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**The Visual Biopolitics of Mariupol:
A Comparative Analysis of Russian and Ukrainian Visuals on Telegram**

MA Thesis

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Authorship Declaration

I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

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Abstract

How does pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian visual media construct different regimes of visibility through depictions of Mariupol? Visuals play an increasingly important role in how people communicate and generate discourse, especially in conflicts, but the role of visuals in international relations remains understudied. This thesis expands the understanding of this connection by using visual discourse analysis with a biopolitical focus to analyze 20 pictures to analyze this phenomenon in the context of Russia's occupation of Mariupol. The photos analyzed come from the competing Telegram channels of the current pro-Russian Mariupol City Administration and the exiled pro-Ukrainian Mariupol City Council. This thesis finds that the two channels construct radically different regimes of visibility with their respective pictures by emphasizing different political themes and through how they frame the relationship of Mariupol's citizens with Russia and Ukraine. The pro-Russian pictures emphasize Mariupol's unity with Russia and have characteristics of biopolitical paternalism, while the pro-Ukrainian pictures focus on remembrance of Russian crimes and build a negative and necropolitical perspective of Russia's occupation of Mariupol. These findings provide insight into the important ways that visuals can generate their own discourse which either supports or undermines different authorities and narratives. The process used here can be expanded with a larger sample size for a more comprehensive analysis, or it can be applied to other conflicts, such as between Israel and Palestine, to uncover and analyze visual sources of political meaning which may be missed when using other methods.

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Introduction- A Visual Age

“We live in a visual age”.¹

The above statement may seem banal or self-evident at first, but the consequences of living in a visual age are far reaching. Visual media, especially on the internet, is a central component of how people view, experience, and interpret the world around them. The continued growth and popularity of platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok are testament to the power of visual media in society today, and there are no signs of that changing anytime soon. 4.3 billion people around the world owned a smart phone at the end of 2022, meaning well over half of the global population has near instant access to camera, video, and internet capabilities.² This accessibility means it is easier than ever for anyone around the world to both create and view visual media.

In this visual age, the omnipresence of pictures and videos across society influences politics in numerous ways. For example, many governments and government agencies now operate social media accounts, posting pictures and videos to spread their messages and interact with the wider public. Despite the clear and growing power of the visual in modern society, its impact on politics and international relations remains relatively understudied. Having a clearer understanding of this concept is important for academics who study political sciences, as well as policy makers who seek to understand the real power and societal impact of visual media.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine stands as one case that demonstrates the ever-growing connection between the visual and international relations. While many news stories focus on major events from the battlefields, similarly important is the war of words and media that takes place away from the frontlines through pictures, videos, and memes on the internet. Some journalists have dubbed this as the ‘world’s first TikTok war’, or the ‘most viral’ war so far.³ Such titles seem well deserved, considering the near constant stream of content created by civilians, journalists, soldiers, and government officials on both sides as they seek to spread their own perspectives and messages. Roughly 18% of Ukraine’s territory remains under Russian occupation, and there is an expectation on both sides that the war will continue for the foreseeable future.⁴ Millions of Ukrainian citizens will remain living in occupied territory for now, and visual media will continue

¹ Bleiker, Roland, *Visual Global Politics* (Routledge, 2018), p. III.

² Shannahan, Matthew, and Calvin Bahia, *The State of Mobile Internet Connectivity 2023* (GSMA, October 2023), p. 4.

³ York, Joanna, “‘World’s First TikTok War’: Ukraine’s Social Media Campaign ‘a Question of Survival’”, *France 24*, 2023

⁴ ‘Ukraine in Maps: Tracking the War with Russia’, BBC, 2024

to play a major role in how both pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian groups attempt to interact with and influence these people and others.

The objective of this thesis is to expand the understanding of visual media's role in international relations through a biopolitical analysis of images and videos related to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The analysis focuses on visual media of the city of Mariupol, as control of the city holds great strategic and symbolic importance for both sides. The battle and ensuing occupation of Mariupol have generated a substantial amount of media from both Ukrainian and Russian perspectives. The primary research question which this paper seeks to answer is: ***how does pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian visual media construct different regimes of visibility through depictions of Mariupol since the occupation?*** To answer this question, the paper takes a biopolitical perspective while analyzing and comparing images from two contrasting Telegram channels. The first channel is НОВИЙ МАРИУПОЛЬ! (New Mariupol!) and is the official channel for the city's current Russian backed Mariupol City Administration, while the second channel is Мариупольська міська рада (Mariupol City Council) and is the official channel of the exiled pro-Ukrainian pre-occupation city council of Mariupol. For simplicity these two channels are abbreviated as NM and MCC respectively. All the selected pictures from each channel can be found in Table 1 at the end of the thesis. While this analysis seeks to assess differing Ukrainian and Russian perspectives about Mariupol, it is impossible to completely analyze the entirety of such broad, diverse, and contested concepts. That being the case, it is important to note that this paper does not argue the selected images show the totality of either perspective. Instead, it focuses on these images as examples of how visual media can contribute to different regimes of visibility, with a particular focus on their relation to biopolitical themes and how they can manifest in or be represented in images.

The primary research method of this paper is visual discourse analysis (VDA), as outlined by Gillian Rose, with a focus on connections to biopolitical elements. This paper specifically focuses on a visual-biopolitical perspective as recent research has shown the unique and valuable insights that it can provide. This is especially true for studying the practices of illiberal regimes, like in Russia, and resistance to them. Visuals can be an incredibly powerful part of propaganda,

fake news, and other techniques that create or reinforce biopolitical messages of control, bordering, exclusion/inclusion, and more.⁵

This thesis is divided into four main chapters. Chapter 1 covers the theoretical background of the paper. It provides an overview of core concepts and ideas about biopolitics and the visual in international relations and shows the relationships between these theories. Chapter 2 presents the methodology and case selections process for the paper. The chapter discusses how discourse analysis is applied to visual media, why this method was chosen, and why the analyzed pictures were chosen. Chapter 3 contains the paper's analytic work. The chosen method is applied to the 20 selected pictures from the two Telegram channels, with each subsection covering a different aspect of the analysis and comparing the images through the process. The final section is the conclusion. It briefly re-explains the key points and findings from the paper, reflects on the relevance of the work, and points out potential avenues for future research.

⁵ Makarychev, Andrey, 'Visual Biopolitics: Outlining a Research (Sub)Field', *The Journal of Illiberalism Studies*, 1.1 (2021), p. 69.

Chapter 1: Modern Biopolitics & Visuality

This chapter covers the theoretical background of the paper. It starts with a discussion of biopolitics, first briefly covering the foundational work of Michel Foucault, then focusing in more detail on the work of Giorgio Agamben and Achille Mbembe. The chapter then transitions to cover theories about the power of visuals in politics and international relations, mostly from the work of Roland Bleiker. Finally, there is an overview of the emerging field of visual biopolitics. This research subfield covers how these theories of biopolitics and visuals can be related to each other, and the value provided from this analytical perspective. Each section covers and defines the core concepts which are most relevant for the analysis in Chapter 3.

1.1- Foucault & Modern Biopolitics

Biopolitics is a broad and complex concept, with varying (and sometimes contradictory) definitions, depending on the context and field of study. For many modern social science disciplines, the work of Michel Foucault is the most common place to start for understanding biopolitics and related ideas. Foucault's discussions and writings about biopower and biopolitics formed the basis of some of his analysis and critiques of modern society and governance. For Foucault, biopower refers to the modern technologies and regulations used to control people's bodies, lives, and deaths, while biopolitics is the political discourse and policies focused on management, supervision, and disciplining of human bodies at the level of whole populations.⁶ These ideas help explain how politics directly effects people's physical lives and how issues about human bodies are integrated into relations of power. In times of war, like in Russia and Ukraine now, the focus of biopolitics shifts at the level of the individual to simple survival under the threat of violence, and shifts at the level of the state to decisions about handling matters of life and death.

These concepts and theories originate from Foucault's view that overtime states have become increasingly focused on the administration and regulation of the biological functions of their citizens. The progression of this often ends at states seeking to discipline humans in a way that renders them 'docile bodies' and allows the state to exert greater control over the biological functions of the population, such as the births rate, fertility rate, and even deaths.⁷ In the years since Foucault first discussed biopolitics, his ideas have gone on to generate substantial debate

⁶ Foucault, Michel, *The Birth of Biopolitics* (St Martin's Press, 1979)

⁷ Foucault, Michel, *Discipline and Punish* (Pantheon Books, 1977)

among other scholars who have continually critiqued and expanded upon his early ideas. Of special note beyond Foucault is the work of Agamben and Mbembe. While there are importance differences between these three authors in their conceptual understandings and interpretations of biopolitics, at their core all of them are built around investigating the relationship between power, physical life, and social structures/existence.

An important point to preemptively note about the theories of Foucault, Agamben, and Mbembe, is that they largely write about biopolitics in the context of western states and political systems. At first this may appear a potential problem for this thesis given the focus on Ukraine and Russia, especially when the Russian government is explicitly non-western in many ways. Despite the original framing of these theories as western in their focus, they are still applicable to many non-western states. For example, Agamben's writing on bare life and the camp can be seen as applicable to many of the colonial policies of Imperial Japan leading up to and during World War II. There is also a wide range of recent scholarship which demonstrates the value of using these theories to study non-western states.⁸ Overall, this is indicative that these theories are still valid tools for this paper's analysis of Russia and Ukraine.

1.2- Agamben & *Homo Sacer*

Agamben has made substantial contributions to the field of biopolitics, with many of his theories and concepts helping form the base of other works. Agamben's 1995 book *Homo Sacer* stands out as one of his most important contributions. The core biopolitical concepts from *Homo Sacer* are sovereign power, bare life (personified by the homo sacer), and the camp. From these concepts, Agamben draws out numerous arguments about the structure and function of modern western political systems.

The origin and practice of sovereign power is the first, and arguably most important concept, that Agamben discusses, as it underpins his other ideas. Sovereign power is conceived of as the ability decide on the state of exception, or who's lives and rights matter within a state's political system. Agamben begins Chapter 1 of *Homo Sacer* with "The paradox of sovereignty consists in the fact the sovereign is, at the same time, outside and inside the juridical order".⁹ In

⁸ Medvedev, Sergei, *The State and the Human Body in Putin's Russia: The Biopolitics of Authoritarian Revanche* (PONARS, 2019); Ronoh, Viola, 'State Power, Vulnerability, And Indigenous Peoples In International Law', *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights*, 2024, p. 1–28.

⁹ Agamben, Giorgio, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 15.

order to understand this paradox, Agamben turns to the work of Thomas Hobbes and Carl Schmitt. In Hobbes' famous *Leviathan* he conceives of an entity given total power over a state to protect its people. This entity possesses sovereign power, with the defining feature being the ability to do anything to anyone, specifically the right to punish, in contrast to other theories focused on the importance of the rights of citizens, free will, or a social contract. Similarly important for Agamben is Schmitt's work on the nature of sovereignty. It was Schmitt who wrote that the "sovereign is he who decides on the state of exception". For Schmitt, the sovereign is therefore the one with the power to decide when/where/how laws apply and when laws are suspended. This is a key fact for Agamben, as "The exception is more interesting than the regular case. The latter proves nothing; the exception proves everything. The exception does not only confirm the rule; the rule as such lives off the exception alone".¹⁰ It is through deciding on the state of exception that the sovereign creates the conditions necessary for it and the law to remain valid and legitimate.

An important point here is the relationship Agamben sees between sovereign power and violence, as in his view they are functionally the same thing. Agamben referencing Hobbes again and the essay "Critique of Violence" by Walter Benjamin. Hobbes views the state of nature as being inherently violent, and that violence manifests through the sovereign deciding on the state of exception. "The state of nature and the state of exception are nothing but two sides of a single topological process in which what was presupposed as external (the state of nature) now reappears ... in the inside (as state of exception)".¹¹ In "Critique of Violence", Benjamin discusses the importance of violence that posits the law and violence that preserves the law, as if the legitimacy of the sovereign is not supported by objective truth, then it must always be supported by a threat of violence instead. This leads to a chicken-and-the-egg paradox, where the legitimacy allows the sovereign to use violence, but the violence is what gives the sovereign legitimacy in the first place. All of this leads to sovereign power always manifesting in violence that is necessary to enforce and enact laws. In sum, Agamben understands sovereign power as being an institution which exists by deciding on the exception and which is inherently violent. It can create, enforce, and suspend any laws within its territory through exclusion. This exclusion then leads to bare life.

Agamben first turns to the ancient Greek terms of *bios* and *zoē* for his understanding of bare life. *Bios* is political life, meaning someone has access to rights and protections within a state,

¹⁰ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 16.

¹¹ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 37.

while *zoē* is the simple fact of living possessed by all humans and animals.¹² For Agamben *zoē* and bare life are functionally the same concept, with bare life being defined by its exclusion from political relevance. Agamben relies on the titular *homo sacer* as his primary example of bare life, going as far as to call *homo sacer* and its bare life the protagonist of the book. *Homo sacer* is an archaic early Roman legal term for someone who can be killed without consequence but cannot be sacrificed.¹³ While this may initially sound contradictory, it makes sense in the context of an exclusion by existing outside of the political system. This exclusion means that the life and death of *homo sacer* lacks any importance, hence why they can be killed with impunity, but this lack of importance is also why they cannot be sacrificed. Bare life, based on exclusion from *bios* due to the state of exception, is someone who possesses biological life, but exists entirely at the mercy of sovereign power. In a modern context, this concept can be closely linked with the importance of citizenship. Citizens of a state have *bios* and are afforded legal rights and protections within that state, while non-citizens generally have weaker protections, if any at all.

For Agamben, bare life has always been a core component of western political systems, as he states “the inclusion of bare life in the political realm constitutes the original - if concealed - nucleus of sovereign power. *It can even be said that the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power*”.¹⁴ In contrast to Foucault who saw biopolitics as a relatively modern phenomenon, Agamben sees it as having always been present, with both modern and ancient states attempting to manage and control biological functions in various ways. What has changed overtime is the relatively importance of biopolitics, with new technologies and governmental practices allowing states to exercise greater control than ever before. Nowhere is this more important and clearer than in the emergence of ‘the camp’, where the state of exception and bare life are fully realized.

Agamben writes of the camp as the physical embodiment of the state of exception, and the ultimate expression of sovereign power meeting bare life. It is a space where the state of exception becomes functionally permanent, usually justified by war or the perception of an exceptional threat. Agamben mentions debate about where the first camps were, usually thought to be either the *campos de concentraciones* created by the Spanish in Cuba in 1896 to suppress a popular

¹² Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 1.

¹³ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 8.

¹⁴ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 6.

insurrection of the colony, or the concentration camps which the English used during the Second Boer War. Agamben sees a common origin point for both cases and later camps that followed, “What matters here is that in both cases, a state of emergency linked to a colonial war is extended to an entire civil population. The camps are thus born not out of ordinary law... but out of a state of exception and martial law”.¹⁵ This is an especially relevant point in conflicts like the war between Russia and Ukraine due to the long colonial history and relationship between the two states.

The state of exception that allows the camp to exist brings with it many consequences. In particular, Agamben points to the blurring between fact and law that the camp creates:

Only because the camps constitute a space of exception in the sense we have examined - in which not only is law completely suspended but fact and law are completely confused - is everything in the camps truly possible... Whoever entered the camp moved in a zone of indistinction between outside and inside, exception and rule, licit and illicit, in which the very concepts of subjective right and juridical protection no longer made any sense.¹⁶

It is this complete collapsing of boundaries that in part allows terrible violence to take place within the camp. There are no longer any laws or objective truths that will stop violence or anything else from taking place. The actions of those who manage the camp face no restrictions or consequences, making real the total authority of sovereign power.

Those who find themselves within the camp then exist in bare life and embody all the traits of homo sacer. “Insofar as its inhabitants were stripped of every political status and wholly reduced to bare life, the camp was also the most absolute biopolitical space ever to have been realized, in which power confronts nothing but pure life, without any mediation”.¹⁷ In this purely biopolitical existence, the inhabitants of the camp are fully exposed to whatever violence the state deems appropriate, even if it means their death.

Agamben focuses on the Nazi extermination and concentration camps of World War II as the primary example of the camp. It is clear how they contain all of the criteria that Agamben describes, as its inhabitants are in a state of pure bare life, excluded from the political order and stripped of their citizenship and rights. They are forced to live in a squalled space where endure

¹⁵ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 166-167.

¹⁶ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 170.

¹⁷ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 171.

the constant risk of violence or death at the hands of an almighty sovereign power. Despite the Nazi extermination camps being one of the most obvious and worst manifestation of the camp, Agamben maintains that not all camps need to be equally awful or organized in the same way as the Nazis to be considered a camp. The key feature is simply *the potential* for atrocities to take place within the space, and that the acts against its inhabitants are no longer viewed as crimes or wrong.¹⁸ This broadens the scope of what can be viewed as a camp and gets to the core of the Agamben's theories. This allows for spaces such as detention centers for migrants and refugee camp to be viewed as camps in this way, or even larger territories that are under occupation, like the occupied territories in Ukraine or the West Bank.

A final important point from Agamben about the camp is that it is not a defect or anomaly within western political systems, but instead an inherent and key feature of them. Given the nature of sovereign power at the core of these systems, its inherent reliance on violence to legitimize itself, and the ability to decide on the exception, something like the camp almost becomes inevitable. It is a space that embodies the system when brought to its natural extremes, where the state excludes and isolates problematic people from politics and society, while still maintaining sovereign power over them. In this way the camp reinforces the overall system that its inhabitants are excluded from by containing what otherwise may appear to be contradictory elements to those not in the camp.

1.3- Mbembe & Necropolitics

Necropolitics is defined as the subjugation of life to the power of death, or more specifically as the use of political and social power to determine how some people live and die. Necropolitics is often discussed as an extension of biopolitics and biopower, by taking those concepts to an extreme by shifting the center to the importance of death rather than the importance of life. The relatively straightforward ideas of necropolitics brings profound implications for understanding how modern states exercise power and the consequences of state violence. Mbembe proposes:

necropolitics and necropower to account for the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of *death-worlds*, new and unique forms of social existence in

¹⁸ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 171.

which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*.¹⁹

Mbembe develops these ideas by presenting a reading of politics as the work of life and death through references to the work of Georg Hegel and Georges Bataille. Hegel thought that humans only ‘become subject’, separated from simple animals, through a continuous confrontation with death. Bataille somewhat similarly saw the ultimate expression of sovereignty as being a refusal to acknowledge the limits that the fear of death normally bring.

Like Agamben, Mbembe utilizes Foucault’s broad ideas about biopolitics and biopower and relates them to the state of exception and state of siege and concludes that “the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die. Hence, to kill or to allow to live constitute the limits of sovereignty”.²⁰ While their understandings of sovereignty are not the exact same, they show a clear connection to one another in that both emphasize the necessity of a state of exception and reliance upon violence/death as an expression of this authority. The rest of the section will focus on two key concepts from necropolitics: the relation of enmity and death-worlds.

Mbembe views the state of exception as an important component of necropolitics, but still issues questions about the relationship between death and politics in these states of exception, and what other factors contribute toward this focus on death. He points to the relation of enmity, or an intense hatred and fear of some ‘other’, as a vital component here. “...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 fictionalized notion of the enemy. It also labors to produce that same exception, emergency, and fictionalized enemy”.²¹ It is this hatred of another group, regardless of if it is real or imagined, which helps to continually justify death and destruction in these necropolitical relationships. For Mbembe, racism is the clearest example of this relation of enmity. “More so than class-thinking... race has been the ever present shadow in Western political thought and practice, especially when it comes to imagining the inhumanity of, or rule over, foreign peoples”.²² This ‘othering’ and

¹⁹ Mbembe, Achille, ‘Necropolitics’, *Public Culture*, 15.1 (2003), p. 40.

²⁰ Mbembe, ‘Necropolitics’, p. 11.

²¹ Mbembe, ‘Necropolitics’, p. 16.

²² Mbembe, ‘Necropolitics’, p. 17.

division of people along racial lines helps justify the use of sovereign right to kill against different people.

While skin color is the most obvious trait which racism relies upon to make distinctions between people, this relation of enmity does not have to be based on color. Instead, as Mbembe mentions, “according to Ardent, what makes the savages different from other human beings is less the color of their skin than the fear that they behave like a part of nature... The savages are, as it were, “natural” human beings who lack the specifically human character, the specifically human reality”.²³ The distinction between the ‘conqueror’ and the ‘native’ can be based upon factors other than skin color, such as language, religion, culture, or any number of other traits.

Mbembe expanded upon his ideas about the relation of enmity in some of his other writing, stating that “The contemporary age can be seen to embody the fundamental character of the political as a hatred of the enemy, the need to neutralize him, and a generalized desire to avoid the sorts of dangers and contagion he is perceived to bring”.²⁴ While overt displays of racism and subjection of other people through colonialism are less common today than in the past, Mbembe still sees a strong political imperative for most states to have a clear enemy/other. He specifically points to vague fears in many western states of terrorism or immigrants as a prime example of this phenomenon. This endless pursuit of an enemy inevitably leads to dangerous consequences. “Clothed in the rags of international law, human rights, democracy, or, simply put, ‘civilization’, militarism no longer needs a disguise. To relight the flame of hatred, old allies are suddenly transformed into ‘enemies of humanity as a whole’, while might become right”.²⁵ Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in many ways typifies Mbembe’s sentiment here. The Russian government justifies the war and its militarism as being legal under international law, defending the human rights of Russian speakers, restoring true democracy after the perceived ‘coup’ in 2014, and as protecting Russian civilization from the encroaching threat of a decadent West. For the Russian government, the war represents a fight against the amalgamation of all manner of different enemies and threats, regardless of how real any of them may truly be.

Mbembe views the natural outcome of necropolitical systems and relationships as death-worlds, “unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of

²³ Mbembe, ‘Necropolitics’, p. 24.

²⁴ Mbembe, Achille, ‘The Society of Enmity’, *Radical Philosophy*, 200, 2016, p. 27.

²⁵ Mbembe, ‘The Society of Enmity’, p. 28.

life conferring upon them the status of living dead”.²⁶ What these death worlds look like in practice can vary greatly, but Mbembe points to colonial occupation as a prime example of this phenomenon. Colonial occupation in this sense entails new physical boundaries, social hierarchies, the classification of different peoples, resource extraction, and the production of cultural imaginaries that justify and give meaning to the creation of these different classes and rights.²⁷

Mbembe makes a distinction between early and late colonial occupation, with the late (modern) differing in the ways it more totally combines the disciplinary, biopolitical, and necropolitical. A major reason for this difference is the proliferation of new technologies which have drastically expanded how states can act. For example, disciplinary techniques are augmented by the proliferation of the internet and new surveillance technology. With so much of data on the internet today, it is now easier for states to surveil people, such as seeing who they frequently spend time with, what their personal opinions are, or activities they participate in. Modern surveillance is more expansive than ever before, with satellite imagery, troves of online data, and extensive security camera systems allowing states to track, observe, and find people with greater ease than ever before.

A vital component of this modern style of colonial occupation is the state of siege. This is particularly relevant in Ukraine’s occupied territories which are the frontlines of a real war and under a legal state of emergency:

The state of siege is itself a military institution. It allows a modality of killing that does not distinguish between the external and the internal enemy. Entire populations are the target of the sovereign. The besieged villages and towns are sealed off and cut off from the world. Daily life is militarized. Freedom is given to local military commanders to use their discretion as to when and whom to shoot. Movement between the territorial cells requires formal permits. Local civil institutions are systematically destroyed. The besieged population is deprived of their means of income. Invisible killing is added to outright executions.²⁸

The sovereignty power to decide on the exception once again shows itself in this concept, and Ukraine’s occupied territories offer a clear example of this in practice. The exceptionality of

²⁶ Mbembe, ‘Necropolitics’, p. 40.

²⁷ Mbembe, ‘Necropolitics’, p. 26.

²⁸ Mbembe, ‘Necropolitics’, p. 30.

wartime provides justification for Russia to suspend normal laws and rights, turning total authority over to local proxies and military leaders who can kill and torture with near total impunity. There are numerous well documented instances of random arrests and extrajudicial killings of civilians, sometimes justified for reasons as benign as someone speaking Ukrainian.²⁹ All symbols of Ukraine or Ukrainian-ness are systematically dismantled, while local institutions are overhauled by loyal proxies from the area. The territories remain geographically isolated by the war and border controls, and informationally isolated by cutting off as much access as possible to outside media and internet sources.

The result of these death-worlds is both the physical and social death of its inhabitants. These people are deprived of their rights, basic physical necessities (adequate shelter, food, water), and cultural symbols/institutions, while also facing constant surveillance and the threat of violence or death from occupation forces. In the case of the occupied Ukrainian territory, remaining inhabitants are continually worn down by this suffering, and have few options other than to flee or accept a new reality that requires them to act in the way that occupation leadership wants them to. This colonial structure also enhances the view of occupied areas as special frontiers where normal laws and rights for its inhabitants do not apply. As Mbembe says, “the sovereign right to kill is not subject to any rule in the colonies. In the colonies, the sovereign might kill at any time or in any manner”.³⁰ The view of these areas as fundamentally different from the core only furthers an understanding of these spaces as lacking normal prohibitions on violence.

An important question now with many of these theories from Foucault, Agamben, and Mbembe is: how do these concepts be studied and how do they function in ‘real life’ when considered beyond the books where they were written about? Biopolitics, bare life, Necropolitics, etc. these do not have a physical form that one can look at and study. These concepts do not just circulate as vague ideas though, they have a life of their own and can manifest in many ways. One distinct option is to consider the visual aspect of these theories. How do these concepts occur in visual media, and what impacts might they have on how people understand and interact with the world? The remaining sections of this chapter will focus on questions like these, discussing the

²⁹ Arhirova, Hanna, Vasilisa Stepanenko, and Lori Hinnat, ‘Thousands of Ukraine Civilians Are Being Held in Russian Prisons. Russia Plans to Build Many More’, *AP*, 2023

³⁰ Mbembe, ‘Necropolitics’, p. 25.

role of visuals in the study of international relations and how it can be synthesized together with biopolitics to study and understand the world.

1.4- A Pictorial Turn & an Aesthetic Turn

The power of the visual is not a new phenomenon. There is a near universal presence of visuals across the history of human civilization, from simple early cave paintings to the use of flags and other symbols as signs of a particular political or military power. For hundreds of years scholars have theorized and argued about how to understand and study the importance of visuals in society, such as Emmanuel Kant's writing about aesthetics. What is new about visual media today is the scale, speed, and ease with which it is created and consumed. In 1992 W.J.T. Mitchell advocated for a 'pictorial turn' in the humanities. For him this turn was needed to account for both 1) the gap in scholarship created by only focusing on words and text as the generators of meaning and discourse, and 2) the ever-growing importance of visual media across society.³¹ Written over 30 years ago, this call for a pictorial turn appears even more important today. The proliferation of the internet and visually focused social media sites has only further entrenched the power of the visual. Someone can take a photo with their phone and post it online in a few seconds, and within an hour it might be viewed by millions of people around the world.

A growing number of academics are engaging with the importance of visuals and other non-traditional mediums as tools for understanding the social sciences. Roland Bleiker's work stands out as particularly important for taking seriously the connections between the visual, politics, and international relations. A key issue for Bleiker is the difference between mimetic and aesthetic representations. Mimetic approach seeks to represent politics as realistically, authentically, and objectively as possible. In contrast, an aesthetic approach assumes there is always a gap between representations and what they seek to represent, and for Bleiker this gap is "the very location of politics".³²

Bleiker is critical of much of modern IR scholarship as often being solely mimetic and positivist in its approach:

Those who make the analysis of these political events their professional purview—the students of international relations (ir)—adhere to representational habits that have become

³¹ Mitchell, W.J.T, *Picture Theory* (The University of Chicago Press, 1992)

³² Bleiker, Roland, 'The Aesthetic Turn in International Political Theory', *Millennium*, 30.3 (2001), p. 510.

equally objectified and problematic. Many of them are social scientists for whom knowledge about the ‘facts’ of the ‘real world’ emerges from the search for ‘valid inferences by the systematic use of well-established procedures of inquiry’. But relatively little practical knowledge has emerged from these efforts, even after successive generations of social scientists have refined their models and methods. Our insights into the international have not grown substantially, nor have our abilities to prevent deadly conflicts. From Kosovo to Afghanistan violence remains the *modus operandi* of world politics.³³

Seeing a failing in current scholarship, Bleiker points to a growing ‘aesthetic turn’ in IR as a positive trend to support which addresses some of the current problems in the field of study. “Aesthetic approaches... embark on a direct political encounter, for they engage the gap that inevitably opens up between a form of representation and the object it seeks to represent”.³⁴ Since it is this gap which is ‘the location of politics’, a renewed focus on this area opens new avenues for study.

A second important move for Bleiker is drawing on novel and alternative forms of knowledge about the international for study. “By legitimizing images, narratives and sounds as important sources for insight into world politics, aesthetic approaches have moved scholarship away from an exclusive and often very narrow reliance on diplomatic documents, statistical data, political speeches, academic treatises and other traditional sources of knowledge about the international”.³⁵ While these more traditional sources remain valuable objects of study, an exclusive reliance on them obscures what can be learned from these other sources. For example, Bleiker points to the case of an effort in the 1870s to create a photographic databank that systematically represented all racial identities. This system became a common identifying practice for police around the world, and it also “created stereotypical images of identity that then were superimposed upon the far more complex lives of colonial subjects. The linkages between photographic depiction and colonial subjugation led to practices of seeing and policing in which one form of identity (usually race-related) tended to annihilate all others (such as gender, age, religion and class)”.³⁶ Insights like this could not have been reached without paying careful

³³ Bleiker, ‘The Aesthetic Turn’, p. 509-510.

³⁴ Bleiker, ‘The Aesthetic Turn’, p. 512

³⁵ Bleiker, ‘The Aesthetic Turn’, p. 526

³⁶ Bleiker, ‘The Aesthetic Turn’, p. 528.

attention to the original photos themselves from the 1870s. Taking an aesthetic approach, whether by incorporating images, sounds, videos, or something else, adds layers of perception and promotes interactions between different fields which can reveal novel insights.

Much of Bleiker's more recent works are particularly focused on photographs and other images as a valuable medium of study for deepening our understanding of IR. In *Visual Global Politics*, Bleiker provides two broad examples of the power of images and the complex political and social dynamics behind them. First, images can function as icons, which, following the definition from Robert Hariman and John Lucaites, are widely known and distributed images that represent "historically significant events, activate strong emotional identification or response, and are reproduced across a range of media, genres, or topics".³⁷ Common examples of this type of iconic photos are Jeff Widener's "Tank Man" picture of a lone man at Tiananmen Square blocking the path of four tanks, or Kevin Carter's "The Vulture and the Little Girl" showing a young famine-stricken child laying on the ground in Sudan with a vulture lurking nearby. These types of iconic photos are inherently political and are so influential due to their ability to encapsulate complex issues in an eye-catching way. Icons can become a victim of their own success though. As an image is continually reproduced and spreads it can become divorced from its original meaning and context, allowing others to appropriate it and give it new meaning.

Second, images are uniquely able to both appeal to and influence peoples' emotions. One example of this that Bleiker points to is how images of traumatic events, such as airplane crashes or natural disasters, often are accompanied by a warning of the potentially upsetting content in the images.³⁸ Purely verbal or written accounts of the same events rarely include such a warning, indicating the unique ability of photos to elicit emotional responses from viewers, especially when it is of a traumatic subject. Numerous psychological studies have also documented the emotional power of images. The "identifiable victim effect" demonstrates how close-up pictures and portraits of victims of disasters elicit sympathy and compassion from viewers, while distant images of large groups and crowds tend to create feelings of emotional distance.³⁹

Following on the power that images have, Bleiker identifies several more specific links between visuals and global politics. First, photos (and today videos as well) provide an illusion of

³⁷ Bleiker, *Visual Global Politics*, p. 8.

³⁸ Bleiker, *Visual Global Politics*, p. 9.

³⁹ Bleiker, *Visual Global Politics*, p. 10.

authenticity, and it is this this perceived authenticity that makes them so powerful for conveying a political meaning to large audiences. By capturing events and peoples' faces and events in memorable ways, they can build a sense of connection between the viewer and whatever is represented in the photo. The perception of authenticity remains strong, but its strength is declining. The advent of technologies like Photoshop, deep fakes, artificial intelligence, other image/video editing and generation tools have made it easier than ever to manipulate and alter visual media. Many people are more skeptical of the truthfulness of images and videos they see online, yet studies continue to show that people still perceive photos and videos as more authentic and trustworthy than only text-based information.⁴⁰

Related to the issues of authenticity are the aesthetic choices made with any photo, real or fake, and the political choices behind them. As Bleiker states, "A photograph cannot be neutral because it always is an image chosen and composed by a particular person. It is taken from a particular angle, and then produced and reproduced in a certain manner, thereby excluding a range of alternative ways of capturing the object in question".⁴¹ Who is included (and excluded) from a particular image? Who or what is in/out of focus? What background elements are incorporated into the photo? What elements of the picture are emphasized, and in what ways? There is an almost endless number of questions you can ask about how a picture is composed, and each choice can have political implications. Bleiker provides an example of this with two versions of a picture of Catholic church leaders from 1944 at a funeral for the Croatian president.⁴² A cropped version simply shows an unremarkable scene of the solemn looking clergy members. The non-cropped photo shows a far more problematic scene, with numerous men in military uniform engaging in a Nazi salute next to the clergy. Even the simple choice of where to crop an image can drastically impact its message. The important thing here is "there are always relations of power at stake in a photograph, that there is always an attempt to tell a story, and that this story is always told from a particular, politically charged angle".⁴³

A third key political aspect of images is their need for interpretation, as they only gain their full meaning by being viewed and understood in relation to other factors. Related to the aesthetic idea of there always being a difference between a representation and what it represents, in images

⁴⁰ 'Visual Search Wins Over Text as Consumers' Most Trusted Information Source', *Business Wire*, 2019

⁴¹ Bleiker, *Visual Global Politics*, p. 14.

⁴² Bleiker, *Visual Global Politics*, p. 15.

⁴³ Bleiker, *Visual Global Politics*, p. 14.

there is a ‘denoted message’ which is simply what is physically shown, and then there is the ‘connoted message’ which includes how a viewer interprets everything shown and how fits it in their existing knowledge and view of the world.⁴⁴ The process of interpretation is influenced by many factors, such as background knowledges of any people or places in the picture, where/how the photo is viewed (on the internet, in a museum, on TV, etc.), when the photo is viewed, any accompanying text, etc. It can be a complex process that inevitably involves relations of power, societal norms, and more. Bleiker points again to the famous “Tank Man” photo as a demonstration of this fact. Someone from the United States who has background knowledge of the protests and crackdown at Tiananmen will have a drastically different understanding of the photo compared to someone from China who, due to censorship of the photo and information, likely lacks the background knowledge needed to fully interpret the image or even recognize it.⁴⁵ All the information from this section combined points to the inherent power of images, that they matter both politically and socially, and that studying them is a valid and valuable academic endeavor.

1.5- Visual Biopolitics

Given all the above information on biopolitics and the visual, how might these various concepts and ideas be related? One of the best approaches for understanding this relationship is the relatively new research approach of visual biopolitics:

Visual biopolitics emerges at the intersection of the personal/private and communal/societal domains, and may provide novel explanations for both totalizing forms of biopower and their contestation/deconstruction. Importantly, visual biopolitics creates political relations that involve ‘actors, audiences, stages, scripts and mise-en-scene,’ with a broad variety of performative forms and genres that might be inscribed into its frame.⁴⁶

While it is a new approach and not a well-established field of study, it nevertheless offers a valuable perspective on how we can start to understand “the increasingly complex (bio)political reality [that] necessitates visual representations/imageries and its own “pictorial turn” to convey content that cannot be expressed solely verbally”.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Bleiker, *Visual Global Politics*, p. 16.

⁴⁵ Bleiker, *Visual Global Politics*, p. 17-18.

⁴⁶ Makarychev, ‘Visual Biopolitics’, p. 62.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

Two important concepts for visual biopolitics are hegemonic regimes of visibility and performativity. A hegemonic regime of visibility is a concept that “seeks to explain the production and functioning of consensual and standardized representations authorized by the dominant symbolic order and designed to be aesthetically appealing and socially enjoyable. They function as a regulated and unified system of marketable signs and images in which irregular and uncoordinated semiotic elements are treated as alien, foreign, and inappropriate, and therefore expelled”.⁴⁸ These regimes of visibility can manifest in many different forms. Makarychev points to the 2015 classical music concert in Palmyra, Syria, which was led by a famous Russian conductor and his orchestra shortly after the Syrian military regained control of the city with Russian support. The event was heavily visualized through pictures and video recordings and sought “to appeal to universal norms and values of world culture in justifying the Russian military operation in Syria as a civilizational mission aimed against barbarity and terrorism”.⁴⁹

Another important facet of regimes of visibility is locational context. This is the symbolic status of where something is located, nearby structures and objects, and other aspects of the surrounding physical environment. In the case of this paper’s focus on Mariupol, the city itself has vast symbolic importance for both Ukrainians and Russians as the sight of one of the first major battles after Russia’s full-scale invasion and one of the first major cities that Russia successfully occupied. Additionally, within Mariupol various buildings have their own unique significance. A prime example is the Mariupol Drama Theater, which was the sight of a mass casualty event during the siege when a Russian missile destroyed the building and killed hundreds of civilians who were sheltering there.

The second concept, performativity, was developed by Judith Butler and is “a concept instrumental for discussing public actions of high visibility that do not so much reflect as produce reality and that have ontological effects through multiple reiterations... Performativity expresses itself through public and ritualistic acts and cultural gestures of role-taking and role ascription with a certain visibility and a semiotic background”.⁵⁰ Performativity places a focus on the continued repetition and reiteration of politically meaningful public actions, and how those actions either

⁴⁸ Makarychev, ‘Visual Biopolitics’, p. 55.

⁴⁹ Makarychev, ‘Visual Biopolitics’, p. 56.

⁵⁰ Makarychev, ‘Visual Biopolitics’, p. 58.

support or subvert dominant discourse. Examples of this can be events such as parades, political rallies, memorials, and other types of public events and ceremonies.

These early ideas have already started to generate some exciting works and discussions, such as by Kazharski, Kurnyshova, Makarychev, and Siva.⁵¹ Their writing take these early ideas, expands upon them, and shows the value they can bring to studying international relations, particularly in the case of illiberal regimes like Russia. For example, when Kazharski discusses visual biopolitics in Belarus, he notes how broad its impact can be:

visual biopolitics is not only about biopolitical care or control over the population who are immediately inside the “field of representability”. It stretches far beyond, to exercise control over those who can be affected by the spectacle, being plugged into it via their own *zoe*, their physical existence which emotionally, through fear, vulnerability, and empathy, connects them to the performance... the spectacle of visual biopolitics can also be understood as the state (or the political regime) performing itself, its identity as a subject of care and control over the population at large.⁵²

Such a point is especially important for this thesis’ focus on the NM and MCC Telegram channels. Both represent competing governments, so in what ways do they try to perform their identity for their audiences, both for those who still living in Mariupol but also those beyond the city? What might it say about the wider Ukrainian and Russian governments that each are a part of? These and other question begin to emerge from the groundwork that these other authors have started to lay with their inquiries into visual biopolitics. There are also authors who, even though they do not explicitly mention visual biopolitics, create valuable insight by relating biopolitics to the importance of visuals.⁵³

There are two distinct benefits for using visual biopolitics which are especially relevant for this thesis. First, the tools it provides are well suited for studying illiberal forms of governance. It can help find the policies and practices which regimes, like Russia and Belarus, use to exert control

⁵¹ Kazharski, Aliaksei, ‘An Authoritarian Spectacle: Visual Biopolitics and the Dramaturgy of the Poland-Belarus Border Migration Crisis’, *Visual Anthropology*, 36.4 (2023), p. 373–96.; Kurnyshova, Yuliia, and Andrey Makarychev, ‘Visual Biopolitics of Multiple Insecurities: Anthropological Inquiries in Eastern Europe’, *Visual Anthropology*, 36.4 (2023), p. 301–7.; Makarychev, Andrey, and Sami Siva, ‘Photography as Testimony: Insecurities, “Bareness” of Life, and Resilience during the War in Ukraine’, *Visual Anthropology*, 36.4 (2023), p. 330–47.

⁵² Kazharski, ‘An Authoritarian Spectacle’, p. 377.

⁵³ Hanukai, Maksim, ‘Russian Actionism as Biopolitical Performance: Shifting Grounds and Forms of Resistance’, *Russian Literature*, 141 (2023), p. 111–42.

and domination over human bodies. Second, this approach can help identify forms of resistance to illiberal governance. For this paper's focus on starkly different discourses about Mariupol, this theoretical perspective appears is a perfect fit. As the later analysis will show, the NM channel contains clearly articulated messages about the role the Russian state and its paternalistic relationship to Mariupol and its inhabitants. Conversely, the MCC channel seeks to subvert these ideas with its own visuals which seek to demonstrate a relationship that is fundamentally exploitive and necropolitical at its core.

Chapter 2: Methodology and Case Selection

The analytical research of this paper is focused on 20 photos, 10 each selected from the NM and MCC telegram channels. The first section of this chapter provides an overview of the methodology that is used to analyze the pictures and why it was selected instead of other methods. The second section presents important information on the photos themselves, such as the criteria for why they were selected. The final section contains a brief review of existing analysis of similar cases and topics, to demonstrate a gap in current literature which this paper seeks to address.

2.1- Visual Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis (DA) is a qualitative research method that studies the relationship and connections between language and the social world. Often DA is associated with analysis of important texts, such as official government documents or speeches from important political or cultural figures. A less common approach is to apply DA to visual mediums instead of textual ones. The specific type of visual discourse analysis (VDA) used in this paper comes from Gillian Rose's *Visual Methodologies*. Before presenting the various methodological options in the book, Rose puts forward three key qualities for any critical visual methodology. For a method to be considered a critical visual methodology it needs to meet at least two of these three qualities: (1) takes images seriously, (2) thinks about social conditions and effects of visual objects, and (3) considers your own way of looking at images.

The first quality seems rather obvious but is still worth including. Social scientists sometimes do not look close enough at images that they analyze, treating them simply as reflections of their social context. Rose warns that this is an overly reductive approach which also ignores the effects that the images themselves can have.⁵⁴ The second quality is important since visual representations are both influenced by and produce conditions of social inclusion and exclusion. The final quality is important since how the researcher as a viewer sees visual media is often historically, geographically, culturally, and socially specific in some ways. This issue of reflexivity is one that Rose repeatedly addressed throughout the book. For VDA specifically, Rose determines that it meets the method meets the first two qualities, while the third quality of reflexivity is often a challenge for DA, but this issue can sometimes be mitigated.

⁵⁴ Rose, Gillian, *Visual Methodologies*, 1st edn (Sage Publications, 2001), p. 15.

Rose first discusses the foundational ideas and concepts behind DA, and their origins from Foucault's work, then demonstrates how and why they can be used to study visuals. First, discourse itself "is a particular knowledge about the world which shapes how the world is understood and how things are done in it... Discourse also produces subjects".⁵⁵ The diverse ways that discourse can be created means that intertextuality is important, as the meaning of any one piece of discourse depends on the meaning created by other images and texts. As more discourse is created overtime, discursive formations are formed based off how the different parts of discourse are related to one another. From the Foucauldian perspective discourse is powerful since it creates subjects and disciplines them into thinking and acting in certain ways. "Our sense of our self is made through the operation of discourse. So too are objects, relations, places, scenes: discourse produces the world as it understands it".⁵⁶ The power of discourse creates a clear connection to knowledge, and how people understand and interpret the world around them. This in the end can create regimes of truth, which are the grounds on which something is claimed to be true. A regime of truth and the previously discussed regime of visibility share much in common within this context. A regime of visibility can functionally be considered a type of regime of truth, but where the focus is on how visuals justify or support how something is claimed to be true. As Bleiker notes, "Representation is always an act of power. This power is at its peak if a form of representation is able to disguise its subjective origins and values".⁵⁷ Photos here can be very useful for constructing a regime of truth/visibility, as they can provide an air of objectivity and legitimacy for either the Ukrainian or Russian perspectives.

Discourse can be articulated in many different forms, not just through text and speech acts. Key for this paper, "It is possible to think of visuality as a sort of discourse too. A specific visuality will make certain things visible in particular ways, and other things unseeable, for example, and subjects will be produced and act within that field of vision".⁵⁸ Images and other visuals are just one of the many mediums through which discourse can be created. When it comes to specific methodological approaches to discourse analysis, Foucault's own writings on the subject were broad and vague. This has led to many different perspectives and approaches being developed overtime. Rose herself identified two approaches, which she simply calls discourse analysis I and

⁵⁵ Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, p. 136.

⁵⁶ Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, p. 137.

⁵⁷ Bleiker, *Visual Global Politics*, p. 515.

⁵⁸ Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, p. 137.

II, which apply the principles of DA to studying visuals. This paper follows the DA I approach, which:

pays careful attention to an image itself (as well as other sorts of evidence). Since discourses are seen as socially produced rather than created by individuals, this type of discourse analysis is especially concerned with the social modality of the image site. In particular, discourse analysis explores how those specific views or accounts are constructed as real or truthful or natural through particular regimes of truth... It also pays attention to the more socially constituted forms of discursive power, looking at the social construction of difference and authority, for example.⁵⁹

This approach was chosen instead of Rose's DA II since DA I maintains a specific focus on the images themselves. DA II places greater emphasis on how discourse is generated by the institutional apparatuses and technologies that surround the image itself, such as an image's location within a museum and how the museum chooses to display the image.

To use in this type of VDA, Rose outlines a broad process to follow and key questions to address/investigate in one's analysis of images. The first step in the interpretative process is familiarization with the images. This requires the viewer "to try to forget all preconceptions you might have about the materials you are working with. Read them and look at them with fresh eyes... Read and re-read the texts; look and look again at the images".⁶⁰ This is necessary so that pre-existing ideas and notions about the image and its meanings are at least somewhat restrained. The goal with this is for the analyst to understand that the discourse does not just come about on its own, and to allow them to start understanding how the images itself constructs this discourse.

Once familiarized with the images and any related text, the next step is the identification of key themes. What are the most powerful words and images contained within a picture and its text? How often do they occur? Rose specifically advises making a list of these key images and words and coding the picture and text when they appear.⁶¹ It is important to note that the most important words and images are not always those that appear the most frequently, and sometimes what is not shown or said is equally as important. As these key themes are identified, one can start to draw potential connections between them, which in turn may reveal new themes. If this is the

⁵⁹ Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, p. 140-141.

⁶⁰ Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, p. 150.

⁶¹ Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, p. 150.

case then one can again repeat the process of looking for these new themes in the picture and text and seeing how or if they connect to others. “How are particular words or images given specific meanings? Are there meaningful clusters of words and images? What associations are established within such clusters? What connections are there between such clusters?”⁶² These are the kinds of questions to be asked about the key themes identified in the images and associated texts.

Once key themes and their connections are sufficiently identified, it is important to understand how the observed discourse works to persuade viewers, or how does it produce its effects of truth?

Often this entails focusing on claims to truth, or to scientific certainty, or to the natural way of things. As well as the visual and textual devices used to claim truth, however, it is useful to look for moments at which dissent from a discourse is acknowledged (even if implicitly) and dealt with. Search for the work that is being done to reconcile conflicting ideas, to cope with contradiction or uncertainty, or to counter alternatives.⁶³

An example that Rose points to is the use of a map of poverty in Eastern London from 1889. Nominally an objective and scientific visual, it was used by some to justify a moral characterization of the inhabitants in those poor areas being feckless and lazy. This step is particularly important for this paper’s analysis of the openly competing discourse around Mariupol, as both sides present starkly different views that almost completely contradict the other’s version.

Another related emphasis in this VDA is understanding the complexity and contradictions within discourse. Sometimes the complexity and contradictions within discourse can be a strength, by allowing the emergence of many different views but which all still rely on the same core discourse. A useful term which Rose brings in here is interpretative repertoire, from Potter and Wetherell, which are systematically related sets of terms that are often organized around one or more central metaphors.⁶⁴ They are somewhat like ‘mini discourse’, in that they are usually associated with particular social situations. While Potter and Wetherell only discussed interpretative repertoires in relation to text, it can also be easily applied to visuals by instead looking for related sets of images and symbols. An example of this complexity and contradiction that Rose brings up is a specific 1857 painting of a prostitute, based off a poem. While the poem

⁶² Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, p. 151.

⁶³ Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, p. 154.

⁶⁴ Potter, Jonathan, and Margaret Wetherell, ‘Discourse Analysis and the Identification of Interpretative Repertoires’, in *Analysing Everyday Explanation A Casebook of Methods* (Sage Publications), pp. 168–83.

describes the prostitute as deviant and physically degraded, the painting of the same prostitute does not evoke any of that description. While in text prostitutes could be described with extremely negative terms, in art existing discourse at the time about women and femininity would not permit a woman, even a prostitute, to be physically represented in such an unpleasurable way.⁶⁵

The final step to take with this analysis of an image is to determine who/what is invisible or excluded from it? “Absences can be as productive as explicit naming; invisibility can have just as powerful effects as visibility”.⁶⁶ In some cases the people, places, and topics that are avoided in visuals can be key features for understanding their meaning. For example, early visual depictions of Americans as a broad group would often focus exclusively on white Americans, sending a clear implicit message about the status of the non-white inhabitants across the country. The process that Rose presents, slightly paraphrased, is concisely summarized in this diagram:

Discourse Analysis I: (1) Familiarization/Immersion in Sources → (2) Identify Key Themes → (3) Identify Connections Between Key Themes → (4) If finding new themes, repeat again → (5) Identify How the Key Themes Persuade and Produce Effects of Truth → (6) Assess the Complexity and Contradictions in this Discourse → (7) Identify Who/What is Invisible or Excluded in the Discourse

In addition to the above process, Rose highlights two other factors worth considering, specifically about the social context of how a discourse is produced. First, the institutional location of the discourse is important. Simply put, the analyst needs to determine the social authority of the person or institution generating the discourse. Statements and visual coming from a position of authority are generally more productive from discourse created in a marginalized social position.⁶⁷ That does not mean that marginalized discourse is unimportant though, as it can still have an important impact, especially in how it may undermine more hegemonic discourses overtime. The second factor is the audience assumed by an image and text. How discourse is produced can vary greatly depending on who the presumed audience is, based on how different groups of people may interpret or understand certain visuals or words in starkly different manners.⁶⁸ These two factors are both worthy of analysis, but at least within the DA I approach are not as much the focus as the intertextuality of the images and the articulation of power in them.

⁶⁵ Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, p. 157.

⁶⁶ Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, p. 158.

⁶⁷ Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, p. 158.

⁶⁸ Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, p. 159.

While the photos themselves are the core unit of analysis for this thesis, the text associated with each image is also an important part of the analysis as well. Images do not work independently of language, and despite what some may argue, visuals have not supplanted words as the dominant mode of expression. Words and images often work in conjunction with each other and impact how the other is interpreted. Mitchell has three categories for the relation between a visual and text: *imagetext* (when the two are seamlessly merged), *image-text* (when they are separated by connected, and *image/text* (when they are in conflict or tension).⁶⁹ The pictures from the Telegram channel are considered *image-text*, since they are included in the same posts on the channels, but the text itself is not within the image. This connection is especially important in this case, as in most of the images someone would not fully understand what is shown without the context provided by the text. Additionally, the associated text provides a clear articulation of how each channel would like a viewer to interpret and understand the image.

2.2- Alternative Methodological Options

A key question is why this thesis utilizes VDA instead of other methods. This section will first discuss the strengths and weaknesses of VDA as presented by Rose. It will then discuss a few other options and why they were not chosen. VDA presents clear strengths, which Rose specifically highlights in her summary of the method:

It pays careful attention to images themselves, and to the web of intertextuality in which any individual image is embedded. It is centrally concerned with the production of social difference through visual imagery. It addresses questions of power as they are articulated through visual images themselves. And although reflexivity is a difficult issue for discourse analysis, there are ways in which the authority of the discourse analysis can be both marked (by acknowledging its context of production) and perhaps undermined (by rhetorical strategies of modesty).⁷⁰

On the other hand, Rose also points to two main difficulties with this method. The first is knowing when to stop making intertextual connections. There is no clear benchmark for when connections can stop being made, presenting a risk for any researcher using this method that they may go too far and make increasingly weak connections. The second possible problem for some is DA's

⁶⁹ Bleiker, *Visual Global Politics*, p. 11-12.

⁷⁰ Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, p. 161

refusal to ascribe causality. DA is primarily focused on *how* things can happen, not *why* they happen. The relationship between discourse and its surrounding context is not always very clear, which can be a problem depending on the research question.

Given the above strengths and weaknesses of the VDA, it is overall well suited for answering this thesis' primary research question. The question 'How does pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian visual media construct different regimes of visibility through depictions of Mariupol since the occupation?' is heavily focused on the images themselves and the differing discourses and regimes of visibility they produce about power and social differences. The question is not focused on the specific impacts that this discourse has on its surrounding context. For the issue when to stop making intertextual connections, that issue is at least somewhat alleviated through my own intensive research of the subject and feedback received from my advisor.

Other methods of course could be used for trying to answer this question. Rose's *Visual Methodologies* discusses numerous other visual analysis methods which could have been used. Two notable options that were considered for this paper include content analysis and compositional interpretation. Visual content analysis follows a rigorous process of building out numerous categories for coding and then going through and coding large quantities of pictures to see which elements most commonly appear.⁷¹ Content analysis presents some notable strengths compared to other visual analysis methods. It follows clear methodological guidelines, and a researcher has several explicit rules and procedures that they need to use. In addition, content analysis brings with it more quantitative potential, compared to most other visual analysis methods, which are purely qualitative. If used for this paper, the research would focus on which visual elements occurred most frequently in the pictures posed on the two telegram channels, and then relate that to how the two sides construct different regimes of visibility.

Despite these strengths, various problems make content analysis not an ideal choice for this thesis. The main problem is the number of photos that would need to be analyzed. According to Rose, "content analysis must address all the images relevant to the research question",⁷² which is a major challenge for this case since both Telegram channels have posted over 16,000 pictures each. Even restricting the time frame leaves thousands of pictures to code. Simply put, it would be prohibitively labor intensive to adequately code this many photos. There are potential methods that

⁷¹ Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, p. 54.

⁷² Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, p. 57.

could be used to reduce the number of photos considered relevant for analysis, but it would be impossible to reduce it to a manageable number of photos for one person to code without losing a substantial amount of representability of the total sample size. A second problem is that frequency does not necessarily translate into significance. A visual element that frequently appears in photos is not guaranteed to be important, while what is not included in a photo can be extremely important.⁷³ Content analysis is not capable of addressing what is excluded from a photo. Finally, content analysis does not account for differences between strong and weak examples of a code, which could be a major issue given the large number of photos that would need to be analyzed for this case.⁷⁴

Compositional analysis was another method considered for this thesis. This method also offers its own unique advantages. It places special emphasis on the ‘how’ of an image’s creation, such as the kind of camera used to take a photograph, or the paints used in a piece of art.⁷⁵ It is especially interested in the compositional choices in an image, such as the spatial organization of important people and items, the types of colors used, lighting, etc. While this method can produce some valuable insights about the choices that go into how an image is made, it is not well suited for the case in this paper. Compositional analysis is best utilized with professionally created art and photographs, and most of the photos posted on the Telegram channels are taken by novices and/or non-professionals using their phones. Additionally, while compositional analysis can sometimes be used to assess what kinds of emotions and feelings a specific image may evoke, it is generally less interested in the social practices and context surrounding an image.⁷⁶ This is a problem given this thesis’ interest in the analyzed photos and their relationship to the wider social context and regimes of visibility that they are a part of.

2.3- Presentation of Cases

An important question to answer with thesis is: why does it focus on the NM and MCC Telegram channels? There are certainly many other potential sources of visual media related to Mariupol that could be analyzed, such as news articles, documentaries, YouTube channels, or official government media. Each of these options have their own pros and cons, but Telegram

⁷³ Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, p. 66.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, p. 52.

⁷⁶ Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, p. 53.

stands out as a worthy focus for a few major reasons. First, Telegram has rapidly become the app of choice for many Russians and Ukrainians to get news, particularly about the war, and to communicate with friends and family. In 2021 only 20% of Ukrainians used Telegram, but that number drastically increased to 60% in 2022 and continues to rise, while reliance on more traditional news sources, like TV, is falling in Ukraine.⁷⁷ This popularity is due to a variety of factors, such as Telegram's focus on the privacy and anonymity of users, which is especially valued in Russia due to a harsh crackdown on anti-war speech. Additionally, there is a perception of information on Telegram as being more 'on the ground' and authentic than information from other more traditional sources, especially when both Ukrainian and Russian soldiers frequently post updates about ongoing battles.⁷⁸

While anyone anywhere can set up a Telegram channel, both the NM and MCC channels carry authority with them since they are the official channels of the competing local governments of Mariupol. Both channels have relatively large followings, with the NM channel having close to 21,500 subscribers and the MCC channel having slightly more than 35,000 as of May 2024. Both channels are consistent in posting frequently, usually numerous times each day. Posts for each channel usually garner a few thousand views each, sometimes over 10,000. An important aspect of both channels is that they have a clear local focus, with the primary intended audience being current residents of the city, and for the MCC also former residents who have fled the city. This focus ensures that overtime both channels have developed their own clear discourse and perspectives about Mariupol which sharply contrast with each other. Visuals are a key part of the material that both channels post, often having multiple photos posted together with a brief message about them.

Both channels have a vast trove of photos to choose from for analysis, so narrowing it down was no easy task. In the end I selected 10 photos from each channel. To select the photos, I first spent a substantial amount of time looking through the vast amount posted on each channel and sought to identify broad topical categories which the photos could fit into. After doing this, I sought to pick out a few pictures from each channel which fit well within these different categories. All of the selected photos come from between March 2023 – March 2024. This range was chosen to

⁷⁷ *USAID-Internews Media Consumption Survey* (USAID & Internews, 2023)

⁷⁸ Allen, Bobby, 'Telegram Is the App of Choice in the War in Ukraine despite Experts' Privacy Concerns', *NPR*, 2022

slightly reduce the potential pool of pictures to pick between, and by March 2023 most of Mariupol had spent close to a year under Russian occupation, so the new Russian administration of the city would have had time to develop its own distinct perspective on its Telegram channel.

Additionally, I attempted to maintain rough symmetry between the photos selected from each channel to allow for easier and more natural comparison. The photos in Table 1 are aligned so that they each deal with a similar issue, theme, or topic. For example, contrasting pictures of the management of the recent Russian Presidential election in Mariupol in A5 and B5, or how children and education are often depicted in A6 and B6. As previously noted, the goal of this thesis is to demonstrate how different regimes of visibility can be constructed through photos, and the selected photos were chosen only as broad examples of this. The selected photos are not supposed to be representative of the entirety of pictures posted on the Telegram channels. To achieve a more holistic representation of the photos on both channels would have necessitated a substantially larger sample size of photos for analysis, which would have been prohibitively time consuming to properly analyze with the chosen VDA method.

2.4- The Knowledge Gap

A final important point to demonstrate before the analysis, is to show that there is a gap in existing knowledge which this thesis helps fill. As previously discussed, visual analysis within the field of international relations remains a relatively under-utilized method, so there is ample space for demonstrating its value as a research method. For this thesis' focus on the Russian invasion of Ukraine and Telegram, it is following in the footsteps of recent work by Kazharski, Kurnyshova, Makarychev, and Siva which was discussed earlier. They have shown some of the ways visual analysis can be applied to international relations and biopolitics, especially in the context of illiberal regimes. Their analysis laid the early theoretical groundwork which this thesis seeks to expand upon. The relative recency of these of Russia's full-scale invasion means that there has not been a substantial amount of time for scholars to fully study this case, and the fact it is still ongoing means the exact situation is constantly changing and in flux. This presents ample opportunities for research that have yet to be fully addressed.

As it relates to this thesis' specific interest in content on Telegram, there are numerous studies which have studied this same topic and show the unique insights that can be gained from studying it or similar online spaces. Many of these studies do not explicitly utilize visual analysis

methods though, and topically they often focus on terrorist and extremist groups which use the app to communicate and spread their messages.⁷⁹ Some research is specifically interested in Telegram use in Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but mostly in the context of its frequent use by 'milbloggers' and active members of the military.⁸⁰ There is substantially less work focused on how local governments and similar organizations, like NM and MCC, make use of Telegram. Overall, this thesis expands upon existing new research by combining visual analysis methods with a focus on Telegram use by competing local governments, and may reveal valuable insights while contributing in its own small way to the emerging research subfield of visual biopolitics.

⁷⁹ Alrhoun, Abdullah, Charlie Winter, and János Kertész, 'Automating Terror: The Role and Impact of Telegram Bots in the Islamic State's Online Ecosystem', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, p. 1–16.; McSwiney, Jordan, Michael Vaughan, Annett Heft, and Hoffmann Matthias, 'Sharing the Hate? Memes and Transnationality in the Far Right's Digital Visual Culture', *Information, Communication, & Society*, 24.16 (2021), p. 2502–21.

⁸⁰ Farbman, Sam, 'Telegram, "Milbloggers" and the Russian State', *Survival*, 65.3 (2023), p. 107–28.

Chapter 3: Analysis

This chapter contains the thesis's primary analytic work and is structured along the VDA analysis process from Rose. The first section covers the key themes identified across the 20 pictures and contrasts how they are given different meaning in the two Telegram channels. The second section covers important connections between the key themes. The third section assesses how the images seek to persuade and their effects of truth. The fourth section discusses the complexities and contradictions that these different visual discourses create. The fifth covers who/what is excluded or invisible in these visual discourses. The final section ties together the information gained from this analysis by discussing the different regimes of visibility articulated by these visuals, and how certain biopolitical elements are manifested in them. All the pictures can be found for reference in Table 1 at the end of the thesis. Since most of the images do not have official titles, they are designated A1-10 for the NM channel and B1-10 for the MCC channel. The table also contains the the dates when each picture was posted on Telegram, the translated messages associated with each picture, and the key themes associated with the picture and its text.

3.1- Key Themes

A total of nine key themes were identified across the 20 pictures, after thoroughly familiarizing myself with the images and studying them multiple times. Each representing a certain broad visual element or word in the texts which stand out as frequently used or of thematic importance. These are: children/young people, death, the drama theater, government aid, occupation, reconstruction, remembrance, and unity. Each theme occurred in at least four pictures, and a maximum of nine. How these themes are shown, and the associations connected with them vary starkly between the two channels. The following sub-sections each briefly cover some of the main qualities and examples of each theme.

3.1.1- Children and young people were among the most frequent key themes to be found in the pictures. For the NM channel, the main aspect of their depiction that stuck out is that children and young people are shown as actively participating in government initiatives and benefiting from the involvement of Russia in Mariupol. For example, A3 showing two uniformed boys participating in a memorial where a school is named after a dead soldier, A5 where a young girl is with her father at a polling station, and A10 where a group of young athletes competed at a friendly football match. While the pictures show a variety of situations, the role of children and young

people in each is remarkably similar, always showing their active engagement with state sponsored or related events. The text of A5 in especially demonstrates this, stating “The young Mariupol residents enthusiastically embraced this opportunity to participate in the presidential elections and successfully completed the honorable mission”. Given criticism of Russia’s control of Mariupol as being forced upon its people and an occupation, it is important for the government to show itself as having the active support and involvement of the locals, and not just passive acceptance.

Conversely, the depiction of children in the MCC channel pictures is substantially different. Children in these visuals are shown as victims of the war, both through physical violence and by being brainwashed and manipulated by occupation authorities. B3 shows a gravely wounded pregnant woman being carried on a stretcher after a maternity hospital was shelled by Russian forces during the siege of the city. The text with the photo lets the viewer know that shortly after the image was taken the woman gave birth to a dead child, and then she herself succumbed to her injuries after that. The image is dark and visceral, with the woman’s face pale and dazed while surrounded by damaged buildings as men try carrying her to safety. By centering on the death and pain of two extremely vulnerable people, a mother and her unborn child, the image confronts the viewer with the horrors that have befallen the citizens of Mariupol due to Russia’s invasion. B6 focuses on children currently under occupation in Mariupol, showing a group of them at a school arranged in a Z shape while holding Russian flags. The text with the photo decries the state of education for children in Mariupol:

The city's pseudo-administration of education notes that the program for kindergartens is aimed at ‘patriotic upbringing of children from the earliest stages of the educational process’. In other words, children will be brainwashed from a very young age... The invaders want to de-Ukrainize our children and impose a Russian identity, as they have been doing for centuries.

The situation is seen not just as a problem for the children, but as a threat for all Ukrainians in Mariupol, who stand to lose their identity overtime due to propaganda and repression.

3.1.2- Of all the buildings in Mariupol, the Drama Theater stands out for its symbolic importance. It was an important cultural sight in the city before the full-scale invasion in 2022, but what solidified its importance was the 16 March 2022 rocket attack on the building. The strike destroyed much of the building and killed/injured hundreds of mostly women, children, and elderly people who had taken shelter inside during the siege of the city. The word ‘children’ had been

written in large letters on the ground outside, further angering Ukrainians and other people around the world that the Russian military would attack the building.

Despite the extremely negative attention surrounding the theater, the NM channel frequently features pictures of ongoing reconstruction work at the site, with A1 and A2 both showing this. The text with A1 quotes a government official as saying “They will build a wonderful building. It will be the most modern theater, the most modern venue in the republic with all the lifts, light, sound”, while A2 focuses on thanking the city of St. Petersburg for its help reconstructing the site. What seems to be occurring is an attempt to build a new narrative around the building. The past events which destroyed the building in the first place are ignored, and instead there is a focus on current reconstruction work and the great building that will exist in the future. This possibly seeks to depoliticize the building, making it back into a cultural sight in the city rather than a symbol of the war and its devastation. The screen which obscures the building site in A1 is covered in various Russian cultural figures, like Alexander Pushkin, showing the local government’s preference for the theater to be viewed as a cultural site.

The MCC channel focus with the drama theater remains extremely focused on remembrance of March 2022 missile strike on the building. B1 was posted on the second anniversary of the attack, showing a black and white image of the destroyed theater with the word ‘children’ written in front of it. “Mariupol drama theater - words that became a symbol of the destructive and cruel war of Russians against peaceful people. Words that evoke pain in millions of people around the world”. This statement from B1 encapsulates the MCC perspective on the drama theater, viewing it primarily as a symbol of what Russia did to the city and its people. B2 is a particularly dark example of this, a picture taken shortly after the attack which shows a mangled and dust covered hand sticking out from the rubble of the building. These visuals leave little room for any nuance or compromise. They are entirely focused on the death and suffering which the city faced during the siege in 2022 and make clear that it is Russia who is the enemy and the one to blame for the suffering.

3.1.3- Death is another prominent theme throughout many of the pictures on the Telegram channels. On the NM channel, the only deaths explicitly mentioned are those of soldiers, and both times they are mentioned with pictures of memorials or commemorations honoring their deaths. A3 is the commemoration event of a school which is named after a Russian general who died while fighting during the siege of Mariupol, while A4 is more historic by focusing on a restored

monument for Soviet soldiers. Deaths of civilians in the current war or others are notably absent from these pictures from the NM channel. Of note with both pictures is the gender dimension. A3 has two uniformed boys standing at attention by the commemorative plaque, while in A4 the acting head of the Mariupol City Administration, Oleg Morgun, stands in a similar pose with other male government officials. Both pictures seek to project a sense of masculine strength, especially when considering the military element of each.

Deaths in MCC channel images are broader in their association than the NM channel. A1, A2, and A3 are focused on civilian deaths, particularly of the women and children killed in the attack on the drama theater and a maternity ward. Again, there is an emphasis on the most vulnerable people who died during Russia's siege of the city. The text of A2 strongly emphasizes this, by recounting the experience of a woman who was at the drama theater when it was attacked, "I saw a girl with an unnaturally twisted leg. She was howling in pain and asking for any sort of help". Text like this gives greater narrative strength to the images they are associated with, especially by being a first-hand account. Similar with the NM channel though, the MCC pictures also include reference to soldiers who have died. B10 depicts a group of people during a memorial hike in honor of a soldier who died defending Mariupol during the siege with an emphasis on honoring those who have died defending Ukraine.

3.1.4- Flags are one of the most common key themes to appear across both the NM and MCC visuals. The visual value they provide generally is simpler and more straight forward compared to other key themes. On the NM channel, they are usually displayed in close relation to the unity theme, serving as a symbol of Mariupol being a part of Russia. Their presence can be a major part of the photo, such as in A5 and A10, or as a more subtle signal, such as in A6 and A8. On the MCC channel, presence of Russian and Soviet flags works for an inverse purpose. They are shown in pictures like B4, B5, and B6 as a symbol of the enemy and oppressor, a sign that the viewer can direct their anger toward. In A10 and B10 though, there is a clear commonality between the two channels in how their own national flags are used as clear signs of peoples' support for their countries.

3.1.5- Government aid/assistance is a noticeable theme in both the NM and MCC channels. For the NM channels, aid is shown as an exclusively positive forces which helps residents and improves their quality of life, as best seen in A8 with a woman receiving a new wheelchair in a box marked with a flag in Russian national colors. This theme for NM highlights the constructive

role of the state in supporting the citizens in Mariupol. The MCC's articulation of this theme is the exact opposite of NM's, instead framing this aid as either insufficient/low quality to highlight incompetence, or the need for aid in the first place as a sign that the system is failing. This is most clearly shown in B8, showing a long line of people in Mariupol waiting to receive a free hot meal. Despite the clear and sunny skies, it comes off as a rather dreary scene as the mass of people wait for food, in a scene that is almost reminiscent of the infamous lines that people had to queue in to buy certain goods during the late 80s and early 90s in the Soviet Union. The clear message is that government aid is a sign of citizens not being properly carried for as they are forced to line up for handouts rather than being able to provide for themselves.

Another prime example of this negative association with aid (or rather the lack of it in this case) is B7, which shows a large pile of garbage accumulating outside of a damaged building and includes the text "Mariupol is turning into a city of disastrous garbage dumps... Mariupol residents under occupation complain that the pseudo-authorities do not clean the yards and streets of the city. In various districts, there are more and more landfills. No one cleans them". The photo displays a bleak and gross scene, with so much discarded garbage scattered across the area that it is almost blocking the entrance to a driving school next to it. The image was posted on the MCC channel only three days after the NM channel posted photo A7 of Oleg Morgun, the acting head of the Mariupol city district, responding to citizen concerns. B7 puts forth visual evidence that the current leadership fails to adequately respond to citizen concerns by allowing these large informal dumps to spring up across the city, undermining discourse of the current Mariupol administration as competently managing the city.

3.1.6- A key theme only present in the MCC channel pictures is occupation/occupiers. These terms are frequently used throughout the texts associated with the different MCC pictures, instead of more neutral language. This makes sense, as the use of these terms continually reinforces the core idea of Russian control of Mariupol (and other Ukrainian territories) as being fundamentally illegal, illegitimate, and negative. The lack of this term in the NM channel is unsurprising, as it would not use any terminology which would undermine its own legitimacy while it attempts to consolidate support and portray itself as a competent local government. There are some other rhetorical tools which occurs in some MCC pictures and text which further disrespect Russian authority. For example, in the text of B4 numerous words are intentionally not capitalized at all, like 'ussr', 'lenin', 'soviet', 'komsomol', and 'communards'. What may appear

like a minor grammatical mistake is often meant as an intentional sign of disrespect for the subjects that are not being capitalized.

3.1.7- It is unsurprising that images of reconstruction feature so prominently on both Telegram channels. Russia's siege and assault of Mariupol resulted in devastating wide-scale physical damage to the city's infrastructure. Though exact numbers are not known, roughly half of the buildings in Mariupol sustained damage, with an estimated 90% of high-rise residential buildings and 60% of homes being damaged or destroyed by the end of the battle.⁸¹ Almost all vital institutions and structures were damaged or totally destroyed, like healthcare, government, and education facilities.⁸² Given the scale of the damage as the Russian military took full control of the city in May 2022, there was both a physical and social necessity for reconstruction to be the focus of the city's new administration.

For the NM channel, visuals related to reconstruction are categorically shown as positive and successful. The most relevant pictures from the NM channel for this theme are A1, A2, A7, and A9. A9 is the strongest example of this theme, showing an apartment building before reconstruction work and then the progress of the restoration works so far. In the upper part of the photo most of the building's windows are shattered or missing, many balconies are ruined, and there are a few particularly large holes with debris laying at the openings. The lower portion of the photo shows significant change to the façade of the building, with all the missing and shattered windows now replaced, no holes in the building, scaffolding for reconstruction work, and a bright new coat of paint on the building. This before/after photo presents a clear and undeniable contrast which highlights the improvements to the building.

Keeping in mind locational context, the fact that this photo shows specifically a residential building is important as well. One of the most basic tasks for any government is to ensure residents have adequate and livable housing, which is particularly important since most of Mariupol's housing stock was damaged or rendered uninhabitable. A9 highlights efforts to fix these homes, which would have an immediate and direct impact on how well Mariupol residents can live day-to-day. It follows a wider trend of local leaders emphasizing programs for housing reconstruction or replacement, even if current results are falling short.⁸³ The brief text associated with the picture

⁸¹ Volosatska, Nataliya, '52 Days Of Hell: One Family's Story From The Siege Of Mariupol', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 2023

⁸² 'Beneath the Rubble: Documenting Devastation and Loss in Mariupol', *Human Rights Watch*, 2024

⁸³ Stewart, Briar, and Corinne Seminoff, 'Remaking Mariupol into a Russian City', *CBC News*, 2024

celebrates the progress, stating “The appearance of the streets is being transformed with each day, which undoubtedly delights and instills confidence in the successful life of our city! ... The renovation is still ongoing, but a huge result is already visible”. This emphasizes the speed with which the renovations are progressing, though no information is provided on when the photos were taken. Highlighting the speed of reconstruction aligns with the perspective of reconstruction efforts as successful.

Photo A7 shows another important facet of reconstruction. It focuses on Oleg Morgun, the acting head of the Mariupol city district, as he inspects ongoing reconstruction work at a residential building. Morgun looks on as one of the group of women points out something. The text with the photo provides important context by saying the residents requested Morgun inspect what they claim was non-compliance with the repair schedule and low-quality work. It reports that Morgun, government officials, and the contractors documented the complaints and set deadlines for resolving them. The photo and text construct a view of Morgun as a responsive leader and representative of the state who is directly engaged with locals, and in a broader sense provides credibility to the leadership of the city administration. Such visuals are especially important when considering reports of low-quality work with the ongoing reconstruction efforts.⁸⁴

Conversely, photos of reconstruction as presented by the MCC are all shown in a decidedly negative light. For example, photo B9 shows what at first glance seems to be a benign image of ongoing construction work in Mariupol. What would likely be celebrated as a positive thing on the NM channel is instead treated as a threat. The text with the photo says “The collaborative administration of the city continues to build mortgage housing on the site of the demolished houses of Mariupol residents. The apartments there will be bought by incoming Russians. ... 🤔 The invaders are not interested in creating housing for locals, they want to make money and fill Mariupol with incoming Russians”. An image that initially appears as unproblematic is transformed with these few words into something nefarious, framing it as a tool for displacing locals. It builds an association between reconstruction, displacement, and the occupation of Mariupol. In the future other pictures of reconstruction therefore may also elicit a negative reaction if it is always assumed to be constructed for the benefit of incoming Russians and not for current residents.

⁸⁴ Andringa, Peter, Chris Campbell, Alison Killing, Polina Ivanova, and Caroline Nevitt, ‘Inside Mariupol: Russia’s New Potemkin Village’, *Financial Times*, 2024

3.1.8- The importance of remembrance and memory is apparent throughout many of the pictures. For the NM channel, this remembrance is mostly apparent in A3 and A4, where it is focused on remembering the sacrifices of soldiers who have died, particularly in the recent battle for Mariupol and further back in history to World War II. There are signs that the NM channel assigns a high level of importance to these visuals, as it mentions in A3 that the head of the DPR, Denis Pushilin, attended the commemoration ceremony, while in A4 there is mention of local government directly intervening to help restore the damaged monument following severe storm damage.

In the MCC pictures, remembrance features even more prominently and is arguably one of the most important themes throughout all their visuals. The text from both pictures of the drama theater ends by saying ‘we remember’. There is a continual emphasis that people will not forget those who were injured and died at the attack on the theater and connects it to an overarching remembrance of other crimes committed by Russian forces during the war. The remembrance is not just focused on preserving memories of negatives events though, but also by remembering positive times from before Mariupol was occupied. B7 and B8 encourage the viewer to remember how much better certain aspects of life were back when Mariupol was under Ukrainian control, “Recall that under Ukraine, KP ‘Komunalnyk’ worked in Mariupol, which, after the reboot, became the most efficient enterprise in the country for the removal and cleaning of solid household waste”, and “In Ukrainian Mariupol, people used to attend concerts, walk in renovated parks, and now they survive and rejoice at any handout. That's how much the life of Mariupol people has ‘improved’ under the occupation”. These pictures and messages promote a more positive discourse of Ukraine as better at governing and managing Mariupol. It creates a clear distinction through its visual depictions of current administrations failures while calling back to previous successes under Ukrainian leadership.

3.1.9- Finally, unity is a major element in many pictures, particularly for the NM channel. For NM, unity with Russia is depicted (both explicitly and implicitly) as a simple fact, and that this unity with Russia materially benefits Mariupol and its citizens. For example, the text with A2 makes mention how the reconstruction of the Mariupol is only possible due to the support received from St. Petersburg, with 48 specialists from there being a major force behind the theater’s reconstruction. The benefits of this unity are for people both young and old, as A6 shows how children educationally benefit from interacting with children’s writers based in St. Petersburg,

while in A8 an older disabled woman is shown happy while receiving a new wheelchair thanks to the All-Russian Society of Disabled People. A10 in particular puts the importance of unity front and center, with the young athletes carrying a large number of Russian flags, wearing the colors of Russia, and the text of the photo even begins with “Unity is our strength”, and it is clear that Russia is what Mariupol is unified with. As one person is quoted in A10, “on this important holiday for all Mariupol residents, we want to demonstrate once again that as long as we are united, we are invincible”.

Interestingly, the theme of unity is relatively absent from most of the MCC pictures, at least within this sample. B10 makes some reference to unity through the people hiking to Ukraine’s tallest peak, Hoverla, and displaying Ukrainian flags in honor of a fallen soldier who defended Mariupol. It can be said that some of the images make a more indirect reference to Mariupol’s unity with Ukraine, as in many ways the MCC pictures come from a perspective which inherently assumes that Mariupol should be unified with Ukraine. That being the case, the MCC pictures and text do not need to make extremely direct references to unity in the same way the NM channel does, as due to the newness of Russia’s control of Mariupol the local administration may feel a greater need to emphasize its unity with Russia.

3.2- Connections Between Key Themes

The pictures from both channels encompass a wide variety of key themes, and there are a nearly endless number of connections that can be drawn between all of them. This section is limited to a discussion of some of the strongest connections between the different key themes observed. For the NM channel, unity seems to hold a particularly important spot due to its strong connections to other themes, especially reconstruction, government aid, and children/young people. The reconstruction work is often framed as being directly supported and enabled due to Mariupol’s unity with Russia. A2 is the best demonstration of this due to its explicit message of thanks to St. Petersburg for the help provided with the drama theater reconstruction. This connection exists implicitly throughout many of the other images of reconstruction though, such as in the presence of new Russian government officials at reconstruction projects in A4 and A7. Unity’s connection to government aid is similar, where items like the wheelchairs from A8 are only in Mariupol due to the support of a large Russian organization. Unity’s connection to children and young people is also prominent throughout the pictures due to the fact that the children are always shown at events

that have wider connections to Russia as a whole, such as enthusiastically going to the polls in A5, learning about Russian writers in A6, or happily participating in a large sporting event with other Russians to celebrate the Day of National Unity in A10. The connections that children have to Russia are continually shown time and time again.

Another important connection is between reconstruction and the Drama Theater. Part of the reason that multiple pictures of it were chosen for this analysis is because of how frequently it is shown on the NM channel. Reconstruction efforts in the Mariupol seem to be encapsulated in the drama theater, which is showcased as a prime example of the Russia's continued efforts to transform the city. Its central geographic location in the city, pre-war cultural importance, and post-siege symbolic importance likely meant that the new city administration could not ignore the building. There now seems to be a concerted effort to ignore the building's negative connotations as a symbol not of the war's destruction and only focus on reconstruction efforts in order to build a new pro-Russian narrative around it as a symbol of Russia successfully supporting and rebuilding the city.

For the MCC channel, remembrance holds a similarly important role as unity in the NM channel due to its connections to numerous themes, especially children/young people, death, and reconstruction. Remembrance's connection to children is most visible in B4 and B6. In B4 as two boys raise the flag of the USSR on a monument, the text laments that "In the temporarily occupied city, they cannot offer any vision of a successful future, so they offer the long-forgotten Soviet past... Russian propaganda is poisoning children, breaking them psychologically". Here a threat to children is constructed, as the recent memory of Ukraine is displaced by memories of the USSR by the new Russia focused education system. Remembrance and death also share a strong thematic connection. The main thing being remembered in these pictures are the deaths and crimes that Mariupol's citizens have suffered during the war. Focusing on stark and eye-catching pictures like B1, B2, and B3 calls on the viewer to not forget the deaths that Russia is responsible for, even if remembering these events is painful. Keeping the memory of those events alive helps to remind the viewer why Ukraine continues to fight and why the occupation cannot be tolerated. The connection between remembrance and reconstruction is also a notable way that the MCC draws a contrast between the previous Ukrainian control of the city and the current Russian control. B7 and B8 both highlight ongoing failures of reconstruction and government aid as signs that the new administration is failing, while also calling back to memories of Mariupol during Ukrainian

control, when the trash was properly cleaned up and when residents could peacefully walk around in new parks.

A final notable connection for the MCC channel is between occupation and death. In many ways the MCC pictures equate occupation and death as being almost the same thing, where occupation by Russia inevitably leads to suffering and death, both physically and socially. The physical death and suffering from occupation comes from the direct violence shown in B1 and B2 and the failure of Russia to provide for residents, as seen in B8. Conversely there is also a kind of social or cultural death that comes from the occupation as well, as seen most visible with the threat of propaganda and brainwashing highlighted in B4 and B6, which presents a direct threat to Mariupol's Ukrainian identity.

3.3- Persuasion and Effects of Truth

In looking at these different themes and their connections throughout the pictures and text, the next question to answer is: what are they trying to persuade the viewer about? For the NM channel, there are a few distinct claims to truth that the visuals appeal to. The clearest claim is that the Russian government and new administration are successfully rebuilding Mariupol, and that this is a wholly good and positive thing. A1, A2, A7, and A9 all focus on the success of ongoing reconstruction efforts, putting forth visual evidence that the government is doing its part to fix the city and directly better the lives of its inhabitants. As previously mentioned, this focus on reconstruction is logical given the damage the city sustained in 2022, and promoting visuals that convince people that the city is being rapidly rebuilt offers one of the most straight forward ways to legitimize Russian control of the city. Another important, though slightly more subtle, effort of persuasion is to visually frame Mariupol as a naturally Russian city. For example, the frequent presence of Russian flags and national colors in many pictures, in A6 where there is a sign which encourages students to "Freely read in Russian!", or A10 where the text celebrates the importance of the Russian Day of National Unity, even though it would only be the instance of it being celebrated in the city at the time.

The MCC channel contains a few different claims to truth as it attempts persuade viewers. The most clearly articulated of these claims is that the Russian administration of Mariupol is illegitimate and failing to provide for its citizens. It primarily supports these claims through the frequent use of occupation/occupiers when discussing the current state of Mariupol and the

Russian administration, and through pictures like B7, B8, and B9 which attempt to prove that failing to provide adequate services and basic needs for the city's inhabitants. This visual discourse directly counters the NM channel's own attempts to persuade viewers that the new administration is successful. B9 in particular frames the current government as not only failing to help citizens by leaving them on the streets but using reconstruction as a tool to help incoming Russians at the expense of true locals.

Similarly, the MCC visuals seek to persuade viewers that Russian control of Mariupol is not just a failure, but also poses an existential threat to Ukrainian identity. This is especially prominent in the visuals of children, like B4 and B6, which show children and young people as the most vulnerable to propaganda and brainwashing which takes their Ukrainian identities away and replaces it with a Russian one. For the MCC, the Russians "are occupying not only the territories, but also the consciousness of people who are being turned against Ukraine". Russian actions in the case are a physical danger from the ongoing war, and also a social danger through the elimination of things like the Ukrainian language and national symbols.

3.4- Complexity and Contradiction

Most discourse, especially as broad and contested as viewed for this case, contains its own internal complexities and contradictions. As Rose notes, discourse does not have to be perfectly logical or coherent, and that can sometimes even be a strength. For the NM channel, its approach to the drama theater is a prime example of this. There is a clear contradiction in emphasizing the reconstruction of an iconic structure that the Russian military itself was responsible for destroying in the first place. Keeping in mind the intended audience of the NM channel though, which is primarily aimed at current residents of the city, it possibly presumes a different understanding on their part of the events which destroyed the theater in the first place. While not directly mentioned in the sample pictures in this paper, the Russian government has repeatedly blamed the initial attack on the Ukrainian Azov Regiment, a claim which has been repeatedly refuted by independent investigators. The local audience who has remained in Mariupol may have more limited access to information about the attack though due to the tight media and internet controls in the occupied territories. This situation has led to complex handling of the theater, as the NM channel seems to prefer entirely ignoring how the building was initially damaged. It is also curious how in A1 and A2 the theater is surrounded by the screen which obscures restoration progress from view, yet

other reconstruction sights, like in A9, are not obscured at all as the work progress is shown off for view.

Another point of complexity and contradiction from the NM channel stems from A7. The picture depicts the leadership of the city as responsive to the concerns of the citizens, but possibly contradicts its own simultaneous claims of rapid success found in other pictures. The contractors chosen for reconstruction work were approved by the city administration, so is not a great look for the city if they are choosing contractors who are failing to do quality work and are running behind schedule. This is especially true since enough residents complained to the point that the head of the city administration felt compelled to directly address the situation. While it is like an attempt by the administration to show responsiveness to its citizens, it also allows possibly negative interpretations of its competency.

There is some notable complexity and contradiction present within the MCC's visual discourse as well. For example, it is undeniable that Mariupol was in bad need of reconstruction following the siege of the city. Despite this, all instances of reconstruction within the city are treated as being equally bad and objectionable. The MCC treats the drama theater reconstruction as erasure of the memory of those who died in the tragedy there, and a new apartment building is said to only displace local residents. The treatment of all reconstruction as categorically bad or ineffective almost gives the impression that the MCC would be happier with no reconstruction happening, even though there is an immediate need for it from the locals who were unable or unwilling to leave city during the siege. Adjacent to this point is another possible contradiction: if the current Russian administration is so unequivocally bad, then why have more residents not fled? 120,000 people, a bit more than $\frac{1}{4}$ of the pre-2022 population, remained in the city. Even when accounting for those who were too old or ill to leave, that is still many thousands of locals who chose to stay in Mariupol despite its new Russian control. This indicates that at least some people from Mariupol were happy with, or at least able to tolerate, Russian control of the city, despite insistence by the MCC visuals that life under Russian control is unbearable.

3.5- The Invisible and Excluded

The final analytic step is discussing the people and elements that are invisible and excluded from the pictures. For the NM channel, the most glaring thing missing from the pictures is anything directly about Ukraine. Less than two years ago Mariupol was under Ukrainian control, but there

is a total lack of visual or textual references to Ukrainian culture, the Ukrainian language, or anything else related to Ukraine. Ukraine as a whole is completely ignored, with none of the texts with the 10 NM pictures even mentioning it. This is a notable contrast with the MCC channel, which directly or indirectly references Russia in all 10 of its pictures. Relatedly, there is a relative lack of reference to the ongoing war in Ukraine, despite most of Mariupol being located less than 80km from the front line. One would expect such a large and important conflict close to the city to be frequently mentioned, but it is notably absent. Only A3, showing the memorial and naming ceremony at the school, makes direct reference to the war, and even then, it is almost treated like a relatively distant historic event, like the Soviet memorial in A4, rather than as an ongoing conflict. As Rose notes, “Absences can be as productive as explicit naming”,⁸⁵ and these two absences seek to produce a sense of normalcy for viewers. The total lack of reference to Ukraine while also focusing on visual signs of Russia reinforces a sense of Mariupol as a Russian, not Ukrainian city. Then, by mostly omitting references to the war, the NM channel ignores the exceptionality of the overall situation and focuses on normalizing Mariupol’s status as a regular Russian city with a government primarily interested in management of positive activities, like reconstruction and education.

For the MCC channel, there are also some noteworthy elements which are absent from their pictures. One of the most obvious is any depiction of people who are happy with the new Russian administration. All the visuals and texts focus exclusively on the crimes committed by Russian forces, the danger they pose to Ukrainian identity, or instances of incompetence or malice in how the new administration manages Mariupol. There are likely at least some residents of the city who are happy with the new state of affairs, yet their voice and perspective are absent from the MCC channel. Even relatively benign or unobjectionable actions, like the woman in A8 receiving a new wheelchair, would likely never be shown on the MCC channel. In B6 the children in the photo may be happy and smiling, but the viewer does not know since their faces are all blurred out. This exclusion makes sense for MCC, as any positive example of Russian control can be seen as legitimizing Russian control over the city. A final notable exclusion by both channels is a linguistic one. The NM channel only posts information in Russian, while the MCC channel only posts information in Ukrainian. This simple choice by both channels sends a clear and immediate message about who their posts are for by linguistically ignoring the other.

⁸⁵ Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, p. 157.

3.6- The Regimes of Visibility

Having followed the VDA process as outlined by Rose, we can now piece together the two overarching regimes of visibility that are constructed by these different visual discourses, and their relation to the previously discussed biopolitical concepts. The NM regime of visibility seems to be constructed around three key points. First, Mariupol is unified with Russia and benefiting greatly from this unity. Second, that reconstruction is rapidly proceeding and transforming the city in positive ways. Third, that the citizens of Mariupol are actively participating in and supportive of this new system. These core components inform what kind of pictures are allowed in this visual environment, as all the NM pictures support one or more of these points in some way. This regime of visibility is positive in its outlook, solely focusing on signs of happy citizens and successful governance throughout Mariupol.

An important aspect here from visual biopolitics is the performativity of the pictures posted on the NM channel. Performativity is concerned with the continued repetition of politically meaningful actions, and the NM channel plays an important role for the regime through its constant posting of pictures like the ones analyzed here. Anyone who follows the channel is bombarded with a steady stream of pictures showing ongoing or completed reconstruction projects, government officials helping residents, and other visuals of the city being capably managed by the new administration. As Kazharski notes, “the spectacle of visual biopolitics can also be understood as the state (or the political regime) performing itself, its identity as a subject of care and control over the population at large”.⁸⁶ The NM channel certainly depicts the new Russian administration as performing a vital role of caring for the population of Mariupol. This performativity, especially around reconstruction projects, puts forth pleasant and clean pictures that support a discourse which repeatedly normalizes Mariupol’s new position in Russia. The actual quality of reconstruction and governance in Mariupol may often be of questionable quality, as seen in numerous media reports, but on the NM channel the performance is only one of continued success.⁸⁷

Discourse produces different human subjects, and within the visual discourse that the NM channel works with there seems to be two primary subjects that are produced. The first is government officials, like Oleg Morgun. The focus with these figures is not on them as individuals

⁸⁶ Kazharski, ‘An Authoritarian Spectacle’, p. 377.

⁸⁷ ‘Beneath the Rubble Documenting Devastation and Loss in Mariupol’, *Human Rights Watch*, 2024.

but is more concerned with them representing the authority and benevolence of the state and its power, as in A7 where Morgun is shown responding to concerns from citizens. The second subjects produced are the ‘normal’ residents of Mariupol. The main traits of these subjects are that they are happy and supportive of the new Russian leadership of the city, and that they are subjects of care for the government. The citizens as the subjects of care are particularly important, as the authority of the new governments can be legitimized overtime through the reproduction of visuals which show the state supporting and caring for these people.

Some of the visuals within in this regime of visibility also seem to engage in a kind of depoliticization effort as well. The pictures largely ignore the war, Ukraine, and other difficult political topics and instead frame Mariupol’s overall situation as simply one of a government trying to help its people. The emphasis is on the small scale and day-to-day management of the city, not big political debates and issues. Despite the city currently being under a real state of exception/emergency, most pictures show a city that is trying to be relatively normal. Even A5, which pictures the explicitly political event of the Russian presidential election, almost depicts the event not as a political one but as a common civic duty and fun family activity which people just naturally participate in.

All of this combined creates a regime of visibility that is profoundly paternalistic in nature. Such a move is in line with overarching government practices across Russia, which are often described as paternalistic.⁸⁸ In discussing the visual biopolitics of Aleksander Lukashenka’s regime in Belarus before the 2020 protests, Kazharski describes it as a form of biopolitical paternalism, based on heavily paternalistic attitudes it inherited from the Soviet Union. In many ways the same can be said for the regime of visibility which the NM channel operates within, one where the “general political-economic frame was lavishly embellished by a never-ceasing performance of control and care for the country’s population”.⁸⁹ The NM channel often makes upwards of 20 posts each day, so it certainly cultivates a never ceasing visual performance of the Russian government caring for its new citizens in Mariupol.

As one would expect, the regime of visibility which the MCC channel contributes to is profoundly different in many ways. There are three core ideas within this regime, the first of which

⁸⁸ Kolesnikov, Andrei, and Denis Volkov, *Pragmatic Paternalism: The Russian Public and the Private Sector* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2019)

⁸⁹ Kazharski, ‘An Authoritarian Spectacle’, p. 378.

is that the Russian occupation possess an existential threat to Ukraine, Ukrainians, and the Ukrainian identity. Second, that Ukrainians will not forget or forgive the crimes that Russia has committed against them. Third, that Russia is failing to properly care for and govern Mariupol. These ideas have a clear presence throughout all of the MCC pictures and underpin the overall discourse that it articulates.

The MCC perspective is profoundly negative in its overall outlook due to the heavy focus is on deaths and the many dangers posed by Russia and the occupation. Compared to the paternalistic nature of the NM's associated regime of visibility, the MCC's regime can almost be characterized as necropolitical in orientation. The pictures and their texts call for a constant remembrance of the deaths and suffering that Russia caused during the siege and is continuing to perpetuate through the occupation. The war, death, and occupation are constant topics of focus, compare to the NM channel which hardly even acknowledges them. A strong relation of enmity is articulated in the pictures, showing the Russian state and society as the clear enemy who brings constant harm to Mariupol and its citizens. The characterization is purely black and white. Anything done by the new Russian administration is seen as inherently bad or having some kind of nefarious motive behind it.

The more positive elements within this discourse are almost always done to make a contrast between the past Ukrainian control of Mariupol and current Russian control. Russia fails to keep Mariupol clean while Ukraine succeeded in removing garbage, people now have to line up for a hot meal while Ukraine ensured residents were taken care of and had nice parks, etc. Given the audience of the channel, the MCC constantly seeks to undermine or contest any examples of Russia's governance as being successful. The Ukrainian state is framed as a caring and capable entity who supported Mariupol, while the Russian state is shown as a destructive and dangerous force. Mariupol under Russian occupation is depicted almost like Agamben's idea of the camp, or Mbembe's idea of a death world. The residents are shown in a condition which approaches bare life, where they must fend for themselves against a state which at best does not care about them and their problems and at worst actively seeks to kill them and erase their Ukrainian identity. It is a state of life where the Ukrainian inhabitants face an ever-present threat of both physical and/or social death due to the occupation.

Performativity is also an important part of this regime of visibility. While the NM pictures are centered around a performance of care for the population, the MCC pictures are concerned

with the continuous performance of remembering what Russia has done, and outrage at all these actions. Within the discourse it is important to feel anger and disgust with what Russia has/is doing in Mariupol, and to not accept this as a new status quo. An important note here is that the term performativity can sometimes carry with it a connotation of inauthenticity, that for those who are performing something that what they are performing is not exactly real or authentic. It is important to note in this context that such a connotation is not present. The focus of performativity here is more concerned with the repetition and public facing element of the act, regardless of whether what is being performed is truly real or if the one performing it believes in what is being performed. A perception of authenticity can make performativity more effective with persuading an audience but its presence or lack is not an inherent part of the performativity itself. Both the NM and MCC channels seek to develop this sense of authenticity though, by putting forward their pictures as clear visual evidence of the surrounding world as conforming to their respective regimes of visibility.

The MCC's visuals lead to the creation of two dichotomous human subjects, which can be considered the oppressor and the oppressed. Representatives of the Russian state and society are depicted only in negative ways and only bring suffering to Mariupol. Compared to the NM channel, for the MCC the normal residents of Mariupol are not subjects of care but vulnerable subjects of oppression. For example, in B6 where the children are shown as susceptible to brainwashing and propaganda, or in B8 where hungry residents are left relying on handouts. In this discourse the residents of the city are continuous victims of Russian oppression, both physically from the violence of the war and culturally due to the suppression of the Ukrainian identity.

Another interesting element to note within the MCC discourse is the frequent use of emojis, which are present within all the texts associated with each picture. Emojis often present a blend of the visual and textual, since they are not a word or letter of any kind of but are frequently used online within text as a visual way to convey meaning. The actual interpretation of what the intended meaning is can vary greatly depending on the exact context, as “the meaning of emojis could not simply depend on their grammar or general rules but lies in communication within discourse communities”.⁹⁰ The MCC channel's use of emojis appears to primarily function as a

⁹⁰ Cheng, Le, Yuxiu Sun, and Jian Li, ‘Aggressiveness of Emojis before the Court: A Sociosemiotic Interpretation’, *Social Semiotics*, 30.3 (2020), p. 365.

tool to more explicitly convey the emotions and feelings of the message associated with each picture. For example, the 😞, 😓, 😔, and 😠 emojis are all used at the start of sentences which detail or lament something bad that happened, such as the destruction of the drama theater. Then 🤢, 😏, and 😡 are always used with sentences that express anger and disgust at things like the presence of the informal dump in B7. The use of the emojis seems to augment the emotions which the MCC hopes the viewer will feel when looking at the presented pictures.

Conclusion

The objective of this thesis was to determine how pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian visual media construct different regimes of visibility through depictions of Mariupol since the occupation, with a focus on the relation of these regimes to biopolitical concepts. The analysis focused on 20 pictures, 10 each from two competing Telegram channels. The NM channel is controlled by the current Russian backed city administration of Mariupol while the MCC channel is run by the exiled pro-Ukrainian pre-war city council. The methodological approach relied on a VDA framework from Rose which laid out a multi-step process which was used to understand the discourse constructed by the different pictures and their associated text. These findings were then used to determine the main qualities of the contrasting regimes of visibility and their connections to biopolitical concepts.

The first chapter covered the theoretical background of biopolitics and the power of visuals in politics and IR. It began by discussing various theories and core concepts related to biopolitics, with a focus on the work of Agamben and Mbembe. This introduced concepts like bare life, the camp, and necropolitics, with some examples of how these concepts can manifest in life. The chapter then turned toward the ideas of the pictorial and aesthetic turn, which encompasses theories about the importance of studying visuals as a way of understanding political phenomenon and concepts. Bleiker's work was especially valuable for its robust defense of visual media as a worthy medium of study for social scientists due to the unique insights that visual analysis can uncover. Finally, the chapter ended by turning to the emerging research subfield of visual biopolitics. Early work which utilizes this approach shows analytic promise by combining elements of biopolitics with visual analysis to generate novel insights that might otherwise be missed with more traditional approaches.

The second chapter presented the methodological approach used in the thesis. Rose's *Visual Methodologies* served as the primary source for this, specifically her work on VDA, which she refers to as discourse analysis I. Rose's writing elaborates the important role that visual media plays in generating discourse and gives a framework of specific questions and steps to follow which can show how visuals generate discourse. The chapter also discussed alternative methodological options which were considered, and why this VDA method was the best suited for answering this paper's research question. This chapter finished by reviewing the selection of the

20 pictures which were analyzed, why studying photos on from Telegram channels is both a useful and valid choice, and how there is a gap in existing knowledge which this work can help to fill.

Finally, the third chapter contained the analytic work and results of the thesis. In answer to the research question, this thesis found that the NM and MCC channels construct radically different regimes of visibility by emphasizing different themes and through how they frame the relationship of Mariupol's citizens with Russia and Ukraine. Even when the pictures on the channels address the same themes and subjects, they still create deeply contrasting discourse. The NM channel builds its regime of visibility around themes like unity and reconstruction to develop a positive outlook which depicts the states as a benevolent force that supports its people. There is a clear effort to continually legitimize and justify Mariupol's place within Russia by emphasizing how the city and its residents are happy and benefiting from this new unity. Visuals of reconstruction, especially of prominent buildings like the drama theater, provide a powerful tool to show the government actively aiding the restoration and transformation of the city. The regime of visibility contains many qualities that are emblematic of biopolitical paternalism, which aligns well with existing governmental practices in Russia. Within this context the state performs the central role as a force for good that cares for its citizens and while projecting strength and political unity.

The MCC channel's regime of visibility is constructed around themes like remembrance, death, and occupation, which underpinned its relatively negative perspective. There is a focus throughout the pictures on keeping alive the memory of Russia's past crimes in Mariupol, while also directing attention toward the ongoing mismanagement of the city. The pictures make consistent appeals to emotions like anger, sadness, and disgust to undermine and contest any interpretation of Russia's occupation as a positive change for Mariupol. The occupation is shown to be a constant threat to Ukrainian people and their identity, with the citizens of Mariupol (especially children and young people) being vulnerable to repression and brainwashing by the Russian administration. Many of the themes articulated by Agamben and Mbembe can be seen within the discourse generated by the MCC, with its continuous focus on memorializing the deaths that Russia has caused, and decrying the bare and bleak condition that Mariupol now finds itself in. The positive elements of the MCC's discourse are directed toward remembering how life in Mariupol was better before the occupation, seeking to further contrast Russian and Ukrainian stewardship of the city.

The work done here is of course only an early step in this research. There are limitations in what can be gleaned from this sample of pictures, but it is still valuable. The main point is not about any one individual picture studied here, but how these regimes of visibility are constructed overtime by the continuous posting of pictures like these over and over again. The information discovered in this paper has wider implications for understanding what types of themes and subjects pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian visual discourse focuses on, and how they attempt to persuade viewers to believe their perspectives. The results of this analysis also provide numerous options for future research to generate deeper insights. Most immediately, a useful step could be expanding the sample size of pictures used to see how well these results apply to more pictures from the two Telegram channels. As the sample size is expanded it can allow for further refinement of the key themes, their connections, and how they construct different regimes of visibility overtime. The same process can also be applied to related channels or taken beyond Telegram to focus on other visual-heavy social media sights, such as Instagram or TikTok. While the VDA process used here can be time consuming, with enough attention and resources it can reveal further information in other visual sources.



The information here is not just relevant for Russia and Ukraine. There are exciting opportunities to apply this process to contrasting visuals in other conflict zones to understand how their own regimes of visibility are constructed. The conflict between Israel and Palestine stands out as a particularly strong example of a situation where both sides have developed large systems of online visuals to support their respective causes. Analysis of those visuals could provide many valuable insights. Researchers must not shy away from the important work of studying visuals. The internet's major role in modern communication continues to expand each day, and visual media on social sights like Telegram play a key role in how billions of humans communicate. It is therefore vital to understand how pictures and other visuals build and contest different discourses overtime in our increasingly visual age.

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Table 1: Telegram Photos

<p>New Mariupol (NM)- Mariupol City Administration</p>	<p>Mariupol City Council (MCC)</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">A1</p>  <p style="text-align: center;">18/06/2023</p> <p>Translated Text: After reconstruction, the Mariupol Drama Theater will become the most modern venue in the Republic. The acting Minister of Culture of the DPR, Mikhail Zheltyakov, reported this to TASS</p> <p>“They will build a wonderful building. It will be the most modern theater, the most modern venue in the republic with all the lifts, light, sound, we are eagerly anticipating the opening of this venue so that we can work fully,” he said.</p> <p>Key Themes: Drama Theater, Reconstruction</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">B1</p>  <p style="text-align: center;">16/03/2024</p> <p>Translated Text: ❤️ March 16, 2022. This date is forever in the heart of every Mariupol citizen</p> <p>😞 Mariupol drama theater - words that became a symbol of the destructive and cruel war of Russians against peaceful people. Words that evoke pain in millions of people around the world.</p> <p>The destruction of the theater, where Mariupol families with children were hiding from shelling, shocked the world. Everyone saw the true face of the russian occupiers.</p> <p>We will not forget and we will not forgive. All criminals must be punished!</p> <p>The memory of hundreds of people who became victims of this bloody crime is forever in our hearts.</p> <p>🕯️ We remember! Everyone... Everyone...</p> <p>The mayor of Mariupol - Vadym Boychenko</p> <p>Key Themes: Children, Drama Theater, Occupation, Remembrance</p>

A2



13/10/2023

Translated Text: St. Petersburg continues to restore the drama theater in Mariupol

48 specialists from the contracting organization from the city on the Neva, Module-Center LLC, are working at the site at an accelerated pace. To complete the work as early as possible, the craftsmen work in several shifts. Now builders are busy reinforcing the foundation, dismantling work, backfilling and excavating the soil.

The drama theater is planned to be restored by the end of 2024. In 2025, the doors of the theater are set to open to spectators.

Key Themes: Drama Theater, Reconstruction, Unity

B2



16/03/2024

Translated Text: 😞 "I saw a girl with an unnaturally twisted leg. She was howling in pain and asking for any sort of help"

😞 Mariupol woman Natalya Kozub was hiding from the Russian shelling in a house next to the Drama Theater. March 16, 2022 is forever etched in her memory...

"We came out of the basement of the house, in which we were hiding, and saw a huge white cloud on the site of the theater, from which the silhouettes of people completely white from the dust were coming and crawling out," Natalya recalls.

😞 She ran closer and saw a girl in a chef's apron. She recounted that she had been working in the kitchen, preparing food, when suddenly she heard a rumble and an explosion. In a few minutes Natalya saw a girl with an unnaturally twisted leg:

"She was howling in pain and asking for help. Across from the theater there was a dental clinic, so I immediately ran there and started looking for some painkiller. I managed to find one pill, but in those circumstances, even that was fortunate. I ran back to the basement, where I had left the girl. She swallowed the pill... The main thing is that she is alive."

We remember!🕊

Key Themes: Death, Drama Theater, Remembrance

A3



10/03/2024

Translated Text: At secondary school No. 4, a memorial plaque was unveiled to Major General Vladimir Petrovich Frolov, who died in the line of military duty during the special military operation.

In the circle of honored guests and relatives of the Hero of Russia, they honored the memory of the defender with a minute of silence. The head of the DPR Denis Pushilin awarded the Star of the Hero of the Donetsk People's Republic to the family of Vladimir Petrovich. The title "Hero of the DPR" to the major general, unfortunately, was awarded posthumously.

Having taken the battle along with his soldiers and received multiple wounds, Vladimir Frolov died from a sniper's bullet on March 10, 2022, while liberating Mariupol.

The opening of this memorial plaque is not only an act of recognition of the heroism of Vladimir Frolov, but also our responsibility to preserve and pass on his memory to future generations. This plaque will remind us of his feat, his devotion and his love for the Motherland.

Secondary school No. 4 will now bear the name of Hero of Russia, Hero of the Donetsk People's Republic Vladimir Frolov.

Eternal memory to the hero!

Key Themes: Children, Death, Remembrance, Unity

B3



21/04/2023

Translated Text: 😞 This photo shows how a wounded pregnant woman - 32-year-old Irina Kalinin - is being carried out of the Mariupol maternity hospital, which was shelled by the russians. After being wounded, she gave birth to a dead child, and half an hour later she died from the received injuries.

📷 This photo of the bombed maternity hospital in Mariupol won at World Press Photo 2023. The photo by Ukrainian photographer Evgeniy Maloletka received the most prestigious award for photojournalists. For the first time, a photographer from Ukraine has received the highest award at this competition. This was reported on the World Press Photo website.

Key Themes: Children, Death

A4



14/03/2024

Translated Text: Together with Deputy General Director of JSC GC EKS Vadim Kuts, we visited the updated monument in honor of the feat of Azov sailors during the Civil and Patriotic Wars. The bad weather that hit Mariupol at the end of November last year damaged the cladding of the monument and significantly worsened its appearance.

Employees of the municipal unitary enterprise AGM "Zelenstroy" had previously prepared the monument for reconstruction - they dismantled the facing plaster and tidied up the area near the pedestal. The main restoration work was carried out by specialists from JSC GC EKS. Thanks to their efforts, the monument looks completely new.

Also, as part of the two-month improvement campaign announced by the Head of the Republic, our utility workers will soon tidy up the area of the observation deck adjacent to the monument.

I thanked JSC GC EKS for the prompt response to our request and high-quality work. I am sure that the restored monument will allow the people of Mariupol to carefully preserve the memory of the feats of their fellow countrymen during the harsh wartime years.

Key Themes: Flag, Reconstruction, Remembrance

B4



30/01/2024

Translated Text: 🇷🇺 Back to the ussr: the komsomol movement emerged in Mariupol

In the temporarily occupied city, they cannot offer any vision of a successful future, so they offer the long-forgotten soviet past. Monuments to lenin are being returned to the city, and a youth army has been formed. 🇷🇺 And now the komsomol has been revived.

Mariupol komsomol cleans the territory and paints monuments. And they also raised the Soviet flag over the city. After raising the flag, they laid flowers with a ribbon: "The feat of the communards is immortal!" 🇷🇺

"The occupiers are trying to impose soviet traditions and ideas on Ukrainian children. In this way, they are occupying not only the territories, but also the consciousness of people who are being turned against Ukraine. Russian propaganda is poisoning children, breaking them psychologically," - Mayor of Mariupol, Vadym Boychenko.

Key Themes: Children, Flag, Remembrance, Occupation

A5



16/03/2024

Translated Text: Mariupol residents vote with whole families

Citizens happily join the all-Russian campaign “The whole family - to the polls” and come to the polling stations together with other family members.

Adult Mariupol residents tell their children about the significance of the Russian Presidential elections for the future of our country and actively involve young city residents in the electoral process.

As such, today at one of the polling stations in the Ordzhonikidze district, fathers entrusted their children with the important task of casting the filled-out ballot into the voting urn. The young Mariupol residents enthusiastically embraced this opportunity to participate in the presidential elections and successfully completed the honorable mission.

Key Themes: Children, Flag, Unity

B5



11/03/2024

Translated Text: ! The so-called early "voting" for "Putin's election" is taking place in Mariupol

☹️ From March 10th to 14th, a farce called "early voting in the presidential elections of the Russian Federation" is taking place in Mariupol. Mobile groups of precinct commissions go to residents' houses and set up "polling stations" right in their yards.

The occupiers claim that this form of voting "will allow to avoid crowding of people at the polling stations and will reduce the risk of their shelling." In reality, it is an opportunity for falsifications and coercion of people to participate in pseudo-elections. After all, the invaders understand that the residents simply do not want to go to the polling stations.

👉 Even so, the turnout at the end of the first day of early voting in the so-called "DNR" is only 22%. Residents do not want to participate in this propaganda "show".

Everyone understands that the results are predetermined. The real opinion of the residents is of no interest to anyone, russians just need a "picture" of alleged support for putin by the residents of the occupied territories.

Key Themes: Flag, Occupation

A6



01/04/2024

Translated Text: Young Mariupol residents met with famous children's writers. Online meetings were held as part of the Children's Book Week.

Young readers of the N.V. Gogol branch library talked with a writer from St. Petersburg, Yulia Ivanova.

Fourth-graders from school No. 5 learned more about Yulia's work, her fairy tales for children, short stories, books on the history of the Northern capital and other works. The children were particularly interested in the writer's works in the fantasy genre, which immersed the young Mariupol residents in the world of magic.

And at G.H. Andersen library branch third-graders from school No. 60 attended a meeting with Andrei Usachev. The children asked the writer about his life and work, got acquainted with his works and crafted from paper one of the heroines of Usachev's stories - the clever dog Sonya.

Librarians noted that the young Mariupol residents enthusiastically embraced the opportunity to communicate with famous writers, ask them questions and receive truthful answers "first-hand."

Key Themes: Children, Flag, Unity

B6



22/06/2023

Translated Text: 😞 Russian propaganda from kindergarten: Mariupol children will be taught the Russian anthem and constitution

😞 The city's pseudo-administration of education notes that the program for kindergartens is aimed at "patriotic upbringing of children from the earliest stages of the educational process." In other words, children will be brainwashed from a very young age.

😞 Children under the age of 3, will be introduced to the landmarks of their native land. Probably with those that the occupiers destroyed in Mariupol. From 4 to 6 years old - they will begin real propaganda work. Children will be imposed with Russian public holidays and symbols of the terrorist country. And from 6 to 7 years old - they will be introduced to the anthem and the constitution of the Russian Federation.

The invaders want to de-Ukrainize our children and impose a Russian identity, as they have been doing for centuries.

We believe in the Armed Forces and the liberation of Mariupol from Russian terrorists.

Key Themes: Children, Flag, Occupation

A7



27/03/2024

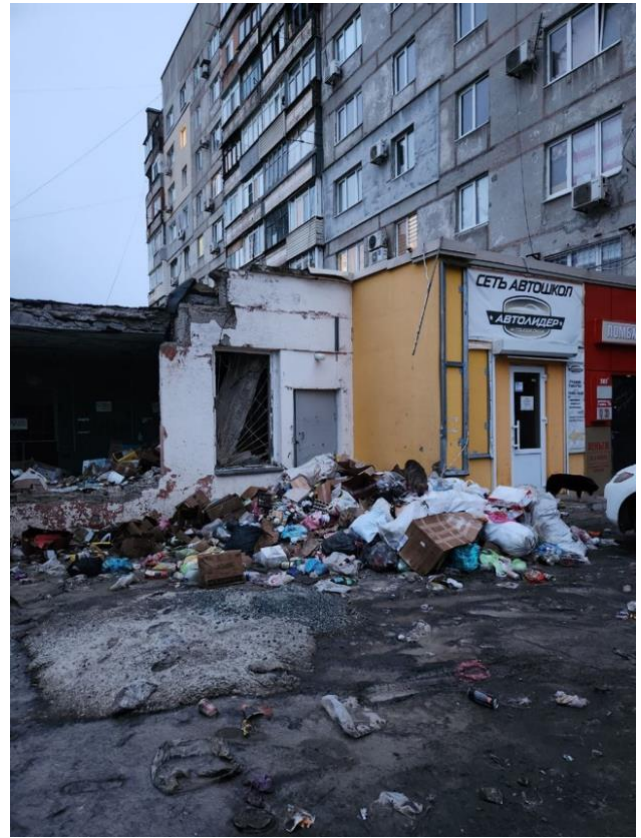
Translated Text: Following citizens' requests, [he (Oleg Morgun, acting head of Mariupol city district)] went to inspect the progress of repair and restoration works at four addresses in the Zhovtnevy, Ilyichevsky and Ordzhonikidzevsky districts. At each of them, Mariupol residents claim non-compliance with repair schedules, as well as complaint about the quality of the ongoing work.

Together with representatives of the general contractor RKS-NR LLC, heads of district administrations and specialists from the city UKS, citizens' complaints were documented and deadlines for their resolution were set. We created contact groups comprising of residents, representatives of subcontracting organizations, UKS and district administrations.

The method of restoring the multi-story building at 28 Pisyareva Street will be separately discussed at a working meeting in the city's Capital Construction Management. It is important to find a technical solution that will satisfy both the residents of the building and the contractor.

Key Themes: Reconstruction, Government Aid

B7



30/03/2024

Translated Text: ☒ Mariupol is turning into a city of disastrous garbage dumps

☹️ Mariupol residents under occupation complain that the pseudo-authorities do not clean the yards and streets of the city. In various district, there are more and more landfills. No one cleans them.

In particular, such an accumulation of garbage appeared on 83/23 Pylypa Orlyk Street. According to residents, the landfill is growing every day.

☹️ And the residents of Upper Novoselevka complain that they don't have a single garbage can. Garbage trucks don't come either.

"You have to go very far to throw out garbage. Put at least one bin for every 3-4 alleys." - write the people of Mariupol.

☹️ At the same time, Russian builders are setting up "toilets" right in the courtyards. Garbage is also left there. Residents of the apartment complex on Metalurgiv Avenue 195, 197, 205, complain about this.

! The occupiers do not take care of cleaning the city. Mariupol is being turned into a city of disorder and garbage. Recall that under Ukraine, KP "Komunalnyk" worked in Mariupol, which, after the reboot, became the most efficient enterprise in the country for the removal

and cleaning of solid household waste. Modern garbage trucks drove around the city and a sufficient number of euro containers were installed. Residents positively evaluated the work of the enterprise and were satisfied with the garbage removal.

Key Themes: Government Aid, Reconstruction, Occupation, Remembrance

A8



13/09/2023

Translated Text: Mariupol residents with limited mobility are being provided with wheelchairs

The Mariupol local branch of the All-Russian Society of Disabled People has launched the process of providing wheelchairs to people with injuries and disorders of the musculoskeletal system.

This became possible with the direct support of the Donetsk Regional Organization of the All-Russian Society of Disabled People and the United Russia WFP. The first batch of wheelchairs has already been distributed to those in need. The second one will arrive in Mariupol soon.

The chairman of the Mariupol local branch of VOI Andrei Mogilny says that the society continues to accept residents with disabilities into its ranks. The plans include not only providing social and legal assistance, but also creating job opportunities for people with limited physical abilities.

Contact the Mariupol local branch of VOI.
Reception days: Tuesday and Friday from 10:00 to 14:00.

Key Themes: Government Aid, Unity

B8



08/03/2023

Translated Text: 😞 Distribution of hot food. Now this is what holidays look like in occupied Mariupol. "Holiday", on which just a year ago, thousands of people died daily from Russian shelling.

In the city, ahead of March 8th, a "celebration" was held right on Svobody Square – preparing hot porridge. People lined up in huge queues just to eat.

In Ukrainian Mariupol, people used to attend concerts, walk in renovated parks, and now they survive and rejoice at any handout. That's how much the life of Mariupol people has "improved" under the occupation 😞

Key Themes: Death, Government Aid, Remembrance

A9



07/07/2023

Translated Text: Repair and restoration work on apartment buildings in the Ordzhonikidzevsky district is being carried out by contracting organizations 🏠🔨

The appearance of the streets is being transformed with each day, which undoubtedly delights and instills confidence in the successful life of our city! The photo shows the BEFORE and PROCESS of the restoration of a building on the street. Vladimirska, 5. The renovation is still ongoing, but a huge result is already visible.

Key Themes: Reconstruction

B9



08/02/2024

Translated Text: 🚧 Occupants continue to build mortgage housing in Mariupol. Locals remain on the streets

👉 The collaborative administration of the city continues to build mortgage housing on the site of the demolished houses of Mariupol residents. The apartments there will be bought by incoming Russians. Thus, the residents of Mariupol are deprived of the opportunity to receive the promised apartments in exchange for the destroyed ones.

😞 In particular, another commercial housing is being built on 8/1 Khmelnytskyi Street. Before the invasion, there was a multi-story building, where the people of Mariupol lived peacefully. The occupiers completely demolished it. Most of the people remained on the streets.

😡 The invaders are not interested in creating housing for locals, they want to make money and fill Mariupol with incoming Russians.

Key Themes: Reconstruction, Occupation

A10



05/11/2023

Translated Text: Our strength is in unity

Under this slogan, a friendly mini-football match was held at SC "Illichivets". For the Day of National Unity, it was organized and held by activists of three public organizations: "Young Guard of United Russia", "Volunteer Company of the Combat Brotherhood" and "Young Republic".

"This is our joint initiative, which was supported by the city administration. Today, on this important holiday for all Mariupol residents, we want to demonstrate once again that as long as we are united, we are invincible," shared the leader of the local branch of MGER Nikita Averkin.

The teams showcased an open attacking style of football and pleased the audience with seven scored goals. Spectators warmly applauded every precise action of the players. Because it didn't matter who would win. What mattered was that even in the excitement of a football match, an atmosphere of friendship, mutual assistance and unity reigned at the stadium.

Key Themes: Children, Flags, Unity

B10



23/05/2023

Translated Text: 🇺🇦 The flag of Mariupol on Hoverla!

🕯️ In memory of the fallen defender of Mariupol, Oleksandr Hrynyk, a climb to Hoverla took place. The action was initiated by the father of the dead soldier. M.Sport coach Oksana Melnyk was among the participants. She raised the flag of our city to the highest Ukrainian peak.

"We wanted to show that the people of Mariupol remember and support our defenders. Many guys are still in captivity, so we also show that we are waiting for their release," says Oksana.

😊 Serhiy Hrynyk with the nickname "Hryan", fought in the ranks of "Azov" since 2016. From the first day of the full-scale invasion, he defended Mariupol. He was wounded at Azovstal, but continued to fight. He died on May 8th.

🇺🇦 Mariupol remembers its Heroes!

Key Themes: Death, Flags, Remembrance, Unity

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