

1023-20-712

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The interplay between the characteristic and resonance varieties of a group leads to new obstructions to formality and quasi-projectivity. When combined with a complex analogue of the Bestvina-Brady Morse theory for groups, this approach yields examples of smooth, complex projective varieties whose fundamental groups are not commensurable to the fundamental group of any aspherical, quasi-projective variety. (Received September 21, 2006)