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# Automatic Pipeline for the Identification of Lung Lesions on CT Images of Patients Affected by COVID-19

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Academic Year 2019 /2020

# Abstract

COroNaVirus Disease (COVID-19) has widely spread all over the world since the beginning of 2020. It is an acute, highly contagious, infection disease mainly involving the respiratory system.

Chest CT scans of patient affected by this disease have shown peculiar patterns of Ground Glass Opacities (GGO) and Consolidation (CS). These patterns are made in relation with the severity and the stage of the disease.

In this scenario a correct and fast identification of these patterns is a fundamental task. Up to now the the identification of these areas is made mainly using manual or semi-automatic techniques, which are time expansive and and subjected to the operator expertize.

In this work of thesis I pose an automated pipeline for the identification of GGO and CS. The pipeline achieves the segmentation by applying colour quantization as medical image segmentation technique. In this way I have obtained an hard classification based on voxel intensities. I have used the way in which digital images encodes colour information to takes into account also properties related to the voxel neighbourhood.



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# Introduction

Since the end of 2019, COVID-19 has widely spread all over the world. Up to now the gold standard for the diagnosis of this disease are the reverse transcription-polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) and the gene sequencing of sputum, throat swab and lower respiratory tract secretion [1].

An initial prospective made by Huang et al. [2] on chest CT scans of patients affected by COVID-19, has shown the 98% of examined subjects have shown a bilateral patchy shadows or ground glass opacity (GGO) and consolidation (CS). Their severity, shape and involved percentage of lung were made in relation with the stage of the disease [3]. In the end, other studies have monitored the change in volume and shape of these features on healed patients [4] in order to check their actual recovery. These behaviour can be seen in Figure 1, in which chest CT scans of patient with different severity of disease are compared.



**Figure 1:** Ground Glass Opacity and Consolidation on chest CT scans of COVID-19 affected patients with different severity of the disease. From left to right we can observe an increment of the GGO areas in the lung.

GGO and CS are not exclusive of COVID-19, but may be also caused by pulmonary edema, bacterial infection, other viral infection or alveolar haemorrhage [5]. The combination between CT scan information and other diagnostic techniques like the RT-PCR mentioned above, may help the diagnosis, the monitoring of the course of the disease and the checking of the recovery in healed patients. The study of these patterns may help to understand the infection pathogenesis, which is not well known since COVID-19 is a new disease.

Identification and quantification of these lesions in chest CT scans is a fundamental task. Up to now the segmentation is made in a manual or semiautomatic way, which are time consuming (several hours or days) and subjected to the operator experience, since involves the interaction with trained personnel. Moreover these kind of segmentation cannot be reproduced. To overcome these issues an automatic and fast way for the segmentation is required.

This work of thesis, made in collaboration with the Department of Diagnostic and Preventive Medicine of the Poloclinico Sant'Orsola - Malpighi, aims to develop an automatic pipeline for the identification of GGO and CS in chest CT of patient affected by COVID-19. The work was based and tested on chest CT scans provided by Sant'Orsola, but also public repositories [6] [7] where used as benchmark.

We start out discussion by understanding what is a digital medical image, its physical meaning and digital representation, focusing mainly on Computed Tomography. After that a brief review on the main image segmentation techniques will be presented, focusing on the ones used for the implementation of the pipeline.

The discussion will continue by describing the main pipeline characteristics and its structure: We will see how color quantization was used to achieve the segmentation and how the digital image properties were used in order to take into account different image features. We also discuss how a preliminary lung segmentation will help the identification performances. After that we will continue the discussion by describing in details the pipeline implementation.

In the end we will discuss the segmentation results. The pipeline performances were checked through different methods, like visual comparison with other segmentation techniques, quantitative comparison against manual annotation and blind evaluation by experts. Also the segmentation achieved on healthy control was considered as benchmark.

# Chapter 1

## Image Segmentation techniques

Image segmentation consists in the partitioning of an image into non overlapping consistent regions that are homogeneous respect to some characteristics, such as intensity or texture [8]. The results of segmentation can be used to perform feature extraction, that provides fundamental information about organs or lesion volumes, cell counting, etc. If a patient perform many analysis during time, image segmentation is a useful tool to monitor the evolution of particular lesions or tumours during a therapy. Nowadays different non-invasive medical imaging techniques are available, such as Computed Tomography (CT), Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) or X-Ray imaging, that provide a map of the subject anatomy or function.

Image segmentation plays a crucial role in many medical-imaging applications by automating or facilitate the delineation of anatomical structures and other regions of interest [8]. Manual segmentation is possible, but it is time consuming and subject to operator variability making the results difficult to reproduce [9]. Therefore an automatic or semi-automatic methods are preferable.

The major difficulty in medical image segmentation is the high variability in medical images. First and foremost, the human anatomy itself shows major modes of variation [10]. Furthermore the many different modalities (X-ray, CT, MRI, etc.) used to create medical images change the particular meaning of the data.

In this chapter I will provide a brief introduction about medical images, focusing mainly on Computed Tomography, which is the technique used to acquire the images segmented in this work. This part is followed by a discussion on the main image segmentation techniques.

### 1.1 Medical Images

A medical image is the representation of internal structure or function of anatomic region in the form of array of picture elements (pixels/voxels). This discrete representation results from a process that map each numerical value in a position of the space. The number of pixels used for this representation is an expression of the details with which the anatomy of function can be depicted. The physical meaning of the data changes according to the image acquisition modality (CT, MRI, PET, etc.); for instance, we can consider the computed tomography (CT) case:

Computed Tomography (CT) is a medical imaging technique which aims to reproduce cross-section images and the 3D anatomy of the examined subject. Each data represents the capability of the corresponding volume to attenuate an x-ray

beam. In order to match results from different scans the beam attenuation is measured in Hounsfield Units(HU) :

$$CT - number = k \times \frac{\mu - \mu_{H_2O}}{\mu_{H_2O}} \quad (1.1)$$

Where  $\mu$  is the linear attenuation coefficient of the tissue,  $\mu_{H_2O}$  is the linear attenuation coefficient of the water, took as a reference, and  $k$  is a constant which can be 1000 or 1024 according to manufacturer scan. The linear attenuation coefficient of the air is considered as 0, so the corresponding CT number is  $-1000$ . For the bones, that have a density double than water, the CT number is  $1000$ .

Medical images can be characterized by 5 properties : *pixel depth, photometric, interpretation, metadata and pixel data.*

**Pixel depth** is the number of bits used to encode the information of each pixel. Each value of the tensor is integer of floating point number belonging to a domain related to the image format. It is related to the memory space necessary to store the image and the amount of information we want to store in each pixel. Higher bit allows to store more information, but requires more memory [11]. The most common are  $[0, 255]$  for 8-bit integer image, of  $[0, 1]$  for float. Also other formats are available, like 16-bit integers, widely used to represent medical images.

**Photometric Interpretation** The photometric interpretation specifies how the pixel data should be interpreted for the correct image display as a monochrome or color image. We have to introduce the concept of *number of channel*. Monochrome images have only one sample per pixel (GL intensity). To encode color information into pixels, we typically need multiple samples per pixel and to adopt a colour model that specifies how to obtain colors combining the samples. Colour may be used to encode blood flow direction and velocity in Doppler ultrasound [11]. In this work I have used colour to consider also voxels neighbouring information and different image gamma.

**Metadata** Are the information that describe the image. Metadata is typically stored at the beginning of the file and contains (at least) the image matrix dimension and photometric interpretation. In medical image formats it contains also informations how the image was produced or about the patient [11].

**Pixel Data** Numerical values of the pixels that are stored according to data type.

### 1.1.1 Medical Image Formats

Image file formats provide a standard way to store the information describing an image in a computer file. Moreover file format describes how the image data are organized inside the image file and how the pixel should be interpreted by a software for the correct loading and visualization.

Medical file formats can be divided in two categories: one that try to standardize the images generated by diagnostic modality(e.g. DICOM), the other that try to facilitate the post processing analysis (e.g. Nifti). Both of them stores image data and metadata at the beginning of the file [11].

**DICOM**, acronymes for Digital Imaging and COmmunications in Medicine, is not only a file format but also a network communication protocol. The added value of its adoption in terms of access, exchange, and usability of diagnostic medical images is, in general, huge. Dicom file format establish that the pixels data cannot be separated from the description of the medical procedure which lead to the formation of the image itself. The header also contains patient informations such as name, gender, age, etc. So the header allows the image to be self descriptive. DICOM is born for only 2D images, so a 3D volume is described by a series of files containing the single slices [11].

**Nifti** primary goal is to provide coordinated and targeted service, training, and research to speed the development and enhance the utility of informatics tools related to neuroimaging. This file format uses the header to store informations about image orientation, image centre and origin. This avoid left-right brain hemisphere ambiguity. Even if this file is born for neuroimaging, can be used also to store other kind of images like chest CT. The format is supported by many viewers and image analysis software like 3D Slicer, ImageJ, and OsiriX [11].

## 1.2 Review on Image Segmentation Methods

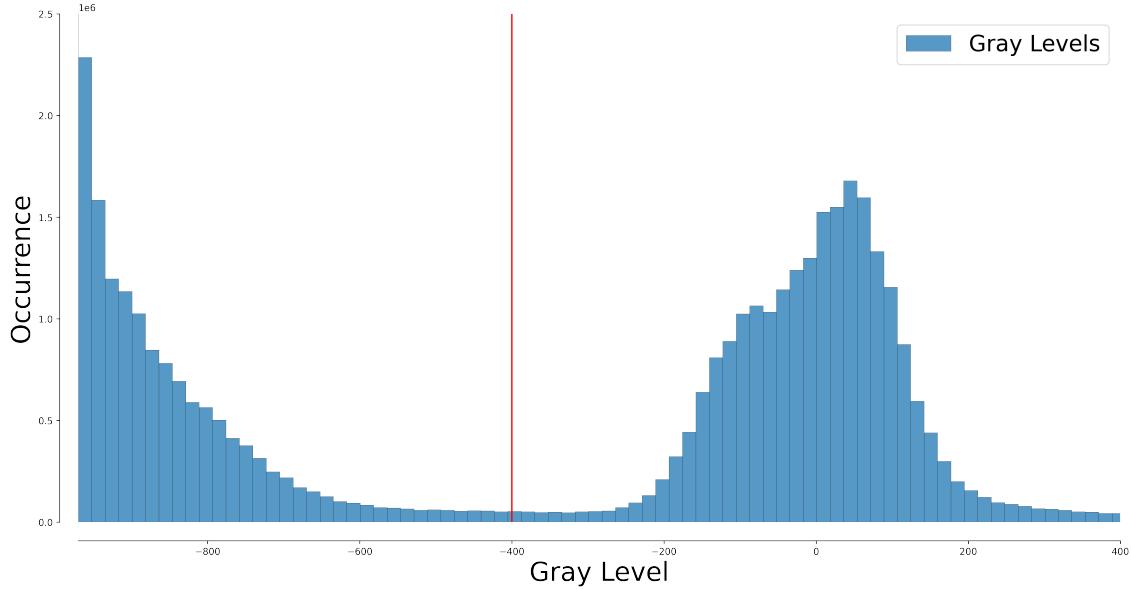
During the years, several segmentation methods have been developed and they are based on a lot of different approaches. These methods can be classified into several ways, for example we can divide them into *supervised* or *unsupervised* if they require or not a set of training data, or can be classified according to the used information type, like *Pixel classification methods*, which use only information about pixel intensity, or *Boundary following* methods, which use edge information, etc. In this section I will provide a brief review on the main segmentation methods, organized in the same way as in [8], that divides the methods in 8 categories:

1. Thresholding,
2. Region growing,
3. Classifiers,
4. Clustering,
5. Markov Random Fields models,
6. Artificial Neural Networks,
7. Deformable Models,
8. Atlas guided approaches.

### 1.2.1 Thresholding

Thresholding approach is very simple and it basically segments a scalar image by creating a binary partitioning of image intensities [8]. It can be applied on an image to distinguish regions with contrasting intensities and thus differentiate between

tissue regions represented within the image [9]. Figure 1.1 shows an histogram of a scalar image with two classes, threshold based approach attempts to determine an intensity value, called *threshold* which splits the desired classes [8]. To achieve the segmentation we can group all the pixels with intensity higher than the threshold in one class an all the remaining ones into other class.



**Figure 1.1:** Histogram of a GL image with two well delineated regions. The threshold value(red line) was set visually at -400 HU

The threshold value is usually setting by visual assessment, but can also be automatized by algorithms like Otsu one. Sometimes may happen that more than two classes are present in the image, so we can set more than one threshold values in order to achieve a multi-class segmentation, also in this case there are algorithms to automatized this process, like an extension of the previous one called *multi Otsu threshold*.

This is a simple but very effective approach to segment images when different structures have an high contrast in intensities. Threshold does not takes into account the spatial characteristics of the image, so it is sensitive to noise and intensity inhomogeneity, that corrupt the image histogram of the image and that make difficult the separation [8]. To overcome these issues several variations of threshold have been proposed based on local intensities and connectivity.

Threshold is usually used as initial step in sequency of image processing operations, followed by other segmentation techniques that improve the segmentation quality. Since threshold uses only intensity information, it can be considered a pixel classification technique.

### 1.2.2 Region Growing Approach

Region growing approach allows to extract connected regions from an image. This algorithm starts at seed location in the image (usually manually selected) and checks the adjacent pixels against a predefined homogeneity criteria [9], based on intensity, and/or edges. If the pixels met the criteria, they are added to the region. A continuos application of the rule allows the region to grow.

Like thresholding, region growing is used in combination with other image segmentation operations, and it usually allows the delineation of small and simple structures such as tumor and lesions [8].

Regions growing can also be sensitive to noise: the extracted regions may have holes or even become disconnected. May also happen that disjoint areas become connected due to partial volume effect.

When we use this approach we have to consider that for each region we want to segment a seed must be planted. There are some algorithms, related to region growing, that does not require a seed point, like split and merge one. Split and merge operates in a recursive fashion. The first step is to check the pixel intensity homogeneity: if they are not homogeneous, the region is splitted into two equal sized sub-regions. This step leads to an oversegmentation, so a merging step is performed, which merge together adjacent regions with similar intensities [9].

### 1.2.3 Deformable Model

Deformable Models use an artificial, closed, contour/surface able to expand or contract over time and conform to a specific image feature [9]. This approach is physically motivated model-based technique for the detection of region boundaries [8]. The curve/surface is placed near the desidered boundary and it is deformed by the action of internal and external forces that act iteratively. The external forces are usually derived from the image.

This approach has the capability to directly generate closed parametric curves or surfaces from images and incorporate smoothness constraint that provides robustness to noise and spurious edges.

However this approach requires a manual interaction to place the appropriate set of parameters.

### 1.2.4 Markov Random Field

Markov Random Field (MRF) is not a proper segmentation method, but it is a statistical model that is used within segmentation methods which models the spatial interaction between neighbouring pixels. It is often incorporated in clustering algorithms such as K-means with a Bayesian prior probability.

This model is used when most pixels belong to the same class as their neighbouring pixels, in this cases any anatomical structure that consist of only one pixel has a very low probability of occurring [8].

A difficulty of this model is that it is very sensitive to the parameters that controls the strength of the spatial interactions. An other MRF disavantage is that it is a very computationally expansive algorithms. However, despite these disadvantages, MRF are widely used to model segmentation classes and intensity inhomogeneities [8].

### 1.2.5 Classifiers Approach

Classifiers approaches use statistical pattern recognition techniques to segment images by using a mixture model which assumes that each pixels belongs to one of a prior known set of classes [9]. To assign each pixel to the corresponding class, it

use the so called *feature space*, which is the space of any function of the image. An example of 1D feature space is the image histogram.

The features of each pixel form a pattern that is classified by assigning a probability measure for the inclusion of each pixel in each class [9].

This approach assumes a prior knowledge about the total numbers of features in the image and the probability of occurrence of each class. Generally this quantity is not prior known, so we need a set of training data to use as reference.

There are different techniques which use this approach:

- **k-Nearest Neighborhood** : each pixel is classified in the same class as the training data with the closest intensity;
- **Maximum likelihood or Bayesian** : Assume that pixel intensities are independent samples from a mixture of probability distributions and the classification is obtained by assigning each pixel to the class with the highest posterior probability.

This approach requires a structure to segment with distinctive and quantifiable features. It is computational efficient and can be applied to multichannel images. This approach does not consider a spatial modelling and it requires a manual interaction to obtain the training data that must be several since the use of the same training set for a large number of scans can lead to biased results.

### 1.2.6 Clustering

Clustering approach is similar to the classifiers one, but in an unsupervised fashion, so does not require a training dataset. Clustering iteratively alternates between the image segmentation and its classes properties characterization. In this way we can say that clustering approach trains itself by using the available data information. We can identify 3 main clustering algorithms:

- **k-means clustering**: partition  $n$  observations in  $k$  clusters iteratively computing a mean intensity for each class. It segments the image by classifying each pixel in the class with the closest mean
- **Fuzzy C-means**: this algorithm generalizes the K-means clustering in order to achieve soft-segmentation;
- **Expectation Maximization**: uses the same clustering principle as k-means by assuming that each observation belongs to a Gaussian mixture model. It is an iterative method that seeks to find maximum likelihood estimates means, covariances and mixing coefficients of the mixture model.

It does not require training data, but it suffers of an high sensitivity to the initial parameters and it does not incorporate spatial models: it is a pixel classification technique [8].

The most used algorithm for clustering is the k-means clustering, which seeks to assign each pixel to a particular cluster aiming to minimize the average square distance between pixels in the same cluster [12]. Each cluster is described by a vector representing its center, so this technique is described as a centroid model [13]. The

labeling is performed by assigning each point to the cluster with the nearest centroid. Each point is assigned to the cluster with the nearest center.

Given an integer  $k$  and a set of  $n$  data points from  $\mathbb{R}^d$ , the k-means clustering seeks to find the  $k$  centers that minimize a potential function given by the sum of squares:

$$\Phi = \sum_{x \in S} \min \|x - c\|^2 \quad (1.2)$$

Where  $S \subset \mathbb{R}^d$  is a set of points. In this work  $\mathbb{R}^d$  will be the colors space and  $S$  is the space of color of each voxel.

The steps of the algorithm are the following:

1. Randomly initialize the values of the  $k$  centers,
2. Generates the  $k$  clusters associating each point to its nearest centroid
3. Re-compute the centroid for each cluster until the centroid does not change.

Arthur and Vassilvitskii [12] have pointed out that this algorithm is not accurate and can produce arbitrarily bad clusters. So they have developed a method, the "k-means++" which improves the clustering accuracy by made an accurate choice of the initial cluster centers.

They pointed out that the bad clustering is caused to the fact that  $\frac{\Phi}{\Phi_{opt}}$  is unbounded even if the number of clusters and points are fixed, where  $\Phi_{opt}$  is the potential function in the optimal centroids case. They proposed a variant for the choosing of the centroids: They randomly chose only the first centroid. To chose the other, they weight the initial points according to the distance square ( $D(x)^2$ ) from the closest center already chosen. So the final algorithm is equal to the k-means except for the initial centroids selection that is made as follows:

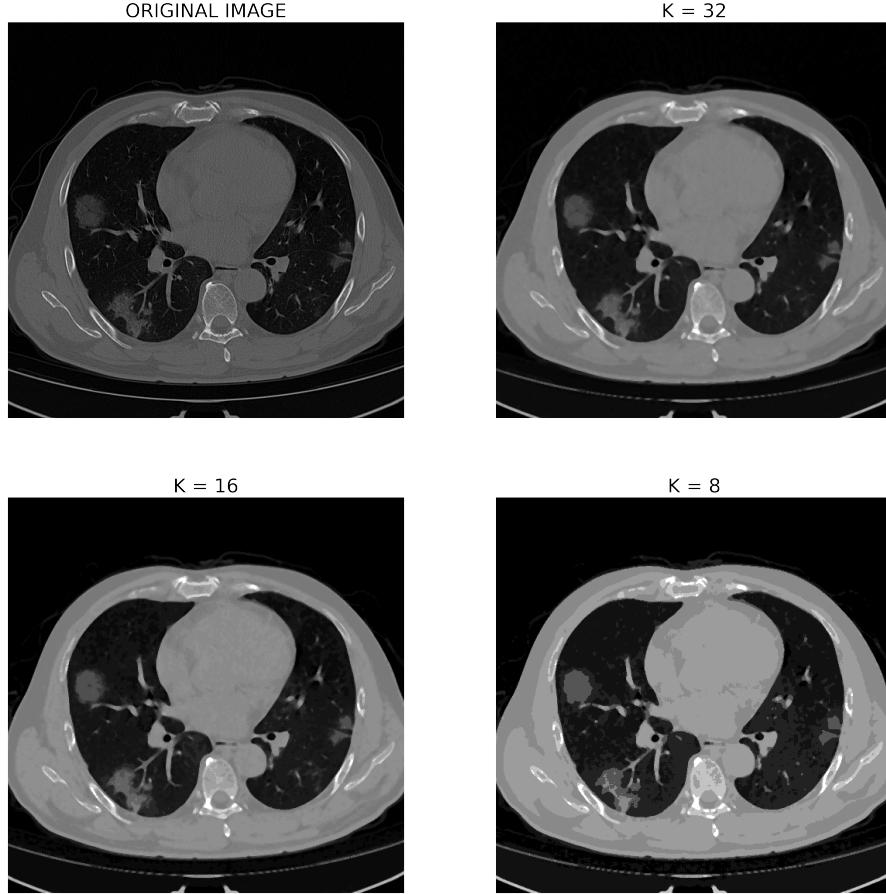
1. Take one center  $c_1$ , chosen uniformly at random from  $S$ .
2. Take a new center  $c_i$ , choosing  $x \in S$  with probability  $\frac{D(x)^2}{\sum_{x \in S} D(x)^2}$
3. Repeat the step 2 till  $k$  centers are chosen
4. Proceed like a classical k-means clustering.

They have proved that this approach leads to better results in less time. For more details refer to [12].

### 1.2.7 Color Quantization

Color quantization is the process of reducing the number of colors in a digital image preserving significant information. In other words quantization process should not cause significant information loss in the image. The color quantizes image should be very close to the original image, visually as in Figure 1.2.

Color quantization plays an important role in many application fields such as segmentation, compression, color texture analysis, watermarking, text localization/detection, non photorealistic rendering and content-based retrieval [14].



**Figure 1.2:** Color quantized GL image. We observe the original image, a 32 color image which look similar to the original one, a 16 colors image and 8 colors image. Tissue are grouped by color similarity. Reduce the color to the number of cluster allows pixel classification.

Color quantization is used for image segmentation. To this purpose the algorithm aim to reduce the number of colours in the image to the one of the different tissues, assigning a characteristic colour to each one of them. This is the case of medical image segmentation, in which each image color represents a particular characteristic of the tissue displayed (i.e in x-ray represent  $\mu$ ). To perform this technique, different algorithms may be used to group the colors, like clustering algorithm or the principal component analysis.

### 1.2.8 U-Net

Artificial Neural Networks(ANN) are a computational architecture derived from neural physiological models [9]. This architecture is made by interconnected artificial neurons able to perform elementary operations. For imagery analysis are usually used Convolutional Neural Networks(CNN), also known as shift invariant or space invariant artificial neural networks (SIANN).

In biological image processing the so called U-Net are usually used. U-Net is a kind of convolutional neural network which allows to overcome the requirement of many training data. That because large training dataset are not always available,

like often happens in medical and biological segmentation purposes.

Convolutional Networks are usually applied to classification tasks. In biological and medical purposes, the segmentation should include localization and a class label should be assigned on each voxel. To achieve this purposes, in 2015 for the ISB cell tracking challenge, Olaf Ronneberger, Philipp Fischer, and Thomas Brox have developed this kind of network [15].

The U-Net is able to work with only small set of training samples. In order to work with few training data, we have to make a huge data augmentation, by applying an elastic deformation to the training images.

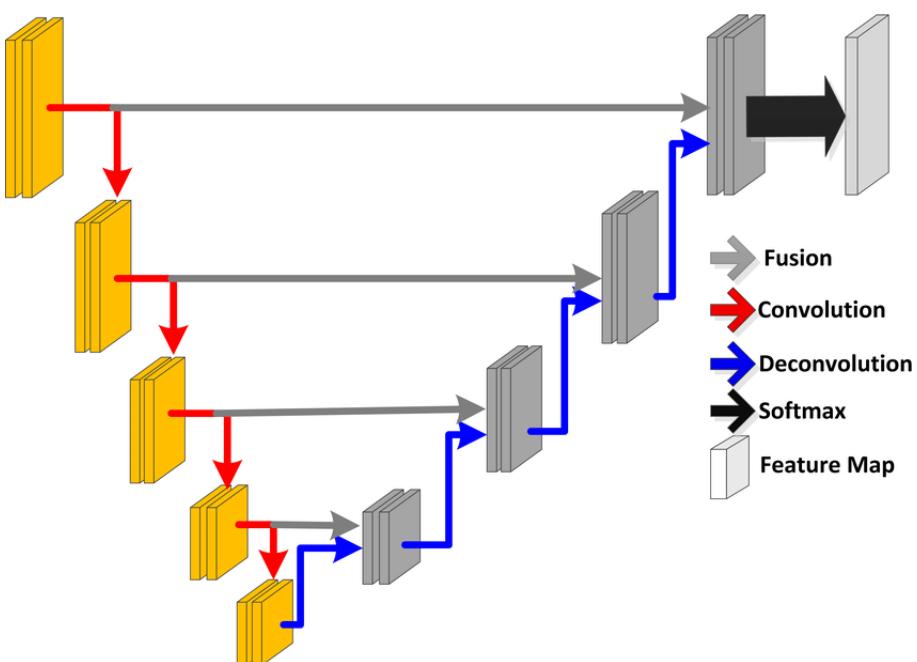
The whole structure is divided into two main parts:

- Contraction path (*encoder*) : sequence of convolutional and pooling layers, which aim to extract features and reduce the input dimensionality.
- Expansion Path (*decoder*) : second set of convolutional and up-sampling layers, to reconstruct the feature map and consequently the segmentation mask, which aims to process the extracted features

The contractive path and the extractive path. The contracting path is a typical convolutional network that consists of repeated application of convolutions, each followed by a rectified linear unit (ReLU) and a max pooling operation. During the contraction, the spatial information is reduced while feature information is increased. The expansive pathway combines the feature and spatial information through a sequence of up-convolutions and concatenations with high-resolution features from the contracting path [15].

Decode path tends to lose some of the higher level features that the encoder learned: Using shortcut connection, the output of the encoding layers are directly passed to the decoder layer, preserving the important features [16].

MainSegmentation



**Figure 1.3:** *UNet* network architecture: We can see the *U*-shape made by symmetry between expansion and contraction path. The gray arrows indicates the shortcut used to prevent information loss

# Chapter 2

## Pipeline

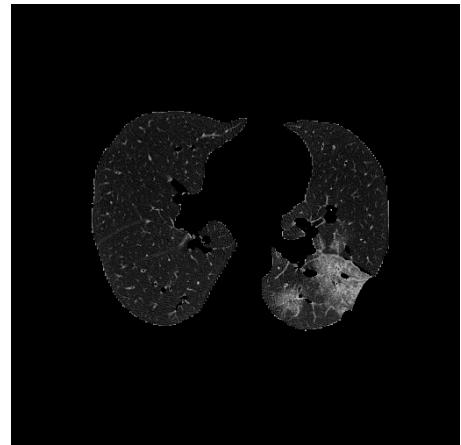
The aim of this work of thesis is the developing of a automatic pipeline for the segmentation of Ground Glass Opacities and Consolidation areas in chest CT scans of patients affected by COVID-19.

Austin, in *Glossary of terms for CT of the lungs* [17] has defined the GGO and CS as :

*"Hazy increased attenuation of lung, but with preservation of bronchial and vascular margins; caused by partial filling of air spaces, interstitial thickening, partial collapse of alveoli, normal expiration, or increased capillary blood volume, which is different from consolidation in which bronchovascular margins are obscured."*



(a) *Chest CT scan with presence of GGO and CS*



(b) *Segmented lung regions*

**Figure 2.1:** Original Chest CT scan(a), we can clearly see the GGO and CS regions. Moreover all extra -lung regions are present. In (b) we can see the same slice but after the lung segmentation. We can see that each different region has a similar gray level.

The starting point are the chest CT scans (Figure 2.1a). Firstly I have removed all the extra lung regions like body, bronchial structures and CT tube which are a potential source of false positives. Once we have obtained a scan as Figure 2.1b, we can

notice that the different structures are characterized by similar gray level: the basic idea was to use the colour quantization for medical image segmentation, grouping voxels based on colour similarity, and assigning to each tissue a characteristic colour. This can be done since in CT scan exists a relationship between the tissue in the voxels and the Gray Levels used to display it, given by the Hounsfield Units(eq 1.1): the colors are proportional to HU, which are defined as a linear transformation of the linear attenuation coefficient( $\mu$ ).

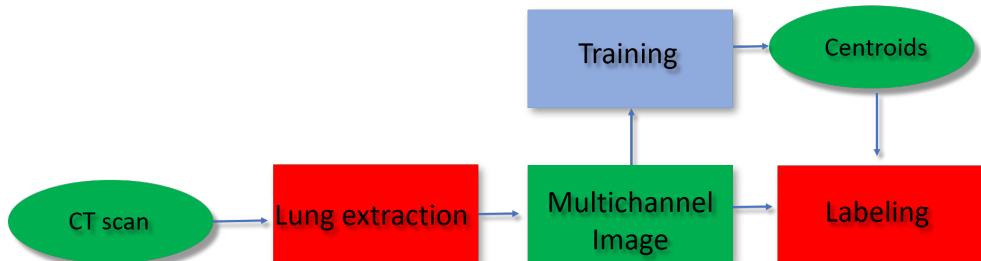
We can consider different properties beside the single voxel intensity. As we can see, lesion areas involves many closest voxels: It is interesting to incorporates also neighbourhood voxel information in the colour quantization. Moreover, contrast between sick and healthy areas may change according to the severity of the disease, so we can incorporate different gamma of the image, in order to enhance these regions.

Adopting a colour model for the digital image, allows to encode colour information in the pixels. Colour can be used to encode also voxel neighbourhood information assigning to each channel a different function of the image.

Once I have build the colour space, I have to find the characteristic colour of each tissue under study, which is represented by a centroids in this space. I have created a training dataset made of CT scans from different patients and applied a k-means clustering, since it provides a good balance between segmentation performance and computational efficiency. K-means clustering requires a prior knowledge about the number of cluster, which in our case is given by the anatomical structure of the lung. I have considered a cluster for each different anatomical structure :

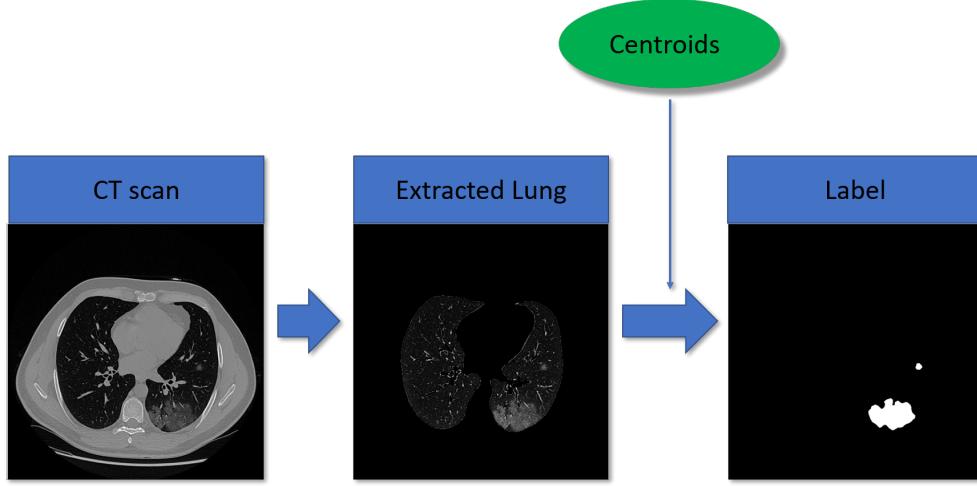
- Lung Parenchima;
- Edges;
- Vessel surrounding bronchial structures;
- Bronchi.
- Ground Glass Opacities and Consolidation;

Once I have estimated the centroids for each tissue, I have used them for the segmentation: each voxel of the image is assigned to the cluster of the closest centroids. The final pipeline structure is summarized in Figure 2.2.



**Figure 2.2:** Workflows of the developed pipeline. CT scans are taken as input and a lung segmentation is performed. After that there is the construction of the multichannel image. The labeling step takes as input the multichannel image and the centroids, previously estimated by a training.

Except for the lung segmentation, the learning process for the GGO and CS segmentation is unsupervised. Once the centroids are estimated, the training step does not need to be repeated. Moreover, in the implementation, the building of the multichannel image is incorporated in the labeling step. As a consequence the final pipeline structure looks like in Figure 2.3.



**Figure 2.3:** Actual segmentation step, from left to right we can see the input image stack, the isolated lung regions and the final label. To perform the labeling a set of pre-computed centroids was used.

## 2.1 Description

As we have seen, the pipeline is divided into many blocks, each one performing a different task. In this section I will describe in details how each step of the pipeline is achieved. This section involves only a description, the implementation will be discussed in the next one.

### Lung Extraction

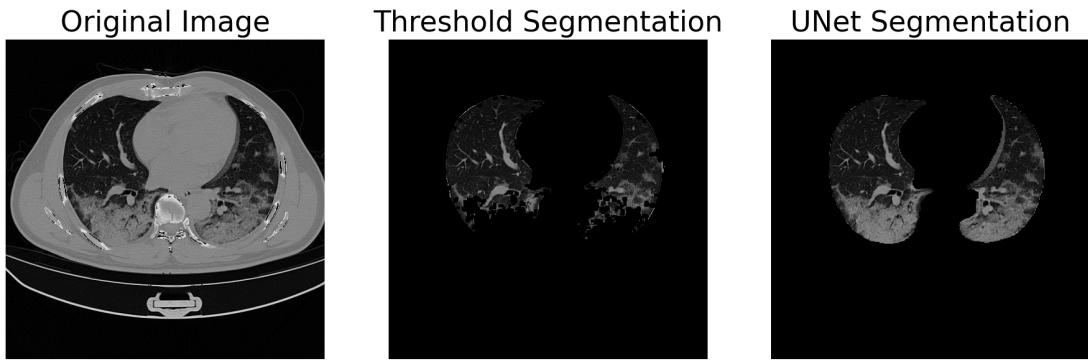
This preliminary step is performed before both training and labeling and involves the managing of the HU, the isolation of lung regions and the removal of the main bronchial structures.

The registration of the HU on a common space is necessary to overcome the issues that may arise from the different padding values and multiplicative constant for HU computation (equation 1.1) used by the different manufacturer of the CT scans. The  $k$  constant in the HU definition (equation 1.1) may change according to the scan manufacturer or scan model. During the scan acquisition, all the regions outside the CT tube aren't sampled, so to obtain a square  $N \times N$  image for each slice some padding values are added, which differ according to the scan manufacturer. This registration allows to overcome some issues that may arise during the conversion of the image from 16 to 8 bit unsigned integers, required to operate with OPENCV functions.

Lung segmentation is a pivotal pre-processing step in many image analysis such as identification and classification of lung pathologies [15]. The lung isolation allows

to find a mask for the lung regions, and thus excluding all the body regions, the CT tube and the extra-lung organs like intestine and heart, avoiding the formation of false positives.

Automatic lung segmentation algorithm are typically developed and tested on limited datasets and usually over a limited spectrum of visual variability by containing mainly cases without severe pathologies [15]. Rule based approach, like thresholding, region growing, ect, usually fails for CT scans of patients with severe Interstitial Lung Disease (ILD), as we can see in Figure 2.4. For these reasons to achieve the lung segmentation I've used a pre-trained U-Net [15] [18].



**Figure 2.4:** From left to right the original CT scan of a patient with severe ILD, the lung segmented by threshold and it's connected components, and lung segmentation achieved by the pre-trained U-Net. We can clearly see the missing areas in the first segmentation, correctly identified in the U-Net one.

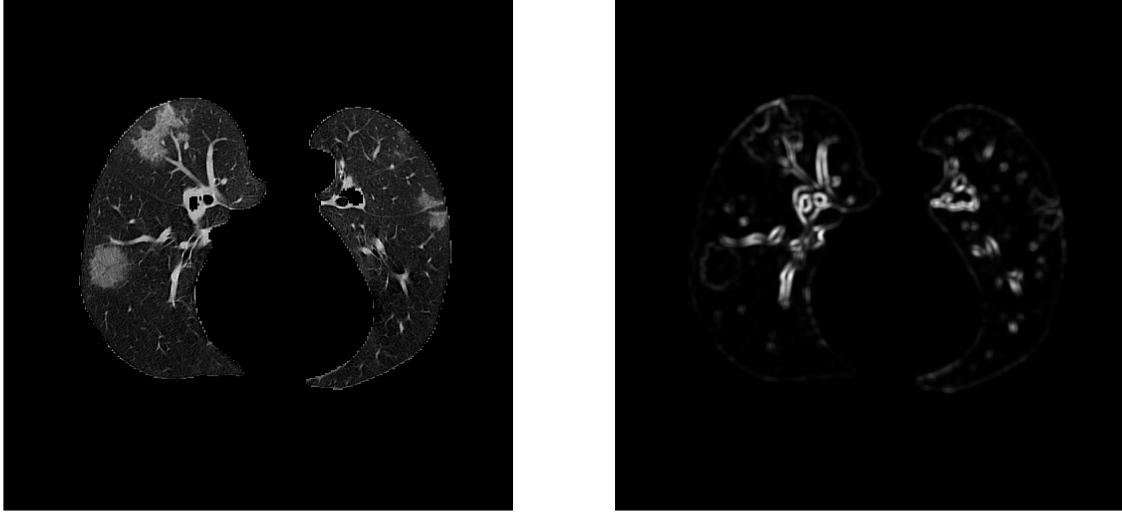
This kind of segmentation includes in the lung region also motion artifacts and bronchial structures, which are the main source of false positives. To achieve a better segmentation a refinement process is performed, which aims to remove the main bronchial structures from the selected lung regions.

Bronchi have an elongated shape respect to the other structure which usually are rounded: the basic idea was to use this kind of information. In order to perform this task, I have computed the covariant matrix of the derivative in a neighborhood (2.1) and the corresponding eigenvalues.

$$M = \begin{bmatrix} \sum_{S(p)} (dI/dx)^2 & \sum_{S(p)} dI/dxdI/dy \\ \sum_{S(p)} dI/dxdI/dy & \sum_{S(p)} (dI/dy)^2 \end{bmatrix} \quad (2.1)$$

If a particular regions has an elongated shape, one of the eigenvalues (corresponding to the eigenvector in the direction of the structure) will be higher than the other, otherwise both eigenvalues have a low one. I have applied this filter on each slice of the scans and took a map of the maximum eigenvalues.

In Figure 2.5, I've displayed the image after the lung segmentation by the neural network, and the corresponding eigenvalues map. As we can see the higher values of the map corresponds to the edges of the main bronchial structures. To create the mask for these structures I have applied a fixed threshold to the map. Since the main bronchial structures are large, this process is able to remove only part of the edges, but the inner structure is preserved. In order to refine the segmentation, this process is repeated a second time, allowing a fine removal of the structures.



**Figure 2.5:** From left to right: lung regions selected by the U-Net; ,maximum eigenvalues map of the lung. As we can see the U-Net does not exclude the bronchial structure from the lung, on the other hand, the maximum eigenvalues map delineates very well these regions. I have used this map to remove the unwanted bronchial regions.

## Multi Channel Image

This step involves the preparation of the images, with the computation of the different functions and the building of the multi channel image that incorporates neighbouring and edges information. The used image is composed by 4 channel built as follows:

- Pure image after Contrast Limited Adaptive Histogram Equalization (CLAHE), with a block size of  $10 \times 10$  pixels
- Image after a median blurring with kernel size equal to 11 pixels
- Image after a gamma correction with  $\gamma = 1.5$
- Standard filtered image with a kernel of size 3 pixels

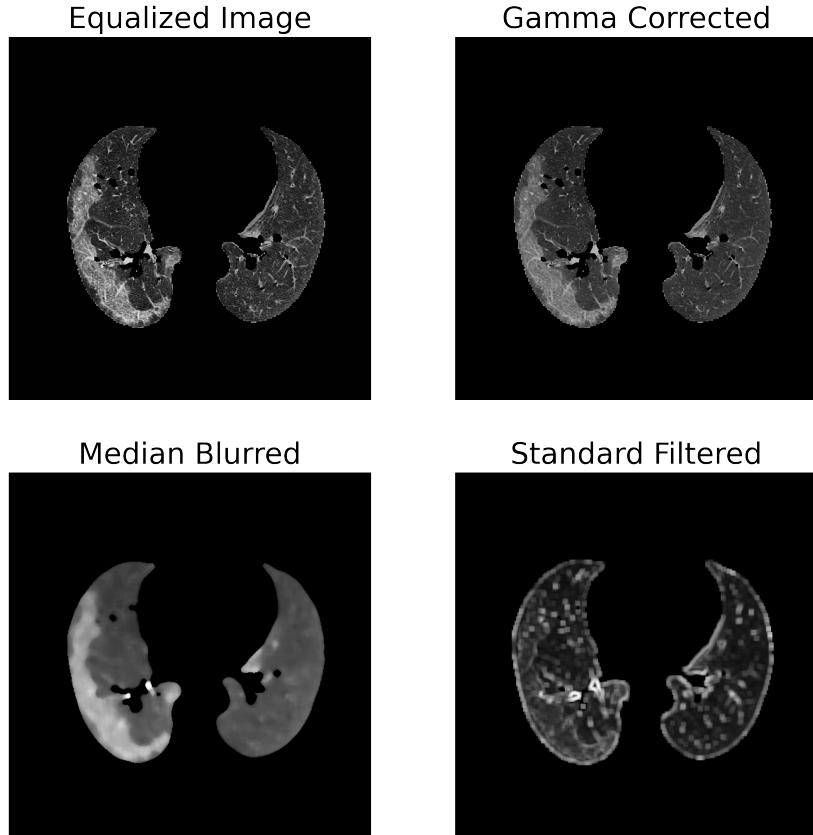
In Figure 2.6 I have displayed the 4 different channels of the image. Each channel allows to consider different information.

The histogram equalized image and the gamma corrected allows to take into account information about the single voxel. The histogram equalization is applied in order to enhance the image contrast by improving the GL usage. For each slice the histogram is equalized considering only a  $10 \times 10$  area, in order to take care of the over-amplification of the contrast.

The gamma correction is a non linear operation and is used to decode the luminance, and to make in evidence the low contrast regions.

The median blurring allow us to consider also the information of the neighbourhood voxels, allowing the reduction of the outliers. The usage of the filter is justified since the lesions involves several closest voxels.

The last channel consists in the image after the application of a local standard deviation filter. This filter consists in the replacement of each pixel value with the



**Figure 2.6:** *Channels of the image. From left to right and from top to bottom the image after the histogram equalization, the gamma correction, the median blurring and the std filtering. These channels allow us to consider information about single voxel, neighbouring voxels and their variability. The histogram equalization is applied over small  $10 \times 10$  areas to avoid over-amplification of the contrast. The gamma correction was performed using  $\gamma = 1.5$ , and the median and std filter kernel sizes are respectively 11 and 3. Each image is normalized according to mean and standard deviation of the whole scan.*

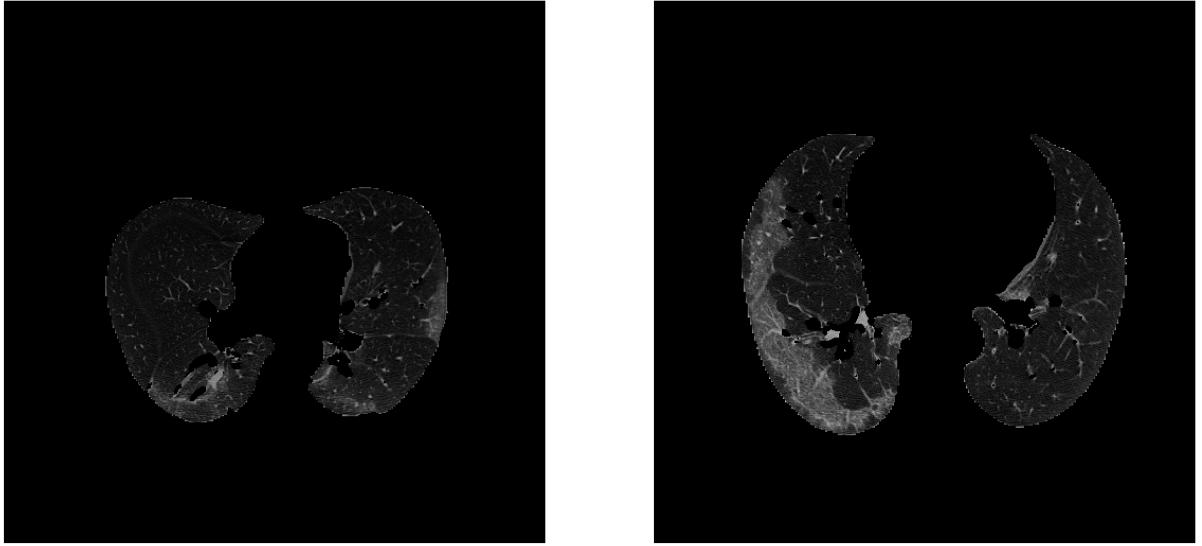
standard deviation of its neighborhood. It help us to distinguish the bronchial structures and motion artifacts not removed during the lung segmentation.

Each image channel is normalized according to means and standard deviation of the whole scan; because of the k-means clustering.

## Training

This step involves the estimation of the centroid set. To achieve this purpose, a k-means clustering was performed on a training set made on multichannel images from many CT scans. During this task I have to takes into account that k-means clustering requires a balance in the different cluster representation. As we can see in Figure 2.7, the main part of the image is composed to background, that is an over-represented cluster. Moreover we can observe that the amount of involved lung volume may change according to the severity of the disease: the first scan presents a low amount pf GGO and CS; the second one have a larger lung region involved.

To overcome these issues, I have simply removed the background from the seg-



**Figure 2.7:** Lung regions with different ground glass areas. We can notice that the main part of the image is composed only by the background. From left to right respectively a scan with small lesion areas and one with a large lesion.

mentation and carefully selected the scans of the training set to ensure a balanced representation of each cluster. The main rule used for the selection is that in each scan must be present a large lesion areas and also a well representation of artifacts, in order to takes into account all the possible features.

The images of the training set are then shuffled and splitted into many subsamples and the clustering is performed independently on each one of them. As a final centroid set I have consider the one that minimize the intra cluster variance. This step is justified since the results of the k-means clustering depends on the initial choice centroids. During the minimization of the potential function the algorithm may find a local minimum rather than the global one. The different clustering allows to estimate more than one possible solution and to chose the best one. Moreover the creation of several sub-samples is made since the creation of a single, large array with several images is not always possible, since requires a huge quantity of memory to be allocated.

## Labeling

This step requires as input the multichannel image and a pre-estimated centroid set. It involves the assigning of each voxel to the cluster corresponding to the nearest centroid and the selections of the one corresponding to GGO and CS areas. In this way we are performing a pixel classification by assigning the regions to a particular labels according only to their intensities information: this allow us to group on the same cluster objects that are spatially disconnected as often happen in the medical imaging field.

The distance between voxel colors and each centroid is defined as the euclidean distance:

$$d(x_j, c_i) = \sqrt{(x_j - c_i)^2}$$

Where  $x_j$  is the color vector for the  $j_{th}$  voxel and  $c_i$  is the  $i_{th}$  centroid.

## 2.2 Implementation

I've implemented the pipeline described before using python, which is an high level object oriented programming language. To perform all necessary operations (image filtering, input/output managing, etc.) I've used three libraries: OPENCV [19], SIMPLEITK [20] and NUMPY [21].

The whole code is open source and available on GitHub [22] and the pipeline installation is automatically tested on both Windows and Linux by using AppveyorCI and TravisCI. The installation is managed by setup.py, which provides also the full list of dependencies. The code documentation was generated by using sphinx and its available online (<https://covid-19-ggo-segmentation.readthedocs.io/en/latest/?badge=latest>).

The pipeline provides 3 scripts: LUNG\\_EXTRACTION, LABELING and TRAIN, to perform the image segmentation and the centroid estimation. However, also a pre-trained centroid set is provided. Till now I've used the (silent) hypothesis that the segmentation involves only one scan. In order to automatize the segmentation on several CT scans, powershell and bash script are provided.

An important point is the input and output managing. The pipeline operations involves only the voxel array, but the input image formats provided also additional information like voxel spacing, image origin and direction. These information must be preserved and incorporated in the output, since are necessary to preserve the compatibility with medical image processing software and medical image format. To achieve this purpose I have implemented input and output method based on the SIMPLEITK IO interface: as a consequence the supported image formats are the one supported by SIMPLEITK. The input method allows to read an image in the medical image format and get the voxel array and the spatial information. The output one allows to save the image in medical image format by setting also voxel array and spatial information.

The construction of the multi-channel image is embedded both in training and labeling script. This step requires the application of 4 filters on the image and to stack the together the results. For the image filtering I've used the corresponding function implemented in OPENCV. These functions can be applied only on a single image; so I have applied them slice by slice along the axial direction. In this way each images is processed independently from the others: No 3D structure is exploited. To stack the images I've simply used the NUMPY STACK method. Notice that the OPENCV functions works only with 8-bit gray scale images. The input image must be converted from HU to GL image. This step is performed at the end of the lung extraction.

### 2.2.1 Lung Extraction

This script aims to achieve the HU registration, the lung segmentation and the bronchial removal. It takes as input the CT scan in each format supported by SIMPLEITK. As output will returns the stack after the lung extraction, saved as *nifti*. Its workflow is summarized in1.

---

**Algorithm 1:** Lung Extraction

---

**Data:** Volume (CT scan)  
**Result:** Volume with extracted lung

```

mask←ApplyUNetVolume(Volume)
volume←(volume < 1200) =air_hu
volume←ShiftMinimumTo1(volume)
/* Start the bronchial removal */
```

```

eigen← maxEigenvalues(lung)
bronchial_mask← (eigen < threshold)
lung_woBronchi← (lung o bronchial_mask)
/* Refine the bronchial mask */
```

```

eigen←maxEigenvalues(lung_woBronchi)
bronchial_mask←(eigen < threshold)
lung_woBronchi← (lung_woBronchi o bronchial_mask)
```

---

The lung mask was created by applying the a pre trained U-Net by using the suitable method from [18].

In order to achieve th registration, first of all the values less than the air value are setted to this value, after that the air value is subtracted from all the voxels. These operation are performed on the image tensor by using NUMPY ndarray method. After each value is rescaled in [0, 255].

Listing 2.1: HU registering function

```

1 import numpy as np
2
3 def shif_and_crop(tensor) :
4
5     tensor[tensor < -1200] = tensor[tensor > -1200].min()
6     tensor = tensor - tensor.min()
7
8     return tensor
9
10
```

More inreresting is the estimation of the eignevalues map. To achieve this purpose I've implemented a function based on CV2.CORNEREIGENVALSANDVEC in OPENCV. This function takes as input an 8-bit gray scale image, so we have to rescale the GL value of the image tensor.

In the end the computing of the eigenvalues map is made by the following function:

Listing 2.2: HU registration function

```

1
2 import cv2
3 import numpy as np
4 from functools import partial
5
6 def max_eigenvalues_map(tensor, block_size, kernel_size) :
```

```

7
8     func = partial(cv2.cornerEigenValsAndVecs ,
9         blockSize = block_size ,
10        ksize = kernel_size)
11    res = np.array(list(zip(*list(map(func , tensor))))) )
12    res = res.transpose(1, 0, 2, 3)
13    res = res[:, :, :, :2]
14    max_eigenvals = np.max(res , axis = 3)
15
16    return max_eigenvals
17
18

```

Once the required parameter were setted, the OPENCV function is iterate over the axial slices. The following transposition and selection of tensor elements, are needed since the function returns also the eigenvectors, in which we are not interested in.

At the end of the whole procedure, the resulting tensor is saved into a medical image formats.

### 2.2.2 Training

This script allows to estimate the set of centroids. It requires as input a path to the training dataset. Each training scan must be saved in a format supported by SIMPLEITK. This script will returns as output the set of centroids in *.npy* format.

This script will read the training dataset, construct the multichannel image, create the subsamples and cluster them independently. Notice that during the clustering process the background must be removed. These script is summarized in 2.

The clustering process is managed by the KMEANS\_ON\_SUBSAMPLES fucntions, implemented as follows.

Listing 2.3: kmenas\_on\_subsamples

```

1
2     import cv2
3     import numpy as np
4     from tqdm import tqdm
5
6     def kmeans_on_subsamples(imgs, n_centroids, stopping_criteria,
7                             centr_init, weight = None) :
8
9         if weight is not None :
10            vector = np.asarray([el[w != 0]
11                                for el, w in zip(imgs, weight)],
12                                dtype = np.ndarray)
13        else :
14            vector = np.asarray([el.reshape((-1, el[-1]))]
15                                for el in imgs],
16                                dtype=np.ndarray)
17
18        centroids = []
19        ret = []
20        for el in tqdm(vector) :
21
22            r, _, centr = cv2.kmeans(el.astype(np.float32), n_centroids,

```

---

**Algorithm 2:** training

---

**Data:** CT scans with Extracted lung**Result:** Centroid matrix

```

foreach scan  $\in$  input_scans do
    | read the scan
    | sample $\leftarrow$ image_array
end

/* prepare subsamples */ 
sample $\leftarrow$  build_multichannel(sample)
sample $\leftarrow$ shuffle(sample)
subsamples $\leftarrow$ split(sample)
/* start the first clustering */
foreach Sub  $\in$  subsamples do
    | center $\leftarrow$ kmeans(sub, number of centroids)
    | centroid_vector, internal_variance $\leftarrow$ append(center)
end

/* Refinement */
centroid_matrix $\leftarrow$ centroid_vactor(min(internal_variance))

```

---

```

23             None, stopping_criteria,
24             10, centr_init)
25     centroids.append(centr)
26     ret.append(r)
27
28     final_center = centroids[np.argmin(ret)]
29
30     return np.asarray(final_center, dtype= np.float32)
31
32

```

This function takes as input the array containing the subsamples, and apply kmeans clustering on each of them, storing all the values. To remove the background it use a weight tensor. The values of this tensor must be 0 for the voxel corresponding to the background, and 1 otherwise. At the end of the procedure, the centroid set which provide the minum value of the sum of square error is selected.

### 2.2.3 Labeling

This is the last step of the pipeline and involves assigning of each voxels to the cluster corresponding to the nearest centroids, in this way an hard segmentation is achieved.

The script takes as input the CT scan after the lung extraction and it build the multichannel image as described before. After that it assigns each voxel to the cluster of nearest centroids, which is the one that minimize the distance :

$$cluster = \arg \min_S \sum_{i=1}^k \sum_S \|x - \mu_i\| \quad (2.2)$$

where  $x$  is the color vector of the voxel and  $\mu$  is the  $i$ th centroid. During this process the background is automatically assigned to the 0 label, by passing a mask which assume 0 on the volxel background and 1 for the other one. At the end of the assignment, only the cluster corresponding to GGO and CS is selected. To summarize the process, the pseudocode of the script is reported in algorithm 3. I've tested this algorithm on three different dataset, the results are described in the next chapter.

---

**Algorithm 3:** Pseudo-code for the labeling script

---

**Data:** CT scan to label, centroids  
**Result:** GGO label

```

image←build_multi_channel
/* Compute distances and found the minimum */ 
foreach  $c \in centroids$  do
    | distances←  $\|image - c\|^2$ 
end
labels← arg min (distances)

```

---

The assignment process is performed by the IMLABELING function, which takes care to assign the background to 0, if the suitable parameter is passed. The function is implemented as follows:

Listing 2.4: imlabeling

```

1 import numpy as np
2
3 def imlabeling(image , centroids , weight = None) :
4
5
6     if weight  is not None :
7         distances = np.asarray([np.linalg.norm(image[weight != 0] -c,
8                                         axis = 1) for c in centroids])
9
10    weight[weight != 0] = np.argmin(distances , axis = 0)
11    return weight
12 else :
13     distances = np.asarray([np.linalg.norm(image -c, axis = 3)
14                             for c in centroids])
15     labels = np.argmin(distances , axis = 0)
16     return labels
17
18
19
20

```

## 2.3 Optimization

During each step of the pipeline we have to set different parameters, like the kernel size for median and std filter, as well as the number of centroids to use fro the segmentation. In this section I will birefly describe how each one of these parameters was optimized, in order to obtain the best segmentation performances.

### 2.3.1 Number of Clusters

The designed algorithm for the centroids estimation is the k-means clustering that requires a prior knowledge about the number of clusters to use. This is very important since a bad choice will badly affect the whole segmentation results. In order to chose the proper number of clusters, I've consider two different sources of information: the anatomical knowledge about the lung and the internal variability of the lung.

From anatomical knowledge about the lung, we can derive 5 clusters, corresponding to:

- Lung Parenchima;
- Edges;
- Vessel surrounding bronchial structures;
- Bronchi.
- Ground Glass Opacities and Consolidation;

Notice that the background of the image is not considered as a cluster since it is removed from the segmentation for the reasons explained before. In order to verify that this number of clusters is the best one, I have considered the internal cluster variability.

Clustering techniques try to group the data into different clusters in order to maximize the difference between points in different clusters and to maximize the similarity within each cluster. If the number of centroids is less then the clusters one, the similarity within each cluster is low. Increasing the number of centroids, will reduce the internal variability till 0 (if number of clusters is equal to the number of points). This means that after a certain point the diminishing of the internal variability is no more significant, since do not correspond to the good number of clusters but only to the increasing of their number.

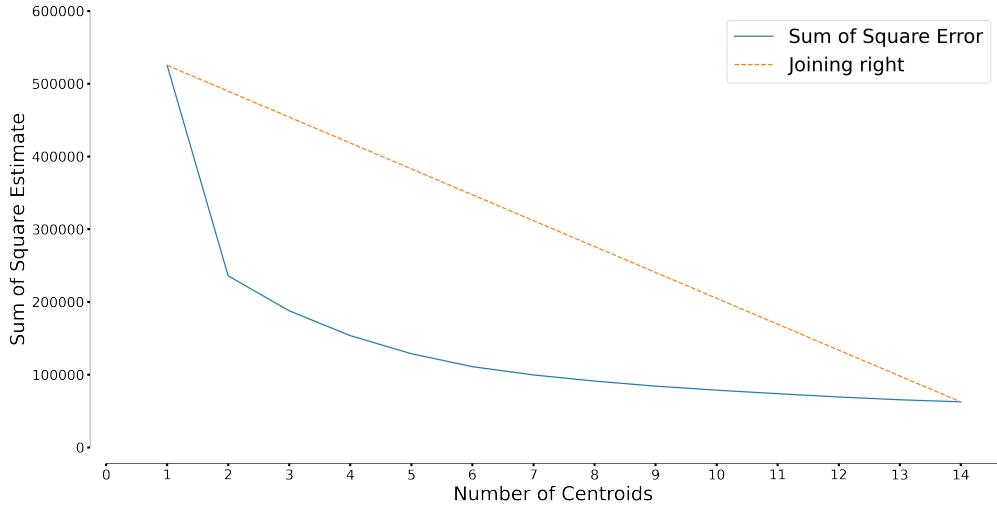
To found the correct number of clusters we are seek to for a number of clusters which still provides a small amount of internal variability.

To achieve this purpose, the clustering was repeated several times increasing the number of clusters and for each iteration the internal variability was measured by the sum of squares estimate error (SSE) :

$$SSE = \sum (x_i - c_j)^2 \quad (2.3)$$

Once this task is completed, the results was printed in Figure 2.8.

The optimal number of cluster is the one that corresponds to the elbow of the curve. It is difficult to find this feature from visually, I took the numerical value of the elbow considering the point which maximize the distance between the right joining the first and the last point. From this analysis I have found that the optimal number of clusters is 5, which corresponds to the same that I have found considering the lung anatomy.



**Figure 2.8:** Intra-cluster variance vs the number fo clusters(blue); right joining firts and last point(orange). We can se the elbow shape of the graph; the elbow location in the one which maximize the distance between the right joining line and the elbow curve.

### 2.3.2 Kernel Size

During the building of the multi channel image, I had to compute different image features, that requires the setting of different parameters, like median or standard filter kernel sizes. In order to achieve the best segmentation, I have performed an optimization step that aims to find the parameters that allows to obtain the best segmentation.

Notice that this process is not necessary and a good segmentation can be achieved also by setting this parameters manually.

In order to perform the optimization, I have used SCIKIT-OPTIMIZE [23], more specifically the GC\_MINIMIZE METHOD.

This method seeks to perform a Bayesian optimization by using a Gaussian process to approximate an objective function. The function values are assumed to follow a multivariate Gaussian. The covariance of the function values are given by a GP kernel between the parameters. Then a smart choice to choose the next parameter to evaluate can be made by the acquisition function over the Gaussian prior which is much quicker to evaluate [23].

In the end an objective function is minimized. I have used the objective function defined in 4 in which is also reported the whole minimization pseudocode. The used function aim to minimize  $1 - IoU$  where the IoU(Intersection over Union) is computed between the output labels and a reference one :

$$IoU = \frac{\text{Area of Overlap}}{\text{Area of Union}}$$

I have decided to use the IoU instead of accuracy since the number of pixels concerning the labeled object would be very few against the number of pixels related to the background. Thus, the label would be a matrix with a large amount of zeros (background) and only few ones (object). In this case the standard metric functions have to consider an unbalanced number of samples; so the solution was to use the

IoU which measures the ration between the Intersection and Union of the output labels and the binary ground truth [16]:

---

**Algorithm 4:** Parameter Optimization Algorithm

---

**Data:** Test scans, Ground Truth  
**Function** `objective(parameters, ref_labels, CT_scan):`  
`labels ← segment(CT_scan)`  
`iou = IoU(labels, ref_labels)`  
`return 1 - iou`  
`best_parameters ← gc_minimize(objective, n_calls, n_random_init)`

---

This process allows to optimize the parameters in order to obtain the better results. As reference labels I have used the ones evaluated as gold standard from five experts radiologists at least 2 years of experience.

This procedure allows only to tune the parameters for a better segmentation, but the learning process remains unsupervised.



# Chapter 3

## Results

The developed pipeline was trained and tested on three datasets (Sant'Orsola, ZENODO and MOSMED), described in the first section. The main method for the evaluation were a quantitative comparison whit a gold standard segmentation, made and validate by 5 experts with at least 2 years of experience. In collaboration with Sant'Orsola, the pipeline results were compared with some semiautomatic segmentation by a blind evaluation made by experts.

### 3.1 DataSet Description

This section is dedicated to the description of the datasets used for the developing and test of the pipeline. The description includes general image characteristics and some metadata. If within the datasets are provided also some manual annotation, also the segmentation masks are described.

#### 3.1.1 Sant'Orsola

Sant'Orsola data was the ones mainly considered in this work. It consist into 83 anonymized CT scans from 83 different patients affected by COVID-19 and 8 scans from healthy controls. Within these scans, also manual annotation were provided. These annotations were obtained with a semi-automatic approach. The built of each annotation may requires several hours.

The series are distributed as follows:

Property	Value
Number of Scans	83
Distribution by sex(M/F/O)	66.3/33.7/0
Distribution by age(min/median/max)	35/60/89

For 5 scans were provided also other semi-automatic segmentations. These segmentation were obtained by refining the initial segmentation of a certified software. The building of these labels has required several days. In the end this results are validated by 5 experts with at least 2 years of experience. These 5 segmentation represents the gold standard used as ground truth.

### 3.1.2 MOSMED

MosMed is a dataset which contains 1110 anonymized CT scan of human lung from both patients affected by COVID-19 in several stages of the disease, and healthy controls. A small subset of this scans is labeled. The scans are obtained between 1st March and 25th of April 2020 by different Russian hospitals. This dataset was born with educational and AI developing purposes. The studies are divided into 5 categories, from healthy patients to the most severe cases. Each scan of the dataset is saved in *.nifti* format and during the conversion from the original dicom series only 1 image every 10 was preserved. The resulting dataset have the following characteristics:

Property	value
Number of Scans	1110
Distribution by sex(M/F/O)	42/56/2
Distribution by age(min/median/max)	18/47/87
Number of studies in each category	254/648/125/45/2

The CT scans are organized into 5 categories, depending on the percentage of the involved lung volume :

Class	Description
CT-0	Normal lung tissues
CT-1	presence of GGO, lung parenchima involved less than 25%
CT-2	GGO, involvement of lung parenchima in 25 – 50%
CT-3	GGO and consolidation, involvement of lung parenchima in 50 – 75%
CT-4	GGO, consolidation and reticular changes, lung parenchima involved more than 75%

Of these five categories only 50 annotations are available, mostly involving only the patients of CT-1 groups. Scans have been annotated by the experts of Research and Practical Clinical Center for Diagnostics and Telemedicine Technologies of the Moscow Health Care Department.

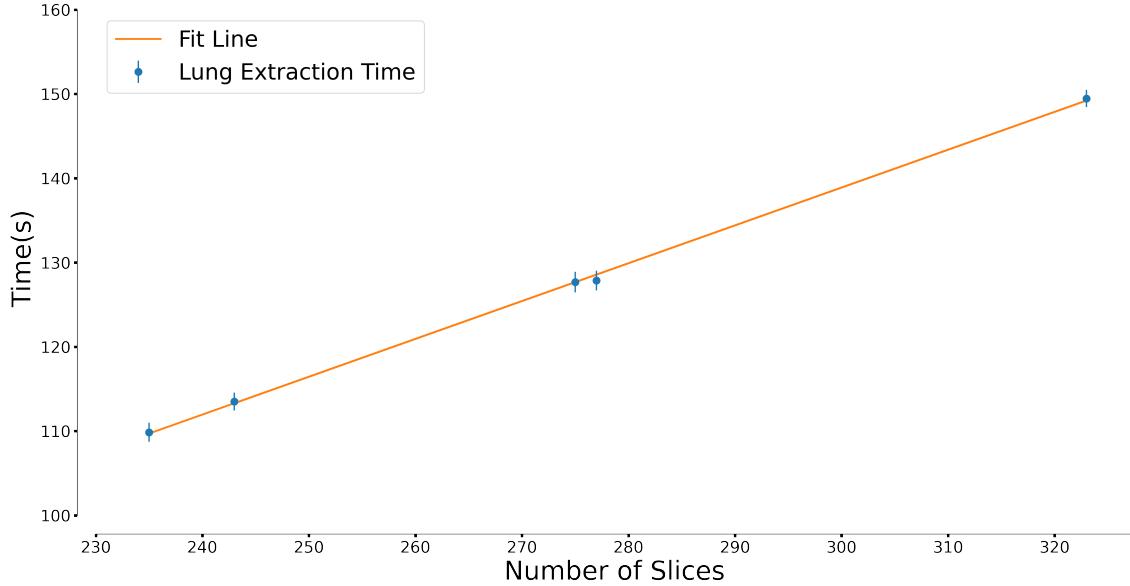
### 3.1.3 ZENODO

This dataset consists into 20 CT scans of patients affected by COVID-19, labeled by two expert radiologists and verified by third one. The anatomic structures labeled are the left and right lung and the infections regions. Each file is in nifti format and no metadata were available.

Unfortunately only half of the scans are in HU, the remaining are in 8-bit gray scale, which is not suitable to verify the pipeline since requires it as input an image in HU.

## 3.2 Timing

One of the highlights of the pipeline is the brief amount of time required to obtain a complete segmentation. In order to characterize this features, I have performed a benchmark on 5 CR scans with different number of slices. For each scan I have



**Figure 3.1:** Lung segmentation time vs number of slice. We can see that the time required to perform the lung segmentation increase linearly with the number of slices. We can also see that in the worst case the lung extraction requires more or less 2 minutes.

performed separately the lung extraction and the labeling step, repeating the procedure several time. The whole test was performed on the server of the Department of Physics and Astronomy.

As we have seen, each operation in each script involves the single slice, and it is repeated for the whole scan in the axial direction. as a consequence the time required to segment different scans changes linearly according to the number of slices. In order to measure the time required to performs each operation on each slice I have performed a linear fit and takes the angular coefficient.

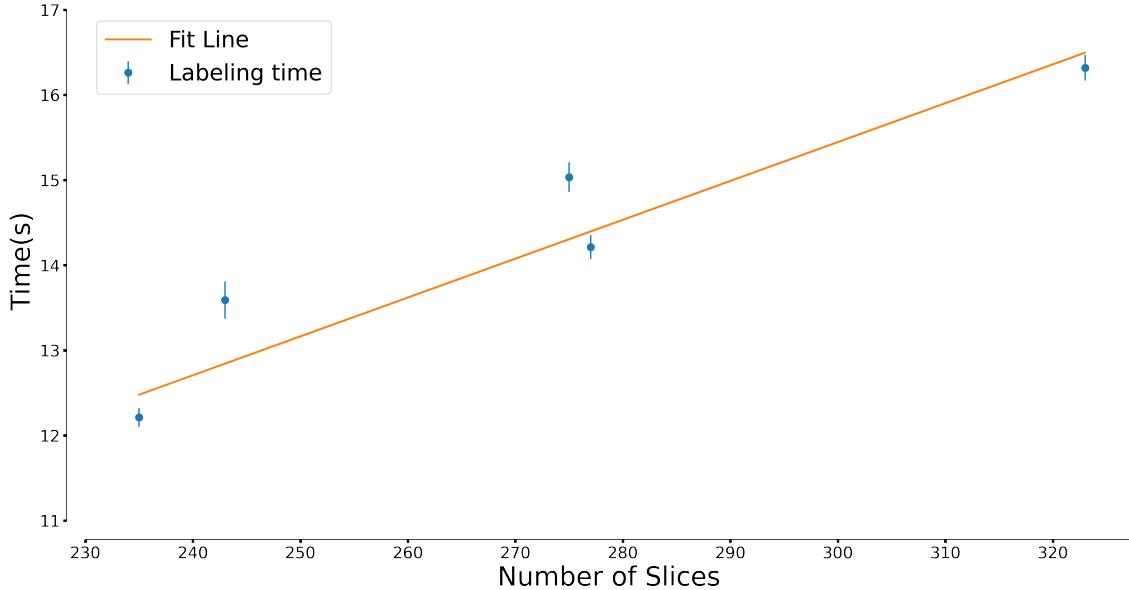
In Figure 3.1 I have reported the time for the lung extraction as a function of the number of slice in the scan. As we expeted the it has a linear trend. In the worst case It requires 125 sec to perform the lung extraction. With the linear fitting I was able to find the time required to process each slice which tesuts:  $449.94 \pm 0.03 \text{ ms}$ . We have to notice that these times are acquired without GPU support. Since the application of the U-Net model is performed by TORCH, with a suitable hardware it is possible to parallelize the computing and achieve also lower times.

In Figure 3.2 I have reported the results for the labeling. As we can see also in this case the trend is linear and in the worst case requires less that 17 sec. As before I have measured the time required to label each slice which results :  $45.65 \pm 0.05 \text{ ms}$ .

In the end we have seen that the pipeline achieve a segmentation in a low amount of time, which can be further reduced if a proper hardware is used.

### 3.3 Accuracy

In this section I will discuss the segmentation results achieved by the described pipeline against the manual annotations. I have estimated the set of centroids considering 10 CT scans from the available datasets. I have carefully selected the scans



**Figure 3.2:** *Labeling time vs number of slice. This time incorporates also the creation of the multi-channel image. As we expected increase linearly with the number of slices and achieve a segmentation in less than 17 sec.*

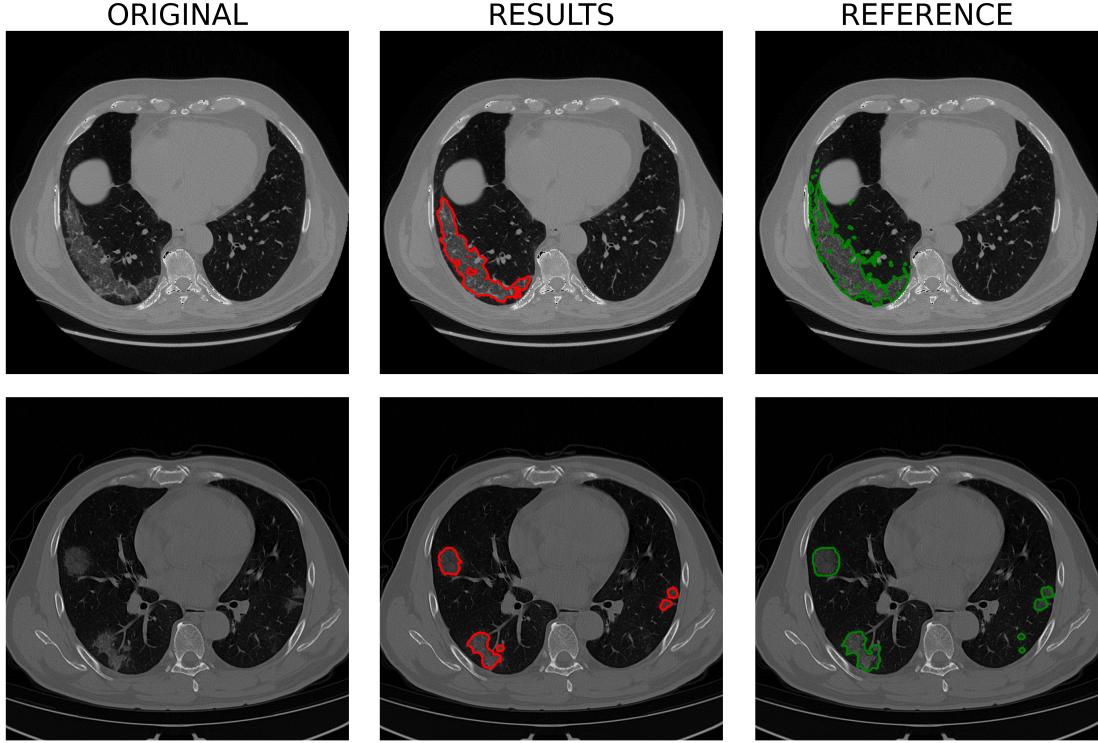
in order to achieve a balanced representation for each cluster. The segmentation was performed using as hardware the servers of the Department of Physics and Astronomy(DIFA), and the segmentation of each patients have taken less than 2 minutes.

In Figure 3.3 I have reported a comparison between the achieved segmentation and the manual annotation as well as the original image. As we can see the lesion areas seem correctly identified. The resulting segmentation and the annotation seems to be in agreement. We can observed that the in the first case the annotation find some spots outside the main GGO area.

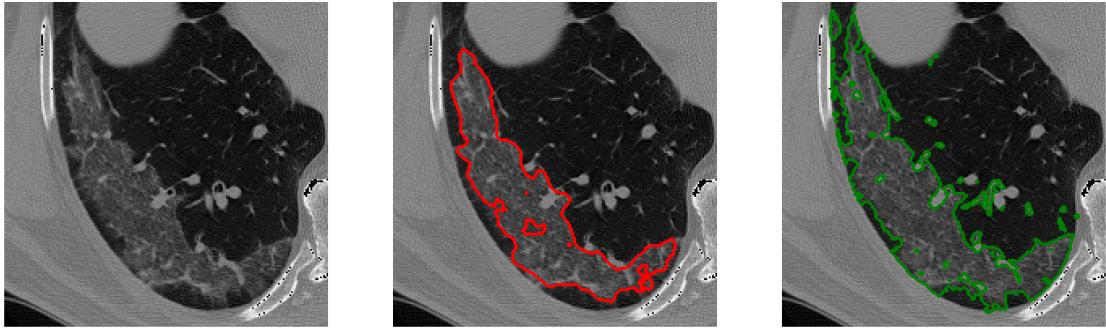
In Figure 3.4 I have provide a zoom on these interesting areas. We can see that the pipeline segmentation well identified the main opacities. We can spot that the annotation tends to consider as GGO a larger region than the pipeline. We can also notice that in the provided annotation also some regions that seems to be healthy are segmented.

In Figure 3.5 we can see the 3D structure of the lung regions with the identified GGO and CS. In green we can observe the pipeline results; in pink the manual annotation. As we can see the two regions seem to be consistent. Again we can spot that the annotation tends to consider a larger areas than the pipeline.

I have also match results and annotation in a quantitative way. Using the 5 ground truth (accurate and validated manual segmentations) I have matched pipeline and annotation considering sensitivity and specificity. Moreover, in collaboration with the Department of Diagnostic and Preventive Medicine of the Poloclinico Sant'Orsola - Malpighi, that the segmentation was submitted to five experts in order to made a blind evaluation, comparing the pipeline segmentation with annotation.



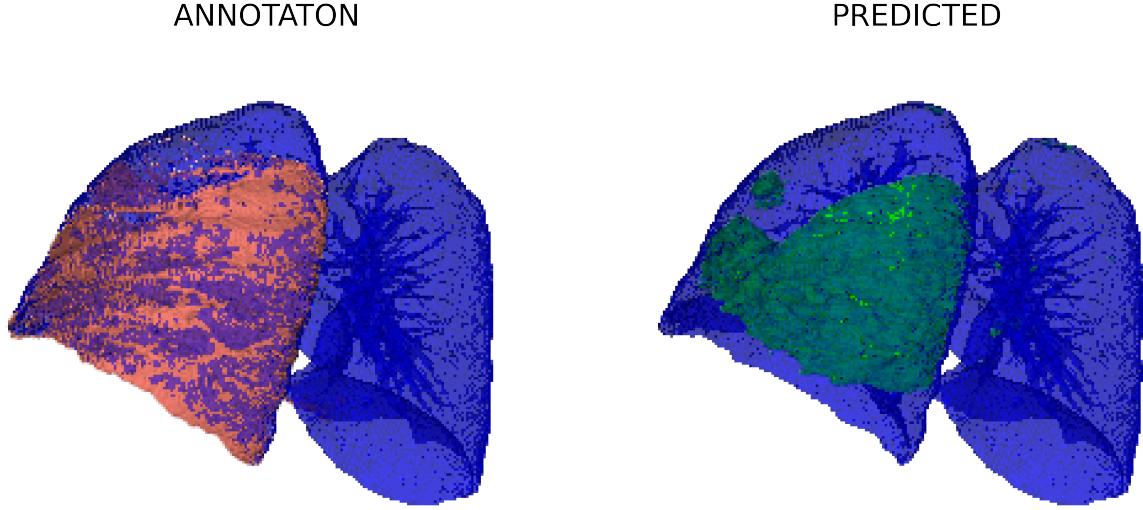
**Figure 3.3:** Comparison between the achieved segmentation (red) and the annotation (green). We clearly see that the GGO ans CS areas are well identified and segmententated.



**Figure 3.4:** Focus on lesion area. From left to right we can observe the original image, the predicted lesion areas and the reference one. We can observe that the annotation identify a larger area. The annotation identify also some spots outside the lesions which seems to be healthy tissue

### 3.3.1 Comparison with Manual Annotations

In order to check the pipeline performances I have compared the obtained segmentation with the manual annotation. To do that I have considere 5 scans from the sant'Orsola dataset for which was available also a ground truth. This ground truth consist in an semi-automatic segmentation made with a certified software and refined by an expert with more than 5 years of experience. After that the segmentation was validated by 5 experts with at least 2 year of experience. This segmentation process takes several days.



**Figure 3.5:** 3D representation of lesions. From left to right the manual annotation (pink) and the pipeline segmentation (green). We can observe that the segmented size of the area is different.

In order to compare annotation and pipeline segmentation, I have computed the *sensitivity* and *specificity*:

**Sensitivity** refers to the ability to correctly detect ill areas. It is defined as total number of voxels correctly classified as opacities (True Positives), over the total number of positives (True Positives + False Negatives) :

$$\text{Sensitivity} : \frac{\text{TruePositive}}{\text{TruePositive} + \text{FalseNegatives}} \quad (3.1)$$

**Specificity** relates to the ability to correctly reject healthy areas. Is defined as the number of rejected pixels (True Negative) against the total number of healthy areas (True Negative + False Positives) :

$$\text{specificity} : \frac{\text{TrueNegative}}{\text{TrueNegative} + \text{FalsePositives}} \quad (3.2)$$

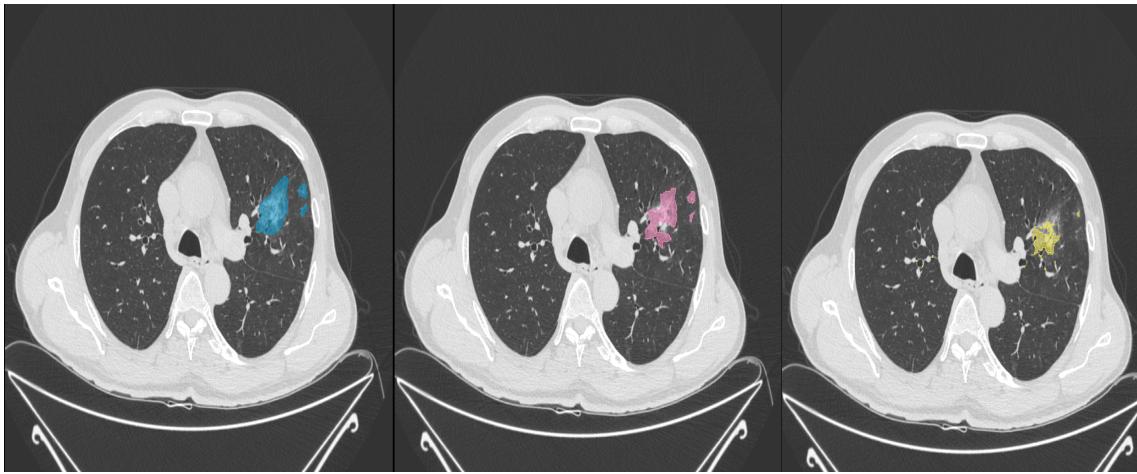
I have displayed the results in table 3.1.

The first thing we can notice is that both the method have an high specificity. That means that they rarely gives positives results for healthy regions (lower type I error rate): there is a low probability to obtain false positives. The situation changes when we consider specificity. We can see that the annotation have achieved a better sensitivity than the pipeline. That means that they rarely gives negative results for GGO regions (lower type II error rate). However this coefficient does not takes into account the rate of false positives, that means we cannot ensure that the detected GGO areas are really sick.

This in agreement to the fact that, generally , the operator tends to include large lesion areas. However that is not always the case, since will depends to operator that performs the segmentation (subjectivity of these techniques).

	Predicted		Annotation	
	Sensitivity	Specificity	Sensitivity	Specificity
Patient 1	0.412	~ 1.00	0.676	0.999
Patient 2	0.399	~ 1.00	0.698	0.995
Patient 3	0.570	~ 1.00	0.653	0.999
Patient 4	0.512	~ 1.00	0.325	0.999
Patient 5	0.628	~ 1.00	0.974	0.999

**Table 3.1:** Sensitivity and Specificity for the pipeline segmentation and annotation. As a ground truth was used a semi-automatic segmentation made and evaluated by 5 experts with at least 2 years of experience.



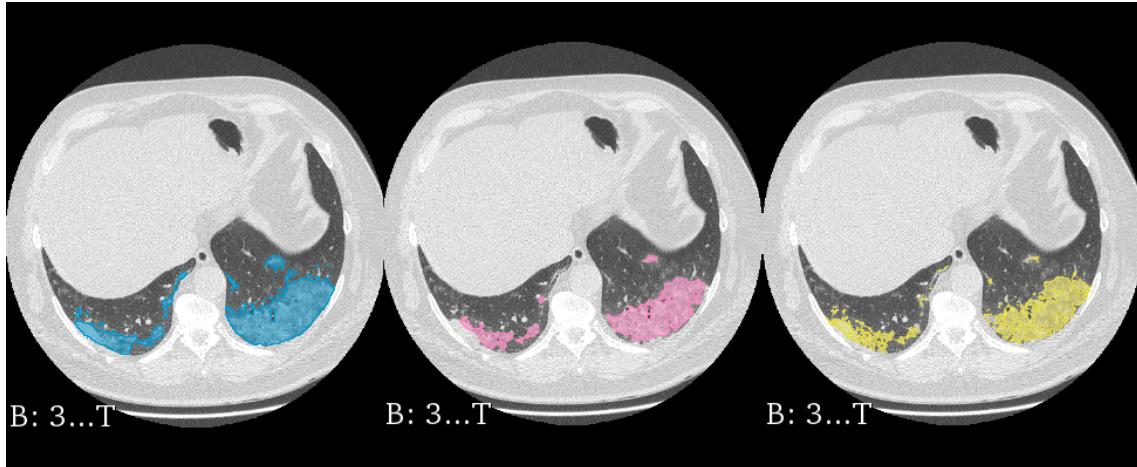
**Figure 3.6:** Comparison between the ground truth (blue), the pipeline segmentation (pink) and the manual annotation (yellow). We can see that the segmentation obtained by the automatic pipeline is better than the one of the manual annotation.

In Figure 3.6 I have reported the results of the segmentation of Patient 4. We can see the ground truth (blue), the pipeline segmentation (pink) and the annotation (yellow). In this case we can see that both the pipeline and the annotation correctly identified the lesion areas. However we can see that the annotation is missing a lot of lesion. On the other hand the segmentation achieved by the pipeline seems to correctly segment the whole areas.

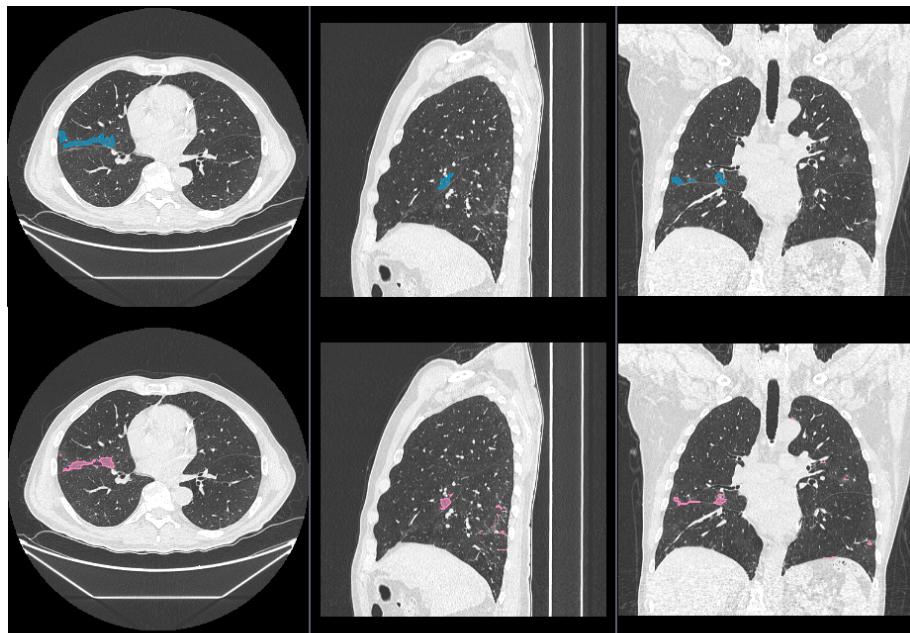
In Figure 3.7 vI have reported the segmentation results for the third patient. We can see the ground truth (blue), the pipeline segmentation (pink) and the annotation (yellow). Also in this case the pipeline seem to correctly identify the opacity. In this case also the annotation seems to be in agreement with the ground truth.

Up to now I have considered only two case in which the GGO and CS regions are well defined with high contrast respect to healthy lung volume. In Figure 3.8 I have reported axial, sagittal and coronal view of the ground truth (blue) and pipeline segmentation (pink) for the first patient. This patient presents a low volume of GGO and CS. Moreover the identification is difficult due to the low contrast between lesion areas healthy lung volume. As we can see the lesion areas are correctly identified even if some misclassified regions are presents.

In the end I have to point out that the annotation and ground truth, since are obtained by semi-automatic method, requires trained personnel and several hours



**Figure 3.7:** Comparison between the ground truth (blue), the pipeline segmentation (pink) and the manual annotation (yellow). We can see that the GGO and CS areas are correctly identified.



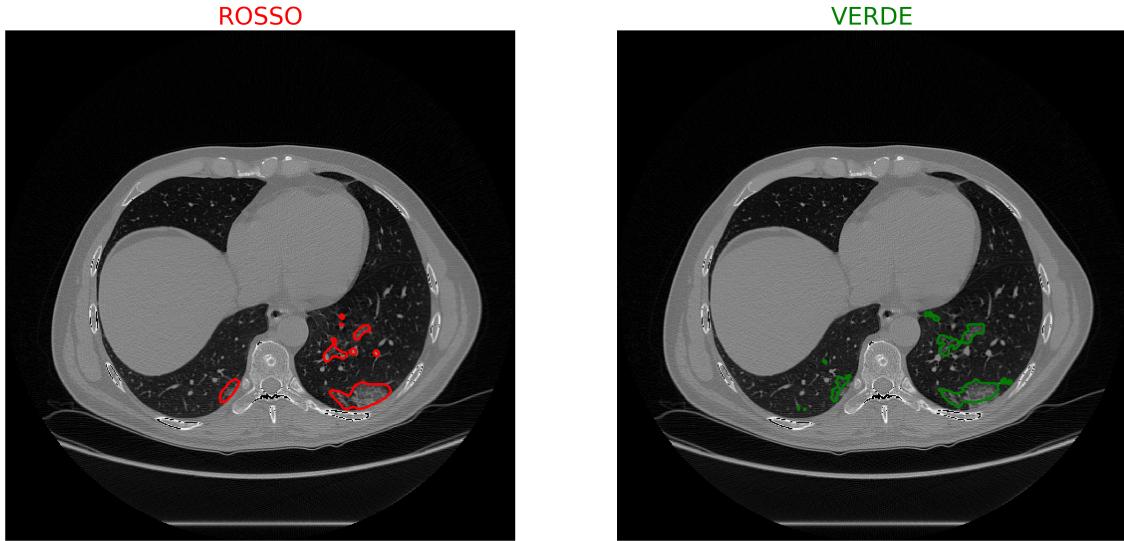
**Figure 3.8:** Comparison between the gold standard segmentation(blue) and the pipeline results(pink) for axial, sagittal and coronal view of a patient with a low involvement of lung volume. We can see that te main lesion areas are identified, even if an underestimation of the total volume is present together with some small misclassified points.

(the first) or days (the seconds). Moreover the automatic method has the advantages of the speed and of the independence from an external operator.

## 3.4 Expert Evaluation

An other measure for the pipeline performances was a blind evaluation. In collaboration with the Department of Diagnostic and Preventive Medicine of the Poloclinico Sant'Orsola - Malpighi, 3 experts with at least 2 years of experience have compared the pipeline segmentation and the reference labels (Annotation) provided within the dataset (obtained by semi-automatic technique).

To perform the evaluation I have randomly selected 10 patients from the three datasets and organized the scans as follows: for each patient I have displayed, slice by slice, two images: the scans with the pipeline segmentation (the one to test), and the semi-automatic labels provided within the dataset (control) as in Figure 3.9.



**Figure 3.9:** Example of comparison submitted to the experts. The two images report the segmentation of the same slices achieved with two different techniques: Manual and pipeline. Was asked to the expert to decide which one is better, without knowing which technique is used to obtain the segmentation.

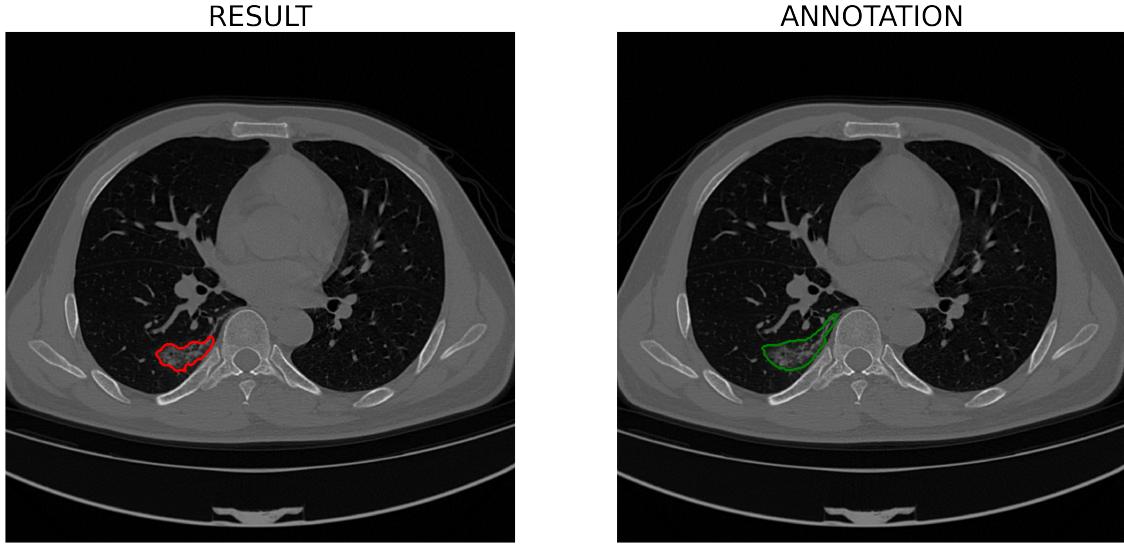
The scans, organized in this way, was submitted to experts, who has been asked to decide for each scan which segmentation is better or if the quality is equal. For each sample, the whole scan was submitted, considering also the slices without lesion.

The core of this method is that the experts do not know which scan corresponds to a specific segmentation technique, so this will lead to an ideally unbiased evaluation. In order to ensure that, the order of segmentation was shuffled between patients. The expert have validated the scans independently, so for each patient I have at most 3 different results.

Patient	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Pipeline	0.06	0.28	0.06	0.92	0.06	0.41	0.13	0.04	0	0.35
Annotation	0.60	0.23	0.80	0.00	0.51	0.27	0.53	0.01	0.43	0.13
None	0.34	0.49	0.14	0.08	0.42	0.32	0.34	0.95	0.57	0.52

**Table 3.2:** Rate of positive evaluation for each class.

In Table 3.2 I have reported the results of this evaluation. For each patient I have displayed the rate of positive evaluation for the pipeline segmentation and the



**Figure 3.10:** Pipeline results vs Manual annotation for the 9<sup>th</sup> patient. As we can see, even if the manual segmentation were classified abetter than the pipeline one, the last seems to be consistent.

annotation. Moreover I have also reported the rate of equal evaluation (None). Notice that this analysis takes into account also the slices in which there aren't lesions. In this way also the false positives were takes into account.

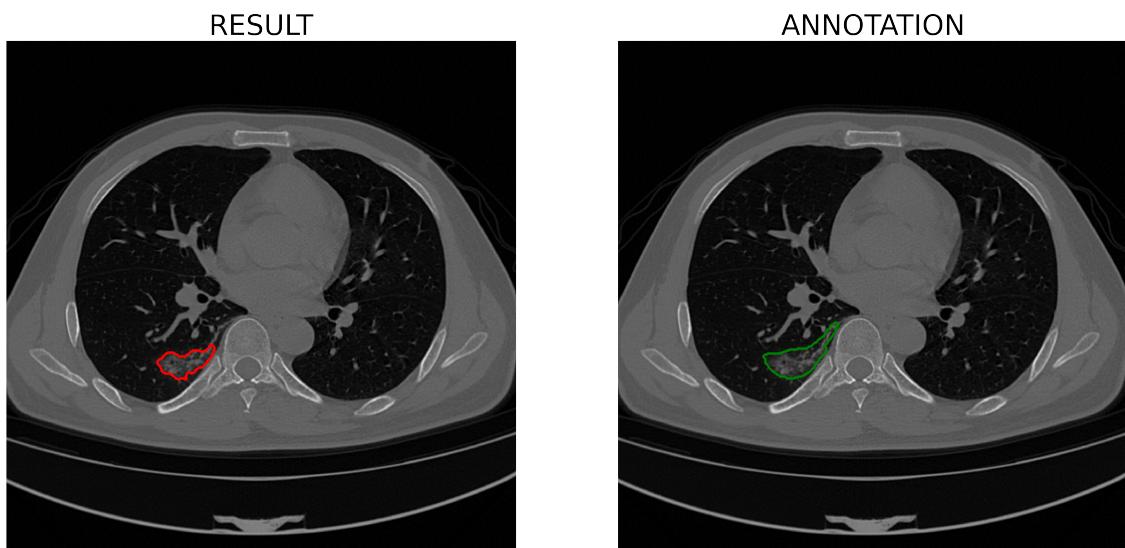
As we can see the pipeline seems to return a better segmentation in more or less an half of the total cases, sometimes may happen that the pipeline show a worst segmentation than the annotation (Patient 9). However we have to point out that this does not mean the achievement of an inconsistent segmentation, but only that the manual annotation is more accurate.

In Figure 3.10 I have reported a matching between the pipeline segmentation (red) and the manual annotation. as w can see the two segmentation are consistent. However the pipeline tends to underestimate the lesion area.

In Figure 3.11 I have matching the segmentation results for patient 10. The pipeline (red) has evaluated to provide a better lesion identification than the annotation (green). We can notice that in this case some healthy regions are misclassified by the operator, bu are correctly removed by the pipeline.

Moreover we can point out that, at least in the most typical cases, the difference between the pipeline segmentation and annotation is due mainly on the second one, since the subjectivity to the operator experience and the available segmentation time (hour or days) affect the quality. On the other hand the developed approach does not suffer of these drawbacks, since it is automatic and fast.

In the end, as final consideration, I have measured the rate of positive evaluation for each class, considering all the results provided. The results are reported in Table ?? from we can notice that the pipeline and annotation gives positives results more or less with the same rate. Given two different labels it usually it is difficult to spot which is obtained by the pipeline.



**Figure 3.11:** Pipeline results vs Manual annotation for the 9<sup>th</sup> patient. As we can see, even if the manual segmentation were classified abetter than the pipeline one, the last seems to be consistent.

Class	Score rate
Pipeline	0.31
Annotation	0.33
None	0.35

**Table 3.3:** Score rate of positive evaluation for each class. As we can see the results seems to be uniformly distributed.



# Conclusions

In this thesis work I have developed a fully automated pipeline for the identification GGO and CS in CT scans of patients affected by COVID-19. As primary step a lung segmentation was performed using a pre trained U-Net. This is followed by a bronchial removal, which successfully reduce the number of false positives. In order to achieve the identification I have used the colour quantization as medical image segmentation technique. It allows to identify the different areas inside the lung grouping them by colour similarity. Since the lesions involves many closest voxels, I have used the colour of the image to encode also neighbourhood information. This was done by assign at each channel a different functions of the image (median blurring, gamma correction, neighbourhood standard deviation and CLAHE). To achieve the segmentation I have found the characteristic colour of each tissue, performing a k-means clustering in the colour space. This set can be used to segment several scans by assigning each voxel to the nearest colour.

The pipeline was tested over 3 datasets, by comparing the results with the annotation provided within. It has shown to correctly identify the GGO areas, with an high specificity, reducing the number of false positives. Even if the segmentation accuracy is not as the one of manual method, the time performances and the independence from an external expert operator make it suitable to obtain good estimations in a small amount of time.

In the end color quantization has shown to be a suitable approach to face this kind of problem.



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