. Evident in the art emerging during the 2022 Mahsa Amini uprising, dissensus can endure, circulate, and acquire new meaning. As Golestan and Moaiery's photographs become iconic, they gain symbolic weight that outlives the events they depict. They reappear as collective emblems of defiance, resistance, and dissensus. In this sense, Golestan and Moaiery do more than fracture the perceptual order; they build an archive of dissensus that keeps rupturing it.

7 Afterword - Resistance Endures

"My eyes burn from the tears streaming down my face. I'm filled with an overwhelming sense of grief. In one hand, I'm holding on tightly to a sharp pair of scissors, whilst in the other there is a generous handful of freshly chopped brown hair."

These are Sahar Zand's words after cutting her hair in front of an audience in her TED talk about Iran after the 2022 Mahsa Amini Protests. Many Iranians and supporters worldwide began cutting their hair, reviving an ancient tradition to publicly express their grief for unjust deaths, to reject the system responsible, and to affirm their resistance and desire for change (Zand). Not only Iranians but also prominent international figures joined in

solidarity: Swedish politician Abir Al-Sahlani cut her hair at the European Parliament in Strasbourg, Turkish singer Melek Mosso did so onstage, and French actresses like Juliette Binoche and Marion Cotillard took scissors to their hair in public (The Kit). What began as a local act of mourning became a transnational symbol of resistance, showing how a simple gesture can carry political force across borders. These global gestures of solidarity reveal that the political power of visual symbols does not end with the image. It lives on through embodied and performed acts.

This thesis has explored how photography in post-revolutionary Iran becomes a political act that captures dissensus in the frame, enacts dissensus by taking a photograph, and becomes part of an *archive of dissensus*. In doing so, it aligns with existing scholarship that treats visual culture in Iran as a site of dissensus, disrupting the distribution of the sensible (Akhavan 2; Gotink 56; Kirsanova 3; Touzelitti 98). However, while others have connected this framework to the Iranian context, this project expands the scholarship on political conditions in Iran by being the first to apply it to photography specifically, foregrounding the mediums' realist force in shaping visual rupture. This application allows for a multilayered analysis, leading to the introduction of an *archive of dissensus*: enduring aesthetics and symbolic traces of political ruptures, such as images, gestures, and acts that continue to disrupt dominant regimes of visibility and perception long after their initial emergence.

Chapter 1 has shown that photography in post-revolutionary Iran cannot escape its political weight. It does not merely represent reality; it intervenes in it. In a regime defined by censorship and enforced invisibility, to photograph is to do politics: to redistribute the sensible, to insist on visibility, and to expose what the state seeks to obscure. Chapter 2 has illuminated how this intervention acquires political significance. The photographs of Golestan and Moaiery enable excluded subjects to assert themselves within the public sphere by capturing realities denied official recognition, making dissensus visible. Chapter 3 deepened this inquiry, showing that photography in Iran does not simply reflect dissensus but enacts it. Moreover, it has demonstrated that by extending Rancière's concepts of dissensus into the domain of visual and symbolic afterlives, dis-

sensus can be archived and circulated, generating an enduring temporality of dissensus.

This thesis opens up new ways of thinking about visibility, not as a static category, but as a contested terrain that stretches across time and memory. The images of Golestan and Moaiery are living ruptures, revealing how, despite the regime's systematic efforts to suppress dissent and foreclose dissensus through legal, institutional, and physical means, resistance does not vanish. Instead, it reconfigures itself, often shifting into alternative and dispersed forms. Across both domestic and diasporic contexts, artists refuse to accept erasure, cultivating new aesthetic and political spaces that challenge the state's grip on visibility. Within this atmosphere of repression and defiance, an aesthetic regime of resistance emerges as a heterogeneous, nonetheless determined, network of practices that insists on presence and asserts the right to appear. Yet the story does not end here. The persistence of dissensus and the formation of an archive reveal that there is always an afterlife. Their force lies in how they endure, become icons, inspire gestures, and reappear across protests, artworks, and bodies. In this sense, the images explored in this thesis do not remain confined to their original moment; they continue to live and to be reactivated. As such, in closing, this thesis explores how the archive expands.

7.1 The Archive Expands

It is in the case of the Mahsa Amini protests that the archive expands. The photographs discussed in this thesis, whether of raised fists, unveiled hair, or defiant gestures, do not remain static. They acquire an afterlife that makes them circulate, inspire, and reappear in new forms. In this way, dissensus moves beyond the frame. It becomes performative, collective, and continuous. This raises broader questions: How do symbols travel across time and space? How does resistance become embodied? What does it mean to perform dissensus? And how can we speak of a performative distribution of the sensible? The symbol of hair and the act of cutting it carry a long cultural and emotional history in contexts of mourning and protest. While the depiction of unveiled hair disrupts the regime of visibility, the severed hair pushes this disruption further by

turning the act of unveiling into a gesture of irreversibility. This afterword explores how such a symbolic and performative act can extend the archive of resistance and sustain its force beyond the photographic moment.

Historically, hair has played a significant role in visual representations (Rabiot; Zand). In Iran, specifically, the symbol of cutting one's hair goes back centuries. In Farsi, the term for it is *Gisuboran*. Here, *gisu* means "hair," and *boran* means "cutting," a practice closely linked to mourning rituals (Zand). In pre-Islamic Persia, where Zoroastrianism shaped spiritual and cultural life, *Gisuboran* was a visible sign of grief and a shared expression of sorrow (Zand). It marked the severing of ties with the departed and a quiet recognition of life's impermanence, offering solace through symbolic release (Zand). Furthermore, cutting hair has symbolised rebellion and the beginning of resistance, especially when women lacked other means to assert power (Mouriquand). It traces back to Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, the epic poem written between 977 and 1010 CE (Mouriquand). Known as the *Book of Kings*, the *Shahnameh* recounts Persia's mythical and historical past, preserving its cultural heritage, language, and identity (Zand). A key example of *Gisuboran* appears when Princess Farangis cuts her long black hair after learning that her husband, Prince Siavash, a legendary hero, has been killed by Iran's enemies (Zand). She ties her severed hair around her waist, symbolizing her withdrawal from ordinary life and marking that nothing will ever return to how it was (Zand).

The long history of *Gisuboran* resonated deeply in the gestures seen across Iran and beyond. However, in the aftermath of Mahsa Amini's death, this mourning became something more. In a context where some lives and deaths are never publicly acknowledged, mourning itself becomes an act of resistance (Safaian). It expresses grief and refusal, resembling a rejection of the violence that necessitates such sorrow. Here, the act of cutting hair blurs the boundary between mourning and protest, transforming a private expression into a collective political statement. As Safaian notes, "As a form of protest and a revolutionary symbol, the gesture of mourning not only mobilises people against the Islamic Republic's policy of death but also brings connectivity, respect for vulnerability, and recognition of life into circula-

tion as political values."

Within Iran, this gesture has evolved into a performative act of dissensus. It has allowed individuals, especially women, to reclaim control over their bodies and narratives symbolically. In a state that tightly regulates visibility, the very act of showing hair already constitutes dissensus. However, cutting it goes further. It communicates pain, resistance, and autonomy all at once. Through this act, women are not only rejecting the regime's mandates; they are rendering the rules irrelevant. This gesture is not about hair, the hijab, or religion but rather the most basic human rights (Who in The Kit). The message evoked becomes clear: *If you forbid me to show my hair, I will show you I no longer need your permission to have it.* The gesture becomes a way of making both the body and its refusal visible, disrupting the distribution of the sensible through presence and performance. Tracing this lineage back to Princess Farangis, who tied her severed hair around her waist in mourning for Prince Siavash, it becomes clear that these gestures carry centuries of symbolic weight (Zand). Then, as now, cutting hair marked a threshold between past and future, silence and speech, grief and action. In the hands of Iranian women today, that same gesture signals that things will not return to how they were. It confronts historical injustice while asserting a different future, one in which mourning is not passive but defiant, and visibility is both personal and political.

These reflections reveal how dissensus has the potential to move beyond visual rupture to become performative and embodied. In the Iranian context, gestures like the raised fist, the unveiled head, and the severed hair do not only depict dissensus and resistance; they perform and embody them. Circulating anonymously yet powerfully across social and geographic boundaries, these acts evade and confront censorship mechanisms. They become signs of dissensus and active sites where political subjectivisation is lived and shared. This embodied, and performative form of iconography has the potential to deepen Rancière's notion of dissensus. No longer confined to the realm of perceptual rupture or symbolic representation alone, dissensus in the Iranian context can emerge as profoundly bodily, performative, and collective. It does not simply fracture the distribution of the sensible in isolated moments but

instead reconfigures the field of visibility with enduring recurrence.

This thesis began with a moment of confrontation in an Iranian interrogation cell, where Yalda Moaiery was told that her photographs had harmed the Islamic Republic. That moment marked the power of visibility: not as representation, but as rupture. Her story opened this thesis as an act of photographic dissensus. It revealed that such dissensus does not end when the shutter clicks or the image circulates but rather persists in symbols that live on. The raised fist, the uncovered hair, and the cut strands are a continuation of Moaiery's moment, each a refusal to let the regime decide what can be seen and what must be forgotten. The story that began with a muted threat and an unspoken triumph does not conclude. It expands. Visibility becomes resistance. Resistance endures.



Figure 6: Shahram Saadat, *Untitled*, Photograph, 2024

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Interdisciplinary

Reimagining Discovery:

A Recommender System for Animated Film Based on Aesthetic Features

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Frame from Snow White. Walt Disney, 1937.

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Abstract

This study investigates the potential of aesthetic-driven recommender systems, using animated films as a case study. Animated movies, with their exceptional visual flexibility, serve as an ideal medium for visual analysis and provide robust features for recommendation. The primary objective of this research is to develop a recommendation system based entirely on animated aesthetics and assess its effectiveness. To achieve this, an image dataset was constructed from still frames of movie trailers, and a pre-trained Convolutional Neural Network (CNN) was fine-tuned using the 2D fine art dataset Artpedia. The refined VGG16 model was applied to the dataset to extract movie vectors, which were subsequently utilized with the ANNOY approximate nearest neighbor algorithm to generate recommendations based on user input. The system excels at identifying novel visual similarities between otherwise unrelated films. It demonstrates high precision when evaluated on the MovieLens dataset, accurately recommending user-preferred movies based on stylistic attributes. Beyond its promising implications for film recommendation, this aesthetic-driven approach offers broader applications in the digital humanities, providing tools to explore visual connections in media such as video games and graphic novels and highlighting the potential of interdisciplinary cross-pollination in machine learning.

Keywords and phrases: *Recommendation System, Animation, Aesthetic Features, Movies, Streaming*

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List of Abbreviations

CNN Convolutional Neural Network

ML Machine Learning

DH Digital Humanities

1 Introduction

The influence of recommender algorithms on current media and information access is difficult to overstate. These algorithms are embedded into streaming services, social media platforms, e-commerce sites, and even research tools, shaping how users discover and engage with information. Given their power and ubiquity, a large field of ongoing research is dedicated to their improvement. One emerging area of exploration involves recommending items based on their aesthetic profiles. Promising studies in this area have focused on live-action movies [1], photography [2], and fashion [3]-[5]. However, no research has yet explored an aesthetics-based recommendation system for animation, leaving a notable gap in the literature. This may be because animated movies are so often thought of as being primarily for children. The bulk of adult entertainment is live-action, after all. However, animation is in fact an incredibly pertinent aesthetic case study because of the diversity of its style and subjects. A viewer's experience with an animated film is inherently tied to the film's visual qualities, which often encapsulate the genre and themes of the work. As a result, aesthetic features present a compelling basis for recommending animated films. This project aims to develop a recommendation system based entirely on the aesthetics of animated movies and to evaluate the effectiveness of this approach.

Developing this system involves five distinct steps. Firstly, an algorithm isolates animated movies from the MovieLens dataset [6] and collects frames from their associated YouTube trailers to create a dataset for aesthetic analysis. Secondly, the convolutional neural network VGG16 [7] is fine-tuned on the Artpedia dataset [8] to extract meaningful feature vectors from 2D images. These vectors describe both the contents of the image as well as its visual style and characteristics. Thirdly, the modified VGG16 extracts feature vectors from the dataset, which are then averaged to generate a single feature vector for each movie. Fourthly, these vectors become input for a content-based recommender system powered by the nearest neighbor algorithm ANNOY [9]. Finally, the recommendation system's performance is evaluated against the MovieLens user rating data to assess its effectiveness in suggesting relevant titles. The results demonstrate high

precision and reveal novel yet meaningful relationships between movies. The final system is not only effective for recommending animated films, but it also serves as a proof of concept that aesthetic connections in animation can drive successful recommendations.

These findings can be leveraged in many different ways. An aesthetics-based recommender system for animation would not only be a valuable resource for animation enthusiasts hoping to discover more relevant content, but also a strategic tool for streaming services to enhance the content-based element of their hybrid systems. Currently, 40% of television usage is devoted to streaming content [10], and over two hundred services compete to provide it [11]. Netflix leads the market with 247 million subscribers. Former Netflix Vice President of Product Innovation Carlos Gomez-Urbe and Product Chief Neil Hunt [12] find that the average Netflix subscriber loses interest after 60 to 90 seconds of choosing, having reviewed roughly 10 to 20 titles. If they do not find something to watch, they are significantly more likely to unsubscribe. For most streaming services, effective recommender systems are a "key pillar of (the) product" [12] and crucial for surviving in such a competitive landscape. An aesthetic-based recommendation strategy for animation could offer a fresh perspective, pushing the boundaries of innovation in this highly pertinent and rapidly evolving field of study.

Such a system could offer significant benefits to animation studios by providing insights into new aesthetic trends emerging in the animated movie market. It could also benefit studios by presenting relevant stylistic references for new projects and identifying underexplored opportunities for visual innovation. Additionally, aesthetic-based animated recommender systems could be a powerful tool for researchers in the digital humanities (DH). Recommender systems have recently begun to garner attention as a method of 'exploring and remixing' humanities data [13]. Several factors explain the limited application of recommender system techniques in DH: limited user data [13], small and sparse datasets [14], insufficient domain-specific vocabularies [15], and stakeholder diversity [14] with often tight budgets [15]. Nevertheless, scholars have identified recommender systems as a forthcoming technology with the potential to greatly benefit DH research

[16]. According to Arnold and their colleagues [13], these methods enable a reorganization of data that facilitates the discovery of latent connections between collection items, ultimately unlocking novel research questions.

2 Related Works

This project explores the efficacy of using the aesthetic features of animated films to recommend animated titles to users. To understand the implications of such an investigation, it is important to ground it in the appropriate theoretical foundations. This section will discuss relevant literature from the fields of animation, aesthetic analysis, and recommendation system design and how they unite to contextualize this research and explain relevant techniques.

2.1 The Case for Animation

Animation showcases unique visual flexibility that few other media can rival. This is partially because the field of animation includes a diversity of associated techniques such as rotoscoping, stop-motion, and computer animation [17], each of which fundamentally affects the look and feel of the production. The greatest source of animation's visual variability, however, is the total control animation studios have over the visual realities of their productions. Animation is not constrained by the same limits that apply to live-action cinematography. It allows for any fantastical visuals or improbable subjects the creators choose to include. One of the inventors of cel animation, John Bray, explained in a patent that animation differed from moving pictures because animation was born from imagination rather than the tangible world. He argued that this led to representations "impossible in reality" [18]. Exaggerated forms, mythical creatures, and improbable camera angles are typical of animation [19] and make animated productions visually distinct from live action and from one another.

This concept informs Suzanne Buchan's notion of *animated worlds*: "realms of cinematic experience that are accessible to the spectator only through the techniques available in animation filmmaking" [20]. Animated worlds help describe the plethora of aesthetic and visual styles

capable of fundamentally shaping the audience's interaction with the title. Given the significant impact that the visual contents and style of animation have on the viewer, going so far as to transport them into whole new realms of cinematic experiences, it is reasonable to hypothesize that the aesthetics of an animated movie play a crucial role in the viewer's enjoyment and may influence their future animated viewing choices.

Furthermore, the breadth of visual options available to animation studios means that stylistic decisions are usually made with intent. Aesthetic choices may be made in service of effectively illustrating the story or tone of the title. They may also be broadly indicative of a certain studio, country, or period; think of the wide-eyed Disney storybook style, the brightly colored 2D characters from '90s Japan, and the avant-garde atmospheric animation from the '70s Soviet bloc. Thus, the aesthetics of animated titles reflect latent features such as theme, genre, and other attributes that may be difficult to identify but nevertheless affect viewer experience. These would naturally appear as emergent attributes in an aesthetics-based recommendation system. Combined with Buchan's conceptualization of the powerful effect of animation on user experience, there is extremely strong evidence that a recommender system for animation based entirely on aesthetics would be very successful in showing users relevant titles.

2.2 Aesthetic Evaluation

The vast majority of machine learning (ML) aesthetic quality assessment and feature extraction is focused on photographs. Various video quality assessment methods have been developed to evaluate computer-generated animation from an objective video quality perspective [21], but there is little research on methods to evaluate the subjective aesthetic qualities of animation. This leaves a significant gap in the existing literature for exploring methodologies that assess the subjective aesthetic qualities of animation using ML. Though the specific question of animation has not been addressed by the literature, it offers a rich library of CNNs and various methods of aesthetic feature extraction to draw upon.

The field of digital aesthetic evaluation began by classifying images based on art and photography principles such as color, shape, and com-

position. However, this initial approach struggled to capture the complexity and subtlety of aesthetics and was significantly enhanced by subsequent deep learning image classification convolutional neural networks (CNNs). Deep CNNs were pioneered by Krizhevsky and his colleagues in 2012 with the breakthrough model AlexNet [22]. AlexNet consists of five convolutional layers followed by max-pooling layers, three fully connected layers, and a softmax output, designed to efficiently process large-scale image data. More CNNs followed, optimizing different aspects of performance for different tasks. VGG models used a deep, uniform architecture with smaller 3x3 convolutional filters to improve learning efficiency and feature extraction while making the network design simpler and more standardized [7]. ResNet models added the concept of "skip connections", which let information jump over layers, making it easier to train very deep networks without the problem of losing important details during training (a challenge called the vanishing gradient problem) [23]. EfficientNet models employed a compound scaling method, which balances network depth, width, and resolution to optimize accuracy and efficiency across different model sizes [24].

These CNNs have been integrated into many different aesthetic feature extraction approaches. Jin and his colleagues trained VGG16 on the widely used dataset AVA [25] to assess both the aesthetic quality of a photograph as well as the difficulty of predicting it [26]. The OWACNN method [27] uses four separate ResNet CNNs to analyze different aspects of the input image: scene, emotion, object, and semantics. These are combined using the OWA pooling layer to get a holistic aesthetic quality assessment that captures the relationship between objects and aesthetics. The NIMA model [28] evaluates image aesthetics by predicting a distribution of aesthetic scores rather than a single score, reflecting subjective human judgments. This project fine-tunes several different CNNs on an aesthetic quality dataset to create models that can predict the likelihood of different aesthetic ratings and create a distribution of aesthetic opinions. It finds VGG16 to be the most effective CNN for the task. Other projects build entirely new CNN architectures to reflect specific methods of human vision and aesthetic judgment. For example, [29] develops CNNs that replicate the dual peripheral-foveal perception of the human eye to process an

object's aesthetic qualities similarly to how a person would.

2.3 Recommendation Systems

Broadly speaking, there are two basic approaches to constructing recommender systems: content-based filtering and collaborative filtering. Content-based filtering focuses on the attributes of the items themselves. It recommends items similar to those a user has already shown interest in, using features such as genre, description, or keywords. While effective for personalizing recommendations for new users, it can suffer from limited variety because it does not explore beyond the user's existing preferences. Collaborative filtering, on the other hand, relies on the behavior and preferences of other users to make recommendations. It identifies patterns among user interactions, such as ratings, purchases, or clicks, and uses them to predict what a user might like based on the preferences of similar users (user-based) or items with similar interaction patterns (item-based). It works well for diverse datasets but struggles with the "cold start" problem: the challenge of making accurate suggestions when there is insufficient data about new users, new items, or both. Many recommendation systems combine both content-based and collaborative filtering methods in a hybrid system to minimize the drawbacks of both.

Currently, a key focus of the field involves refining the insights into a user's taste from their watch history [30] to develop content-based filtering recommendation systems that effectively handle the cold start problem without limiting the scope of user preferences. New recommendation algorithms are even moving toward analyzing user personality and behavior to create cognition-driven systems [31]. Recommender algorithms that analyze aesthetic quality based on individual history and preference have been investigated thoroughly in the fashion industry [3]-[5]. For example, Kalantidis and their colleagues pioneered methods of recommending clothing by measuring aesthetic similarities between clothing articles [3]. Similar strategies have been used in image recommendation algorithms. Lv and their colleagues develop a method to unobtrusively create aesthetic profiles for individuals and use those to measure the aesthetic quality

of photographs, conveniently dodging any problems that may arise when there is an absence of user data [2]. Chen and their colleagues take a collaborative filtering approach and explore how aesthetic recommendation can be applied to live-action movie recommender algorithms based on matrix factorization [1]. They conclude that the integration of aesthetic analysis improves their collaborative recommendation system.

Though the link between aesthetics and user preferences has been investigated in the context of recommender systems, it has never been applied to animation, leaving a notable gap in the literature. Investigating an aesthetics-based recommendation system for animation promises to yield interesting results as a case study for the general applicability of aesthetic features to recommendation systems as well as inform methods of recommending animated movies.

3 Methodology

3.1 Dataset Construction

A recommendation system for animated films based entirely on aesthetics requires a dataset of exclusively animated films and some associated visual representations. The process diagram of how this dataset was obtained is represented in Fig. 1. To analyze the results of the system, this dataset also needs to include individual user ratings. The MovieLens dataset [6] is a good fit for these requirements. The MovieLens dataset was launched in 1997 and has been extensively used to research algorithmic advances in recommender systems, including a breakthrough paper on solving the cold-start problem with a combination of collaborative and content-based recommendation methods [32] and research on improving live-action movie recommendations with aesthetic analysis [1]. The MovieLens 32 M dataset is the most appropriate for this research as it is a stable benchmark dataset; both large and well-tested. It includes 32 million ratings and two million tag applications applied to 87,585 movies by 200,948 users, collected in October 2023. The dataset contains both animated and live-action movies as well as their genres, TMDB IDs, and ratings from individual users.

Immediately after obtaining the dataset, an algorithm removed any movies without the genre

label “Animation”, leaving 4617 total relevant movies. To perform aesthetic analysis on these movies, the system required still frames, preferably ones that highlight the visual characteristics of the film. Without access to the full films, using trailers and clips from YouTube was a realistic and ideal solution. Trailers are made, in part, to show off a movie’s visual versatility and style, so they tend to represent a good aesthetic sample. Using the TMDB IDs associated with each movie, a program accessed the TMDB API and saved any associated YouTube links classified as a “Teaser”, “Trailer” or “Clip” to a data frame. Not every movie in the data frame had a working video link, so the size of the dataset decreased from 4,617 to 2,341. After removing the movies that lacked any associated YouTube links, the average number of links per movie was 1.9 and the maximum number of links was 54.

A program using the `yt_dlp` and `cv2` libraries accessed the video connected to each working YouTube link and extracted one frame every ten seconds. This program excluded frames from the first and final ten seconds of every video in an effort to avoid saving title frames. The images were fit into a padded 224 x 224 pixel frame so that they would later be ready for processing by a CNN. The program kept them uncropped and their aspect ratios intact so that neither cropping nor warping would affect the images’ visuals. This system of frame retrieval was greatly effective at obtaining high-quality, standardized stills from different animated movies, though it was impossible to avoid saving the occasional text-dominated, black, or transition frame. The resulting dataset was too large to reasonably work with, as some movies ended up with over 100 associated frames. To solve this problem, a program shuffled each movie’s saved frames before limiting them to a maximum of twenty. The shuffling ensured that the remaining frames were a random sample of all the extracted frames from all the available videos, so as much visual diversity as possible was captured. The frames were combined with the movie titles data from the MovieLens Dataset to form the new Movie Frames Dataset.

In addition, the titles of each movie were converted into lowercase and stripped of their year, article, special characters, and non-English names. For example, “Princess Mononoke

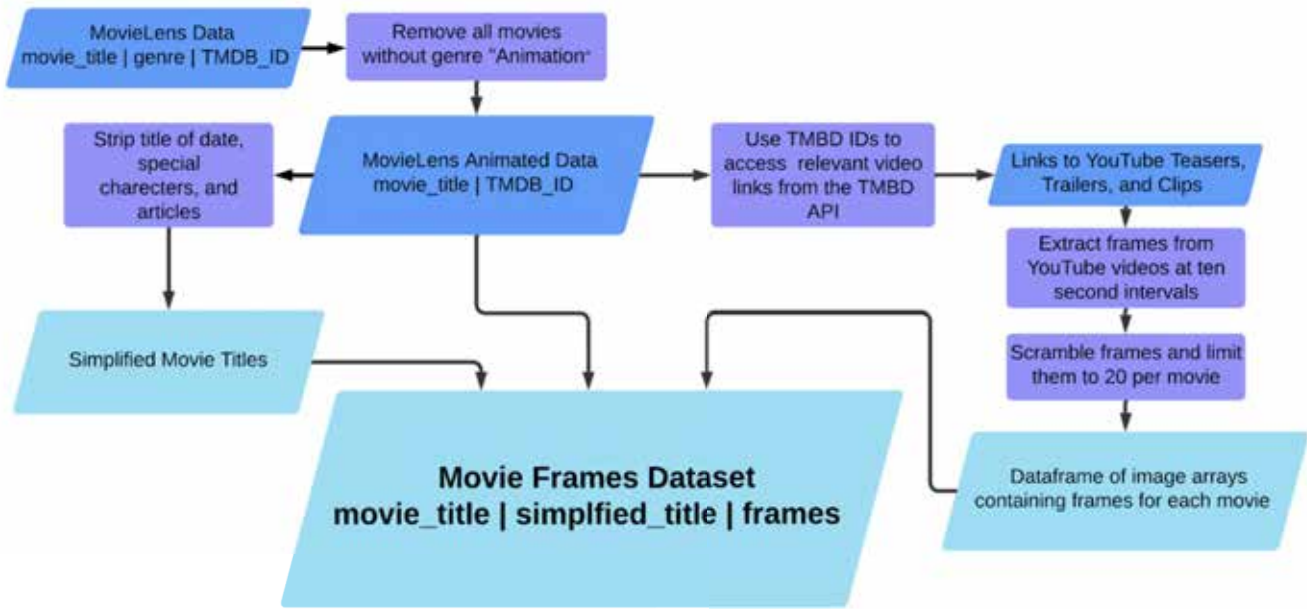


Figure 1: Dataset construction process diagram

(Mononoke-hime) (1997)” became “princess mononoke”. These simplified titles were added in a new column to the Movie Frames Dataset. This would later help the recommendation system recognize any title the user input, regardless of how they formatted it.

3.2 Aesthetic Analysis

There are a wide variety of aesthetic analysis CNN models, but for this project the most appropriate is VGG16 [7]. VGG16 captures hierarchical features well, from edges in the initial layers to complex textures and patterns in deeper layers, and is excellent at extracting spatial and visual features. The sequential design of VGG16 (stacked convolutional layers) is straightforward, making it easy to implement and modify for custom tasks (Fig. 2). There are pre-trained versions available to implement, and importantly, they can be fine-tuned on other datasets. VGG16 in particular is preferable to its larger sibling, VGG19, because of the decreased computational cost. However, VGG16 is still a deep network and takes a relatively long time to train and run.

VGG16 is trained on the ImageNet dataset [34], a massive dataset composed entirely of 3D photographs. As a result, when VGG16 was applied to the 2D animated movie dataset

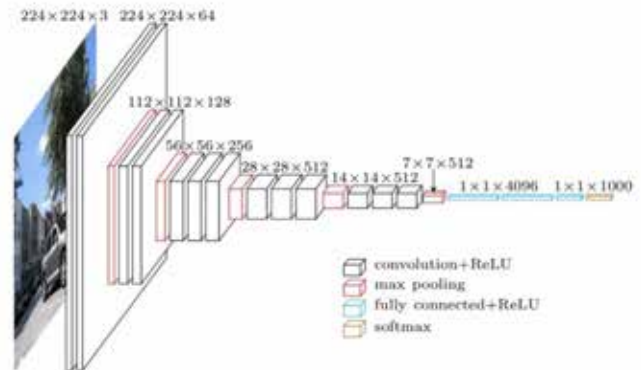


Figure 2: VGG16 CNN architecture [33]

it returned some unexpected classifications. Many images were incorrectly labeled as “television” or “web_site” because the model was ill-equipped to interpret 2D drawings. The classes “home_theatre”, “comic_book”, and “spotlight” also appeared frequently (Fig. 3). VGG16 applied these classes particularly often to 2D images, though they did get assigned to some 3D movies as well.

To improve VGG16’s performance and ensure it would output reasonable and distinct vectors, it needed to be refined on new training data. There is currently no dataset of aesthetically classified animated frames to train or refine VGG16 with, nor is creating one in the scope of this project. To



Figure 3: Unrefined VGG16 frame classifications

solve this problem, the Artpedia dataset was used as a substitute. The process diagram describing how this was accomplished is shown in Fig. 4.

The annotated Artpedia dataset [8] includes images of fine art, paired with visual sentences describing the content of the picture and contextual sentences containing information about the painting’s history (Fig. 5).

This dataset includes only 2D fine-art paintings and no photography, which is ideal because its key function is to give VGG16 further training on 2D images. Importantly, it also includes content that explicitly describes the scene in the painting. There are many large art datasets with a focus on classifying the period, artist or painting techniques [35], but Artpedia is suited for this project because it includes purely visual descriptions of the paintings. To prepare this dataset for training, a program cleaned and stripped the visual

sentences of their stopwords as well as common but unhelpful descriptors such as "symbol", "foreground", and "background" and words that contained non-standard characters or digits. It then identified the lexical category of each remaining word and removed verbs and proper nouns. Finally, it stemmed the remaining words to unify those with the same root and connotations but different conjugations. This left a set of descriptive labels corresponding to 2D fine art images. These labels were composed mostly of nouns and adjectives like "apple", "pastoral" and "grey". One problem remained, which is that Artpedia is a fairly small dataset, with only 2,930 total images. Though not definitively solvable, this issue can be improved with artificial expansion. To artificially expand the dataset and enhance generalization, data augmentation was applied through the ImageDataGenerator during the fine-tuning process, introducing variations such as rotations, shifts, and flips.

To refine the VGG16 model with the adjusted Artpedia dataset, several critical steps, decisions, and parameters were chosen to balance the pre-trained knowledge and the new information. The process began by loading the VGG16 model with pre-trained weights from ImageNet, excluding the top layers, to retain the base’s feature extraction capabilities. These base layers were initially frozen to prevent overwriting their learned weights during training. On top of this base, a custom classification head was added, including a GlobalAveragePooling2D layer to reduce feature maps, a fully connected layer with 512 units and ReLU activation to learn complex relationships, and a dropout layer to mitigate overfitting. Because the images in the animated movie database may contain multiple relevant items or classes, the final layer employed a sigmoid activation function to predict independent probabilities for each label and adjust the model to multi-label classification.

The model was compiled using the Adam optimizer with a learning rate of 0.0001, binary cross-entropy loss for multi-label classification, and accuracy as the evaluation metric. To prevent overfitting, early stopping with a patience of five epochs monitored validation loss, and a checkpoint saved the best-performing model. Finally, fine-tuning was achieved by unfreezing the last four layers of the base model and reducing the

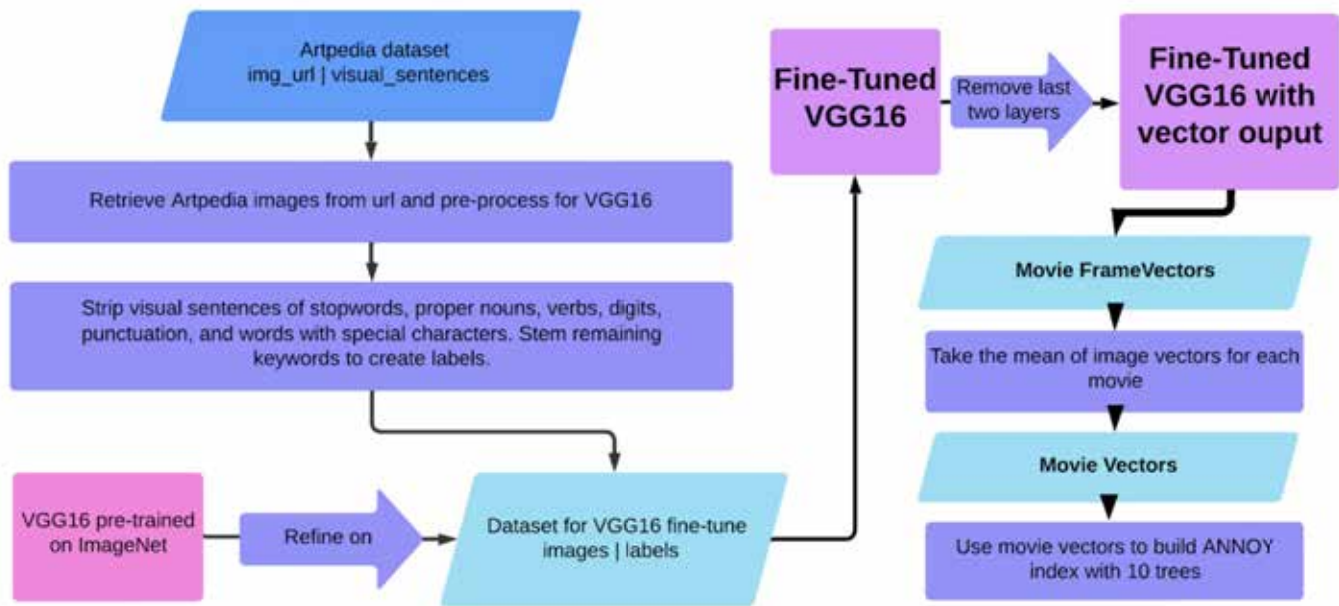


Figure 4: VGG16 fine-tuning process diagram

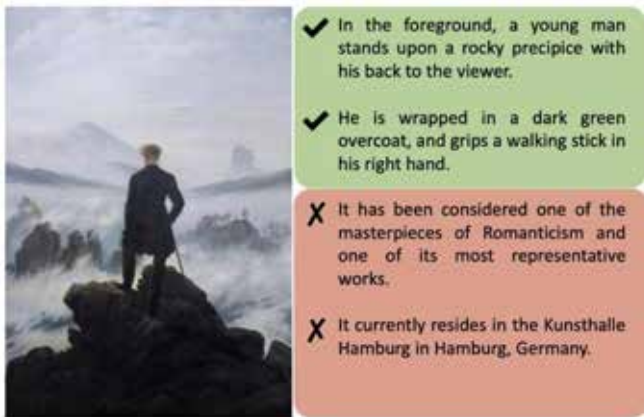


Figure 5: Artpedia text image example [8]

learning rate to 0.00001, allowing selective re-training of higher-level features while preserving lower-level ones. This pipeline ensured a balance between pre-trained knowledge utilization and adaptation to the new dataset. The entire process ultimately equipped VGG16 with some training on how to handle 2D images. Even if the fine art and animated frame dataset mismatch does not necessarily lead to correct classifications, it will generate more robust vectors for the 2D input images, which is enough for them to appropriately differentiate themselves and be successfully grouped by the ANNOY approximate nearest neighbor algorithm.

3.3 Recommender System

To ensure the fine-tuned VGG16 model returned a feature vector rather than a class, the final two layers were stripped. The resulting feature extractor processed each frame in the Movie Frames Dataset, and the resulting output vectors were aggregated by movie. The vector mean was used as the operator as opposed to the sum because the mean normalizes by the number of frames, giving each frame equal weight regardless of their quantity. This is important because each movie did not necessarily have an equal number of frames.

The resulting movie vectors were saved, and a nearest neighbor approach was used to power the recommender system. However, using a precise algorithm to calculate the distance between each of over 2000 vectors in this 512-dimensional space is computationally expensive and memory-intensive, so the approximate nearest neighbor system ANNOY [9] was employed to mitigate this cost. ANNOY uses random projection trees to find neighbors quickly, even in high-dimensional spaces. This makes it ideal for large-scale datasets, where exact methods struggle due to the curse of dimensionality and prohibitive runtime. Additionally, ANNOY allows a trade-off between accuracy and speed by adjusting the number of trees, enabling flexible performance tuning.

For this recommender system, 10 trees were used to strike an ideal balance.

To implement ANNOY, a program first built the ANNOY index from the VGG16 output movie vectors. The ANNOY index was then used as a core component in the architecture of the final recommender system. This system is designed to take a list of animated movie titles that already exist in the Movie Frames dataset and output the n nearest neighbors for each item. Its process diagram is shown in Fig. 6.

To make the system functional and transparent for the average user, a simple script prompting for inputs on the console was set up, allowing the user to create a list of as many movies as they like while those movies are in the database. It returns not only a list of recommended movies, but an image for each recommendation displaying five random frames from the associated list. This way, the user can get a sense of the visuals of the movie and understand why it was recommended to them and if it is in fact something they would like to pursue.

4 Results

The full system comes together to create a robust method of recommending movies based on visual characteristics. The architecture of the full system is demonstrated at the end of this section in Fig. 10.

4.1 Visual Similarity of Movies

The aesthetic recommender system is highly proficient at identifying and recommending obviously similar movies, such as sequels or films produced by the same studio; for instance, inputting “Shrek” at nearest neighbors $n = 3$ returns *Shrek 2* (2004), *Hotel Transylvania* (2012), and *Shrek the Third* (2007). Not only does the algorithm manage to identify the DreamWorks’ *Shrek* sequels as relevant, it also draws a connection to *Hotel Transylvania*—a Sony Pictures Animation movie also featuring monstrous characters. This connection is both serendipitous and insightful. It demonstrates the ability of the algorithm to recommend movies with similar subject matter.

Similarly, inputting “Howl’s Moving Castle” (Fig. 7) returns *Princess Mononoke* (1997), *From*

Up on Poppy Hill (2011), and *Treasure Planet* (2002) as seen in Fig. 8 and 9. Notably, *Princess Mononoke*, *From Up on Poppy Hill*, and *Howl’s Moving Castle* are all Studio Ghibli films. Comparatively, Disney’s *Treasure Planet* is an unexpected yet stylistically relevant match. This could suggest that the struggling post-renaissance Disney of 2002 was taking inspiration from Ghibli’s successes at the time, such as their critically acclaimed hit *Spirited Away* (2001), which would win an Oscar that same year. This further demonstrates the algorithm’s capability to capture unexpected yet meaningful aesthetic relationships.

4.2 Testing on User Rating Data

The recommender system was tested against the MovieLens user rating data at different ratings thresholds. The MovieLens user rating data is a data frame including columns containing the user ID, movie ID, and rating on a scale of 0 to 5. For each rating above the chosen threshold, the respective movie was input into the recommender system with parameter $n = 5$. The recommended movies were then compared to other movies that this user had already rated. The following quantities were calculated:

- **True Positive (TP)** = Movies that were recommended and have a rating $>$ threshold.
- **False Positive (FP)** = Movies that were recommended and have a rating $<$ threshold.
- **True Negative (TN)** = Movies that were not recommended and have a rating $<$ threshold.
- **False Negative (FN)** = Movies that were not recommended and have a rating $>$ threshold.

These quantities were used to calculate the precision and recall of the recommender system. Precision and recall are standard ways to measure the efficacy of a recommender system. Precision (1) represents the proportion of movies that the user has seen and that were recommended that were relevant. Recall (2) represents the number of movies that the user has rated above the threshold that were recommended out of the total number of movies the user rated above the threshold.

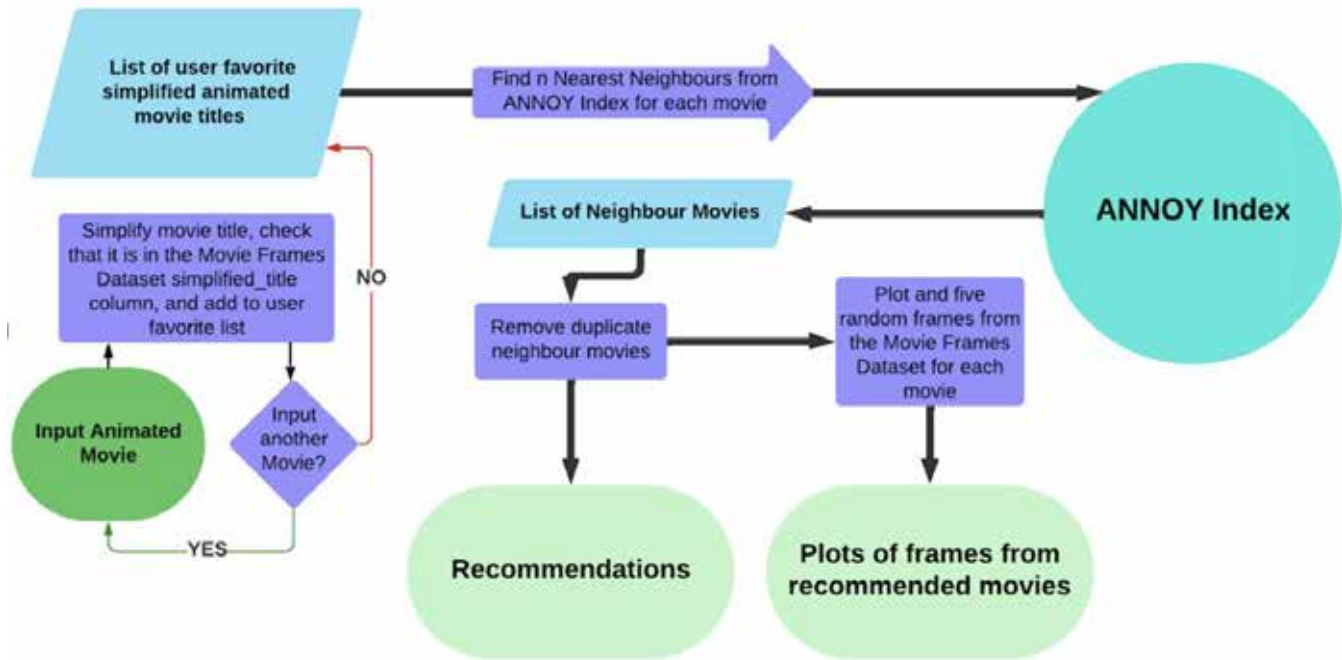


Figure 6: Recommendation System Process Diagram

Images for Howl's Moving Castle (Hauru no ugoku shiro) (2004)



Figure 7: Sample Frames for *Howl's Moving Castle*

```

Loading in movie stills dataframe...
Loading in movie vectors array...
The vector array and movie dataframe are the same length. Proceeding...
Building annoy index ...
Recommender system is ready!
Enter favorite animated movie title: Howl's Moving Castle
Would you like to add another movie? (y/n): n

Recommended movies based on your favorites:
1. Treasure Planet (2002)
2. Princess Mononoke (Mononoke-hime) (1997)
3. From Up on Poppy Hill (Kokuriko-zaka kara) (2011)
    
```

Figure 8: Recommender system text output

$$\text{Precision} = \frac{TP}{TP + FP} \quad (1)$$

$$\text{Recall} = \frac{TP}{TP + FN} \quad (2)$$

Precision and recall were calculated at different thresholds to produce the following graph (Fig.

11). In the interest of time, they were calculated using only the first 500,000 of the 2,092,795 rows in the ratings dataframe.

The proportion of ratings above the threshold can be thought of as the results if the system returned movies at random. As the rating threshold increases, the gap between the precision of the system and the proportion of ratings above the

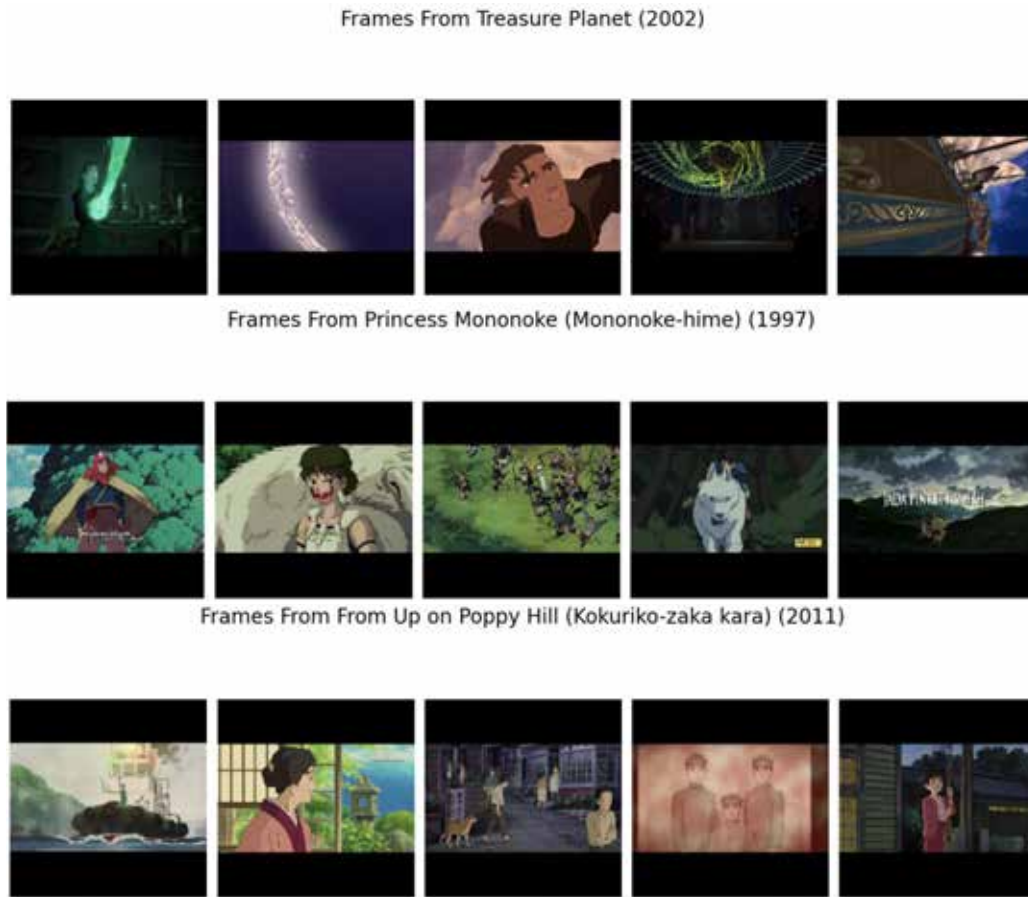


Figure 9: Recommender system visual output for input *Howl's Moving Castle*

threshold also increases. This illustrates that the recommender system’s performance improves as the threshold increases. From this chart, it can be seen that at its best the system is roughly three times as effective as random.

I evaluated the statistical significance of the recommender system’s performance by comparing it against a random baseline. Using the first 500,000 rows of the MovieLens user ratings dataset, precision was calculated for the recommender algorithm with $n = 5$ on movies rated above a threshold of five. These precision values were compared to those generated by recommending movies at random. The analysis yielded a t -statistic of 9.0278 and a p -value of 3.03×10^{-19} , demonstrating that the difference between the recommender system and the random baseline is highly statistically significant.

The average recall is very low at every threshold. As demonstrated in the precision-recall curve (Fig. 12), again calculated with $n = 5$ and with only the first 500,000 rows of the MovieLens ratings dataframe, recall never even gets above 0.019.

This low recall is expected given that here $n = 5$ and the average number of rated animated movies per user is 14.23. This means that the numerator of recall, TP, is limited to a maximum of 5 even when the denominator, TP+FN, is potentially much greater than that. Moreover, the purpose of this system is not to identify movies that users have already seen and rated highly, but to recommend new movies that they are likely to enjoy. As such, low recall is not a concern for this system’s goals. Precision is the much more important and telling metric.

5 Discussion

The results of this research are promising and undoubtedly serve as a strong proof of concept for an animated recommender system based on aesthetics. This system goes a long way towards explaining user taste. At a threshold of 5 with $n = 5$, the precision is just under 0.5 when tested against user ratings. This shows that there is also great

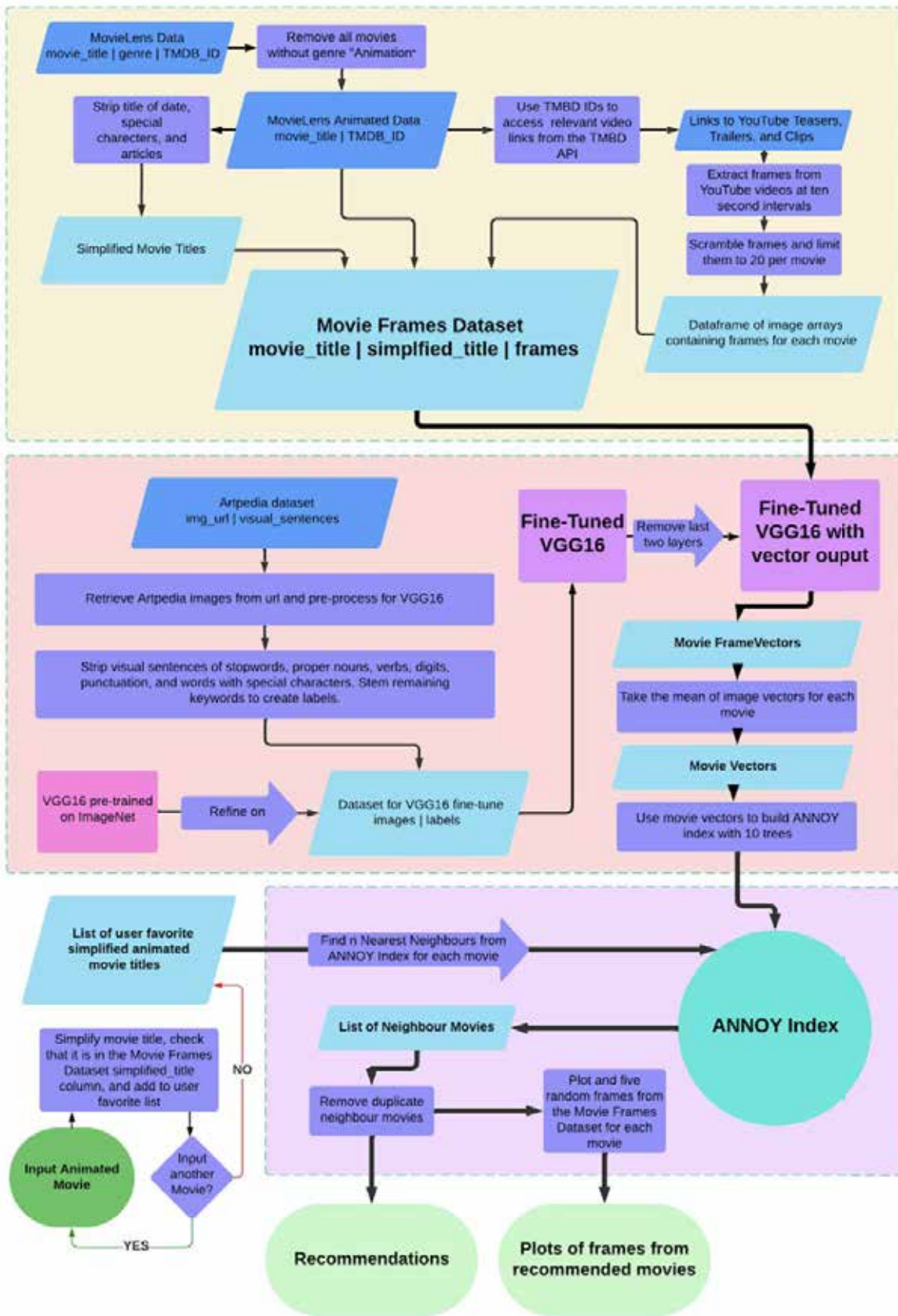


Figure 10: Full Process Diagram

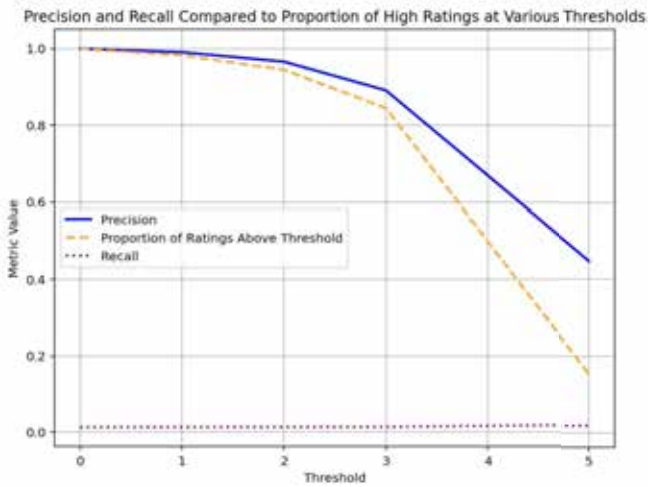


Figure 11: Precision and recall compared to proportion of high rankings at various thresholds

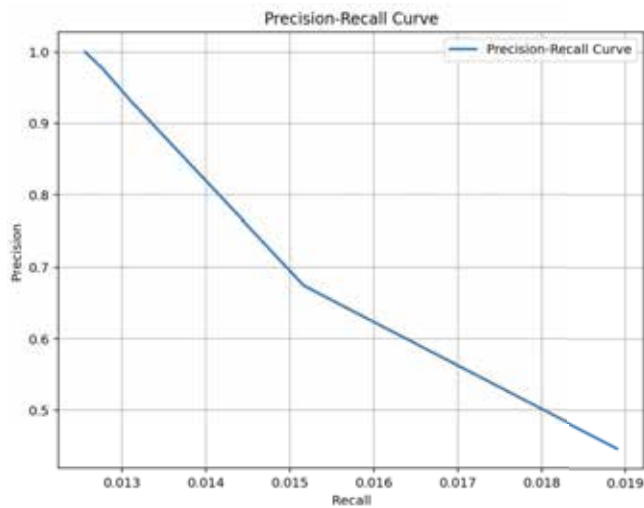


Figure 12: Precision vs. recall graph

merit in using aesthetics as a feature set. Compared to random, the precision of the system is at best three times as high and yields a p -value of 3.03×10^{-19} . This result is competitive with other papers in the field of movie recommendation. In a similar experiment with analyzing the aesthetics of live-action movie posters and incorporating them into a matrix factorization recommendation system framework, Chen and their colleagues [1] achieved a precision of just above 0.35 with $n=5$ and a threshold of 2.5 on the MovieLens user ratings dataset. Though our experiments are not perfectly equivalent, this is a good argument for the efficacy of using aesthetic based recommender systems for the medium of animation specifically.

5.1 Applications

The idea behind this can be leveraged to improve and refine existing recommendation frameworks, notably for streaming services. One repercussion of this could be that the aesthetic qualities of a film become a greater factor in its visibility and success, which may incentivise studios to visually replicate popular movies in order to get recommended alongside them (although that already happens to an extent). This system is also useful for researchers. Beyond film, the algorithm’s methodology could be applied to other media, such as animated series, video games, or graphic novels, offering a versatile tool for exploring aesthetic connections across diverse art forms. It opens new avenues to study the evolution of animation aesthetics, facilitating deeper insights into stylistic trends and cultural influences. This has great potential to drive new research questions and methodologies in the digital humanities. It can also be directly useful for potential users. Given a platform, the proposed recommendation method can be used to power independently functioning systems, catering to users seeking animated recommendations based solely on aesthetic considerations. Of course, such a system would likely disappoint a broader audience by recommending animated movies that are stylistically, but not thematically, similar. For example, an animated parody movie could be recommended alongside classic Disney films. That’s why an aesthetic recommendation algorithm should be balanced with information about each movie’s genre and rating when targeting a general audience, such as for streaming services.

This research also showcases how interdisciplinary approaches can bridge gaps in resource availability by using stand-in datasets that complete a similar task, which could be a useful touchpoint for future research.

5.2 Limitations

This study faced several limitations in the building of this recommender system. First and foremost, this system relied on limited computing power and memory. It was impossible to implement a stronger virtual machine that could have processed more data more efficiently be-

cause YouTube would block it from accessing the site and collecting still frames. Thus, all processes were done with the computing power of one local MacBook M1. Steps were taken to maximize its capabilities, such as batch processing, saving files to the cloud, and reducing the size of the dataframe. This was enough to effectively capture the aesthetics of each movie, but the performance of the recommender could be improved with more available data.

Additionally, the quality of the data could also be improved. Though the methodology of collecting frames from movie trailers after the first ten seconds and before the last ten seconds is effective at obtaining relevant frames, it is impossible to completely avoid title frames, text frames, transition frames, black screens, and the occasional live-action shot when the video covers the making of the movie. Accidental captures may affect the performance of the recommender system; for example, the occasional appearance of a Disney logo may decrease the distance between two Disney movie vectors that are otherwise visually very different.

There are also limitations associated with the MovieLens dataset itself. Because it is old and its interface has been consistently changed over the years, the data is less “clean” than it could be [6]. Additionally, it includes data only from users with at least 20 ratings, and is therefore inherently biased towards those users. As Harper and Konstan [6] mention, “. . . the users who are less interested in rating movies, were unable to find enough ratable content, or did not enjoy their initial experience in the system are not included. . .”. This could affect the distribution of individual user ratings that the recommender system is tested against.

5.3 Future Research

An immediate direction for future research is to build a dataset of animated movie frames and their corresponding aesthetic qualities or rankings. Having such a dataset would make experimenting with the aesthetic analysis of animation more accessible for researchers and cause their results to be both replicable and easily comparable. It would also be fascinating to measure the increase in precision such a dataset could bring to aesthetics-based animation recommender sys-

tems.

The precision of 0.5 is already an impressive figure, considering that the only input feature is a vector representing the movie’s aesthetics. Supplementing with other features, such as genre, studio, or popularity would likely lead to improved results. Furthermore, integrating this content-based system with a collaborative model using a hybrid approach [36] would undoubtedly lead to improved results and is a promising area for future research. Exploring ways to make this recommender system accessible and unobtrusive for users, as [2] investigates for an aesthetic based image recommender system, is also a major direction for further research.

Finally, more research could be done on the efficacy of using stand-in datasets to bridge gaps in resource availability. Specifically, further investigation could examine what dataset substitutions can most effectively re-train a model like VGG16 to analyse frames of animation, and which hyperparameters would optimize the re-trained model’s precision and accuracy.

6 Conclusion

The results demonstrate that the aesthetic recommender system performs effectively, showcasing its ability to identify and recommend both obviously similar movies and capture serendipitous and insightful aesthetic relationships. Performance evaluation using the MovieLens dataset confirms the system’s high precision, with precision increasing as the rating threshold rises, outperforming random recommendations by a factor of three at its best. While recall remains low, this does not detract from the system’s purpose. These findings provide valuable insights into the interplay between aesthetics and audience preferences, emphasizing the potential of aesthetic analysis in recommender systems.

There are many promising future directions for this research. One avenue involves constructing a comprehensive dataset of animated images labeled with aesthetic quality, scene types, or object attributes to train VGG16 and evaluate its impact on system performance. Additionally, applying alternative aesthetic analysis methods, such as OWACNN [27], may help identify the most effective techniques for visual evaluation. Inte-

grating this approach with collaborative recommendation systems and experimenting with varying weight combinations could reveal new optimal strategies for hybrid recommendations, and implementing those hybrid systems might be of great interest to streaming services or other entities that rely on recommendation systems. Expanding beyond animation, inter-media applications could be explored to assess the system's effectiveness in domains such as video games or graphic novels. Finally, conducting user studies could provide valuable insights into user interest and engagement, assessing the practical relevance of a standalone aesthetic recommendation system for animation in real-world settings.

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