Spiral Drawing Test and Explainable Convolutional Neural Networks for Parkinson's Disease Detection

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Abstract: There is no definitive test for Parkinson's disease, and the rate of misdiagnosis, particularly when made by individuals without specialized training, is significantly elevated. The spiral drawing test is a clinical assessment tool used to evaluate fine motor skills, hand-eye coordination, and tremor in individuals, particularly those with neurological disorders such as Parkinson's disease. In this test, a person is typically asked to trace or draw a spiral pattern on a piece of paper or a digital tablet. The test measures the smoothness and steadiness of their hand movements. Any irregularities or tremors in the drawn spiral can provide valuable information to healthcare professionals in diagnosing or monitoring conditions like Parkinson's disease, essential tremors, or other movement disorders. In this paper, we provide a method aimed at automatically analyse spiral drawing tests to understand whether a subject is affected by Parkinson's disease. We employ two different Convolutional Neural Networks: DenseNet and ResNet50, by obtaining an accuracy equal to 0.96 in the evaluation of a dataset composed of 3,991 spiral drawing tests, thus showing the effectiveness of the proposed method. Moreover, with the aim to provide a kind of explainability behind the model prediction, the proposed method is able to visualise, directly on the spiral drawing test image, the areas of the test image that from the model point of view are related to Parkinson's disease.

1 INTRODUCTION AND RELATED WORK

Parkinson's disease (PD) is a neurodegenerative disorder that primarily affects movement (Balestrino and Schapira, 2020). It is a chronic and progressive condition that typically develops slowly over time. The main features of Parkinson's disease include:

- Tremors. Resting tremors are a common symptom, typically starting in one hand and often described as a "pill-rolling" tremor.
- Bradykinesia. This refers to slowness of movement. People with PD may have difficulty initiating and completing voluntary movements, leading to a gradual reduction in their ability to perform everyday tasks.
- Muscle Rigidity. Stiffness of the muscles can make it difficult for individuals with Parkinson's to move smoothly.

• Postural Instability. Balance problems can lead to a greater risk of falls and other injuries.

In addition to motor symptoms, PD can also cause a range of non-motor symptoms, including:

- Cognitive Changes. Some individuals may experience cognitive impairment, which can range from mild memory problems to more severe issues like dementia.
- Mood Disorders. Depression and anxiety are common in people with Parkinson's disease.
- Sleep Disturbances. Sleep problems, such as insomnia or excessive daytime sleepiness, can occur.
- Autonomic Dysfunction. This can lead to issues with blood pressure regulation, digestion, and other bodily functions.

The exact cause of PD is not fully understood (Poewe et al., 2017), but it is believed to involve a combination of genetic and environmental factors.

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There is currently no cure for PD, but there are treatments available to manage its symptoms. Medications, physical therapy, occupational therapy, and lifestyle modifications can all help improve the quality of life for individuals with Parkinson's disease.

In some cases, surgical interventions like deep brain stimulation may be considered to alleviate symptoms, particularly for those who do not respond well to medication.

It is important for individuals with PD to work closely with healthcare professionals, such as neurologists and physical therapists, to develop a personalized treatment plan and receive the necessary support for managing the condition.

PD is currently the second most common neurodegenerative disorder after Alzheimer's disease. According to the Parkinson's Foundation¹, nearly one million people in the U.S. are living with PD. This number is expected to rise to 1.2 million by 2030. Moreover, nearly 90,000 people in the U.S. are diagnosed with PD each year.

Its prevalence tends to increase with age. It is estimated that about 1% of the population over the age of 60 is affected by PD. As a matter of fact, while PD can affect people of all ages, it is most commonly diagnosed in people over the age of 60. It is relatively rare in younger individuals and it is more common in men than in women. Men are about 1.5 times more likely to develop the condition. The incidence of new cases of PD is estimated to be around 20 cases per 100,000 people per year. PD is a progressive condition, and its rate of progression can vary from person to person. Some individuals may experience a relatively slow progression, while others may progress more quickly. it can significantly impact an individual's quality of life and it can lead to difficulties in performing daily activities, increased healthcare costs, and a decreased ability to work. Moreover, while PD itself is not typically considered a direct cause of death, complications related to the condition, such as falls and pneumonia, can increase mortality risk. It can also impose a substantial economic burden on individuals, families, and healthcare systems. Costs associated with medical care, medications, and lost productivity can be significant.

Currently, there is no objective test available for PD, and the rate of misdiagnosis, especially when made by non-specialists, is quite high, with the likelihood of an incorrect diagnosis reaching up to 20% (Rizzo et al., 2016). While a careful analysis of primary symptoms like tremors, bradykinesia, and rigidity can enhance diagnostic accuracy, clinical assessments may still be influenced by the subjectivity of the physician. To address this issue, the use of medical decision support tools is of great interest as they can increase objectivity and aid in early diagnosis. This early diagnosis is crucial as it paves the way for the development of tailored treatments for PDaffected patients (Ammenwerth et al., 2013; Dreiseitl and Binder, 2005). An important objective in neurodegenerative disease research is the identification of precise biomarkers (Mattison et al., 2012).

In the scientific literature, there is a wide array of studies dedicated to PD detection through speech processing (Lahmiri and Shmuel, 2019; Gómez-García et al., 2019), where the diagnosis is based on sustained vowels and natural speech. Additionally, motor symptoms can be detected and monitored by modeling patient movements and gait (Viteckova et al., 2018; San-Segundo et al., 2019).

One of the initial signs often observed in PD is alterations in the kinematics of handwriting. McLennan et al. (Letanneux et al., 2014) found that around 5% of PD patients exhibited micrographia (abnormally small letter size), and 30% reported deteriorating handwriting before the onset of motor symptoms. The motor symptoms associated with PD, such as stiffness, bradykinesia, and tremors, result in three primary changes in writing (Zham et al., 2017a): the size of writing (Potgieser et al., 2015) (micrographia (Drotár et al., 2016)), pen-pressure (Letanneux et al., 2014), and kinematics. Various tools have been developed for the analysis of handwriting related to PD patients (Chatterjee and Kordower, 2019). It is not just the static aspects but also the dynamic ones that are of interest, including speed and pen-pressure reduction during writing (Drotár et al., 2016; Rosenblum et al., 2013).

Several recent review papers on this topic have been published (Impedovo and Pirlo, 2019; Impedovo and Pirlo, 2018). It is important to note that an individual's handwriting can be influenced by their visual capability (Potgieser et al., 2015), writing style, or language skills, leading to significant variability among individuals. An alternative to handwriting analysis is the use of drawings, for instance, the spiral drawing test.

In this direction, Kotsavasiloglou et al. (Kotsavasiloglou et al., 2017) employed a pen-and-tablet device to examine differences in hand movement and muscle coordination between healthy individuals and PD patients. They used five metrics, including mean horizontal velocity, normalized velocity variability (in units per second), standard deviation of horizontal velocity, and entropies of horizontal and vertical signal components. Their evaluation of various classification algorithms resulted in the best accuracy equal to

¹https://www.parkinson.org/

0.88. Zham et al. (Zham et al., 2017a) assessed 10 features, combining static and dynamic information, using the Naïve Bayes algorithm for classification, achieving an accuracy of 0.83. Both of these previous papers (Zham et al., 2017a; Kotsavasiloglou et al., 2017) made decisions at intervals of approximately 2 seconds for each drawing.

Gallicchio et al. (Gallicchio et al., 2018) proposed the utilization of DeepESNs, achieving an accuracy of 0.89. Meanwhile, Khatamino et al. (Khatamino et al., 2018) employed a Convolutional Neural Network (CNN) inspired by the AlexNet architecture (Krizhevsky et al., 2012), which consisted of two main components (convolutional layers for feature extraction and fully connected layers for classification).

A test that involves drawing a spiral on a sheet of paper could be used to diagnose early PD i.e., the socalled Spiral Drawing Test (Chakraborty et al., 2020).

The Spiral Drawing Test is a neuropsychological test used to assess fine motor skills, coordination, and dexterity, particularly in the context of neurological and motor function evaluations(Stanley et al., 2010). It is a relatively simple test that involves asking an individual to draw a spiral or a series of spirals on a piece of paper. The evaluator may provide specific instructions, such as starting from the center and working outward or starting at a particular point on the paper (San Luciano et al., 2016).

The Spiral Drawing Test can be used in various clinical settings, including assessing neurological disorders such as Parkinson's disease. In such cases, it can help evaluate fine motor control and detect any abnormalities or tremors in the drawing pattern. For example, people with Parkinson's disease may produce spirals with more visible tremors or irregularities, which can be indicative of their motor control issues (Kamble et al., 2021).

This test is also used in research and clinical assessments to evaluate other conditions, such as essential tremor, multiple sclerosis, and stroke, which can affect motor skills and coordination.

The Spiral Drawing Test is just one tool in a battery of assessments used by healthcare professionals to diagnose and monitor neurological and motor function disorders. When used alongside other clinical evaluations, medical history, and imaging tests, it can provide valuable insights into a patient's condition and aid in treatment planning and monitoring (Gil-Martín et al., 2019).

In recent years, deep learning has demonstrated remarkable capabilities in the field of image classification(Cimitile et al., 2017; Bacci et al., 2018; Huang et al., 2023; Mercaldo and Santone, 2021). CNNs are a specific class of deep learning models that have been particularly successful in biomedical image classification tasks (Huang et al., 2022). Despite the possibility of deep learning being highly successful in image classification, it is important to note that it requires substantial computational resources, large datasets, and specialized hardware (such as GPUs) for training. Additionally, the explainability of deep learning models can be challenging, which is a topic of ongoing research and development that limits the application of deep learning in the real-world domain, with particular regard to healthcare (Huang et al., 2021).

For these reasons, in this paper, we propose an explainable method aimed at detecting whether a patient is affected by PD by analysing the Spiral Drawing Test. We consider several CNNs for the classification task (aimed to discriminate between healthy and unhealthy patients).

The paper proceeds as follows: in the next section, we present the proposed method for explainable PD detection from the spiral drawing test, in Section 3 the experimental analysis results are presented and, finally, in the last section, conclusion and future research directions are drawn.

2 THE METHOD

As mentioned in the previous section, the proposed approach employs supervised machine learning, specifically delving into deep learning techniques through the utilization of CNNs. CNNs stand out as a type of artificial neural network exceptionally wellsuited for tasks involving image classification, making them particularly relevant in the realm of diagnosing brain cancer.

In this approach, CNNs are subjected to training using a labeled dataset encompassing images of both spiral drawing tests drawn by healthy subjects and from subjects affected by PD. The network gleans knowledge from these instances and distills meaningful characteristics from the images to discern between patterns associated with healthy subjects and those indicative of PD. The training procedure involves iteratively fine-tuning the network's parameters to minimize classification errors and enhance its precision in distinguishing between the two categories.

Once the CNN has been sufficiently trained, it can be applied to categorize new, previously unseen brain images as either healthy or cancer-affected, based on the knowledge it has acquired. The network assesses the input image using its learned filters and identifies pertinent features to make a prediction.

It is essential to acknowledge that the effectiveness and accuracy of the proposed approach depend



Figure 1: The workflow of the proposed method for explainable PD detection through spiral draw testing.

on various factors, including the quality and representativeness of the training data, the architecture and configurations of the CNN, and the methods employed for validation and testing.

The workflow of the proposed method is shown in Figure 1.

The proposed method comprises five distinct phases:

- 1. *Dataset.* An essential element in developing an effective model for brain cancer diagnosis is the dataset used in machine learning. It is crucial to possess a meticulously annotated dataset that encompasses both images of spiral drawing tests obtained from healthy subjects and subjects with PD. Ensuring the model's robustness and generalization capability requires a diverse and representative dataset.
- Data Augmentation. Once the dataset is obtained, it is crucial to preprocess the images to standardize and remove biases introduced by various imaging settings. Common preprocessing techniques include brightness adjustment during training, which mitigates intensity variations. In the

proposed paper we consider the following data augmentation techniques: random rotations, horizontal and vertical reflections, zoom in and zoom out, random cropping, scaling, contrast, brightness, and saturation adjustments. As a matter of fact, data Augmentation, especially for smallsized datasets, can generate new data examples from existing ones, preserving the same general characteristics but with random variations that can enhance the model's generalization ability. These techniques aim to enhance data consistency and algorithm effectiveness.

- 3. CNN Model. After data collection and augmentation, the next step involves selecting deep learning models. We consider a binary classification task, where a spiral drawing test can be classified as belonging to a healthy patient or to a patient affected by PD. Consideration extends beyond accuracy: explainability is essential, particularly in medical applications. Choosing appropriate hyperparameters, such as the number of epochs, batch size, and learning rate, requires careful consideration and experimentation. In this paper, two of the most widespread deep learning architectures based on CNNs are exploited: Densely Connected Convolutional Networks (DenseNet) (Huang et al., 2019) and Residual Networks (ResNet) (He et al., 2016). Both of which have made significant contributions to the field of computer vision and image classification (Zhang et al., 2021; Li et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2022). The following is a brief description of each architecture we exploited in this paper:
 - The key innovation in DenseNet is its dense connectivity pattern. In traditional CNN architectures, each layer typically receives inputs only from the previous layer. In DenseNet, each layer is connected to all subsequent layers. This dense connectivity encourages feature reuse and gradient flow throughout the network, making it more efficient and reducing the risk of vanishing gradients. DenseNet is composed of dense blocks, each containing a series of convolutional layers, batch normalization, and non-linear activation functions. Skip connections from earlier layers are concatenated with the feature maps in the current layer. The dense connectivity allows for more efficient parameter usage, enabling the construction of deep networks with relatively fewer parameters.
 - The central idea behind ResNet is the use of residual connections, which allow for very deep networks to be trained effectively. A residual

block contains a shortcut connection (skip connection) that bypasses one or more convolutional layers. The residual block reformulates the learning problem as learning the residual of the identity mapping. This makes it easier to train deep networks, as the network can learn to adjust the output from a previous layer. ResNet architectures come in various depths, such as ResNet18, ResNet50, ResNet101, and more, where the numbers indicate the number of layers in the network. In this paper, we experiment with the ResNet50 architecture. ResNet's use of residual connections has been instrumental in enabling the training of extremely deep networks, leading to significant improvements in performance on image classification tasks. ResNet has also been widely adopted and adapted for various computer vision tasks, including object detection and image segmentation.

Both DenseNet and ResNet are deep neural network architectures that have had a profound impact on the field of computer vision. DenseNet focuses on dense connectivity, while ResNet utilizes residual connections to enable the training of very deep networks, leading to improved performance in various image analysis tasks: these are the reasons why we experiment with both of them in this paper.

- 4. *Training-Test.* in this step, we consider Model training and testing, involving computing metrics like Accuracy, Precision, and Recall to assess prediction efficiency. If results are unsatisfactory, different combinations of hyperparameters are considered to achieve desired outcomes (Mercaldo and Santone, 2021).
- 5. *Grad-CAM*. The Grad-CAM (Gradient-weighted Class Activation Mapping) algorithm is utilized to create heatmaps, offering visual explanations for model predictions. Beyond prediction accuracy, the model's ability to highlight areas in the input image that influenced the classification is evaluated. The aim of the Grad-CAM is to extract gradients from the model's convolutional layers to provide these visual explanations, offering insights into the decision-making process.

3 EXPERIMENTAL EVALUATION

With the aim of validating the proposed method, we exploit a dataset containing 3,991 images related to spiral drawing tests, with 1,995 images correspond-



Figure 2: Spiral drawing tests related to a healthy (on the left) and an unhealthy patient (on the right).

ing to patients diagnosed with PD and the remaining 1,996 images representing individuals without the disease condition (Zham et al., 2017b). This dataset, referred to as "Parkinson's Drawings" is accessible for research purposes on the Kaggle website and can be freely obtained². As discussed in the previous section, we consider a binary classification task, where each image obtained from a spiral drawing test can be classified as belonging to a PD-affected patient or to a healthy one.

Figure 2 shows two examples of spiral drawing tests (belonging to the analysed dataset): the test on the left is related to a healthy patient, while the one on the right is drawn by a PD-affected subject.

As shown in Figure 2, we can note that in the case of the patient PD-affected on the left, the spiral lines are less linear than in the case on the left of the healthy patient, due to the trembling caused by the disease.

The dataset is later divided into an 80:10:10 ratio for the training, validation, and testing datasets, resulting in the selection of 1,579 images for training (790 associated with healthy patients and the remaining 789 with PD patients), 200 images for validation (100 from each group), and the remaining 200 images for testing (100 from each group).

With the aim of understanding the effectiveness of the models in the discrimination between spiral drawing tests related to healthy and PD-affected patients, the following metrics are computed:

- *Loss.* The loss, also known as the cost or objective function, quantifies the error between the predicted values generated by a machine learning model and the actual ground truth values in the dataset. The goal is to minimize this error during training. Various loss functions, such as mean squared error (MSE), cross-entropy loss, and hinge loss, are used depending on the problem type (e.g., regression or classification).
- Accuracy. Accuracy is a classification metric that measures the proportion of correctly predicted in-

²https://www.kaggle.com/datasets/kmader/parkinson s-drawings

stances in a dataset. It's calculated as the number of correct predictions divided by the total number of predictions. High accuracy indicates that a model is making correct predictions for most of the data.

- Precision. Precision is a metric used in binary classification. It measures the accuracy of positive predictions made by a model. It is calculated as the number of true positives divided by the sum of true positives and false positives. Precision helps assess the model's ability to avoid false positives.
- *Recall.* Recall, also known as sensitivity or true positive rate, measures the ability of a model to correctly identify positive instances from the total number of actual positives. It is calculated as the number of true positives divided by the sum of true positives and false negatives. Recall is essential for understanding how well a model captures all relevant instances.
- *F-Measure*. The F-Measure is a metric that combines both precision and recall into a single value. It is the harmonic mean of precision and recall and provides a balance between them. A higher F1 Score indicates a model that has good precision and recall.
- Area Under the ROC Curve (AUC). AUC is a metric used to evaluate the performance of a binary classification model. It measures the ability of the model to distinguish between positive and negative classes across different classification thresholds. The ROC (Receiver Operating Characteristic) curve is a graphical representation of the trade-off between true positive rate (recall) and false positive rate as the decision threshold varies. The AUC is the area under this ROC curve. A higher AUC signifies better model performance, with a value of 1 indicating perfect classification.

Next, we proceed with the training of the deep learning models. To ensure replicability, in the following, we show the hyperparameters we used for training the DenseNet and MobileNet models in Table 1.

Table 1: Hyper-parameters setting.

Batch size	Learning rate	Image size
32	0.01	224x224x3

The results of the experimental analysis are displayed in Table 2.

As shown in Table 2 we ran several experiments: the first ones with a number of epochs equal to 20: with this number of epochs we obtained an accuracy equal to 0.86 with the DenseNet network and an accuracy of 0.75 by exploiting the ResNet50 one. Considering that from these two experiments, the DenseNet network demonstrated better performances in the discrimination of PD-affected patients and healthy ones, we consider the DenseNet model for additional experiments with a different number of epochs: 50 and 100. With a number of epochs of 50 we obtain an accuracy equal to 0.96, while when the number of epochs is increased to 100, the accuracy obtained is 0.89.

Thus, from the results shown in Table 2, it emerges that the model obtaining the best performances in PD-affected patients is the DenseNet one, trained with a number of epochs equal to 50, with an accuracy, a precision and a recall equal to 0.96.

With the aim to show how the proposed method can provide a kind of explainability behind the model prediction, we show four different examples of Grad-CAM applications (in Figures 3, 4, 5 and 6), belonging to two healthy patients (Figures 3, 4) and to two subjects PD affected (Figures 5, 6), obtained with the best model i.e., the DenseNet one, trained with for 50 epochs.

For instance, in Figure 3 there is an example of localization provided by the Grad-CAM algorithm related to a healthy patient (correctly predicted with a percentage equal to 92.3%). In particular, the pixels highlighted in yellow relate to areas that were of particular interest for the model to make the predictions, the green areas are areas of interest for the model, but of lesser interest than the areas highlighted in yellow. The areas in purple are the areas that are not of interest to the model for the purposes of the prediction made.

For this reason, in Figure 3 we can note that the areas of interest from the model point of view are the ones related to the smallest part of the spiral and some areas on the left of the image (as we can note from the yellow areas in the overlay with heatmap image).

Figure 4 shows another example of prediction related to a healthy patient.

In the Grad-CAM generated for the spiral drawing test shown in Figure 4 we can note that the areas of interest from the model point of view are several areas, all focused on the outermost spiral curves compared to the previous example. The fact that different areas of the spiral are highlighted on a different image is a symptom that the model has learned to generalize the distinctive features of a spiral written by a healthy user, regardless of the area of the spiral or sheet where it was written, demonstrating, therefore, a good model generalization ability, fundamental in machine learning problems to avoid models capable of identifying only certain types of cases (and therefore poorly generalizable).

Model	Epochs	Loss	Accuracy	Precision	Recall	F-Measure	AUC
DenseNet	20	0.34	0.86	0.86	0.86	0.86	0.93
DenseNet	50	0.17	0.96	0.96	0.96	0.96	0.98
DenseNet	100	0.51	0.89	0.89	0.89	0.89	0.94
ResNet50	20	0.48	0.75	0.75	0.75	0.75	0.84

Table 2: The experimental analysis results obtained with the DenseNet and the ResNet50 models.



Figure 3: An example of localization provided by the Grad-CAM algorithm related to a healthy patient predicted with a percentage equal to 92.3%.



Figure 4: An example of localization provided by the Grad-CAM algorithm related to a healthy patient predicted with a percentage equal to 85.1%.

Figure 5 shows an example of prediction related to an unhealthy patient (i.e., PD-affected) predicted with a percentage equal to 94.9%.

In this prediction example, we can see that the area of interest of the model (highlighted by the Grad-CAM in yellow) is related to different areas of the spiral, therefore the model recognized different areas of the spiral as symptomatic of the presence of PD.

Figure 6 shows another example of a (correct) prediction of a patient PD-affected, detected with a percentage equal to 100%.

In this last case, we can see how the spiral is decidedly different in its features compared to the examples of healthy patients (shown in Figures 3 and 4) but also compared to the PD-affected patient analyzed in the previous example (i.e., in Figure 5): as a matter of fact, the features of the spiral are decidedly less linear, and this is symptomatic of a patient who is evidently suffering from severe trembling, one of the main symptoms of PD. In this case, the areas of interest for Grad-CAM are those in which the nonlinearity of the spiral curves is greater, therefore in the innermost part of the spiral we can see how there is a concentration of yellow areas. The model predicted the test with a percentage equal to 100% as the presence of the tremor appears decidedly more evident than in the case of the PD patient analyzed previously.

Also in this case the model highlighted different areas of the image, demonstrating that the distinctive features of the disease were identified regardless of the area of the image in which they were present, showing the generability of the model trained through the DenseNet network.



Figure 5: An example of localization provided by the Grad-CAM algorithm related to an unhealthy patient (i.e., PD-affected) predicted with a percentage equal to 94.9%.



Figure 6: An example of localization provided by the Grad-CAM algorithm related to an unhealthy patient (i.e., PD-affected) correctly predicted with a percentage equal to 100%.

4 CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

Considering that there is no definitive diagnostic test available for PD diagnosis, and the likelihood of misdiagnosis is notably higher, particularly when the diagnosis is made by individuals lacking specialized training, in this paper we proposed a method aimed to discriminate between PD-affected patients and healthy subjects. For this task, we consider different CNN models trained by exploiting images related to spiral drawing tests. Two different CNNs are considered: ResNet50 and DenseNet. The experimental results analysis demonstrated that the DenseNet model is able to obtain better performances if compared with the ResNet50 one: as a matter of fact, accuracy, precision, recall, and F-Measure equal to 0.96 are obtained, in the evaluation of a dataset related to 3,991 different images related to spiral drawing tests, with 1,995 images corresponding to patients PD-affected and the remaining 1,996 images representing individuals without the PD condition (i.e., healthy subjects). Moreover, with the aim to provide prediction explainability, we take into account the Grad-CAM algorithm, able to highlight (with a

heatmap) the areas on the spiral drawing test image symptomatic of a certain prediction, thus providing a kind of rationale behind the model decision, by showing the areas on the image responsible for the prediction. In this way, we think that CNNs can be really employed in real-world clinical decisions, as a matter of fact, due to the lack of prediction explainability medical staff do not have a strong trust in the prediction provided by machine learning models.

In future work, we plan to consider additional CNN-based architectures, with the aim of improving the obtained performances. Moreover, we will consider not only images related to spiral drawing tests but also images related to wave tests, another kind of geometric drawing used to understand whether there is the presence of PD. We will investigate to understand if by exploiting wave images we are able to obtain better PD detection than spiral ones, or if the combination of spiral and wave images can help to obtain better performances.

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