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# ***Wavelet Applications in Signal and Image Processing VIII***

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*Chairs/Editors*

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# Contents

xiii *Conference Committee*

## Part One

### SESSION 1 SAMPLING AND APPROXIMATION

---

- 1 **Curvelets, multiresolution representation, and scaling laws (Invited Paper)** [4119-01]  
E. J. Candès, D. L. Donoho, Stanford Univ. (USA)
- 13 **New Fourier reconstruction algorithms for computerized tomography (Invited Paper)** [4119-02]  
D. Potts, Medical Univ. of Lübeck (Germany); G. Steidl, Univ. of Mannheim (Germany)
- 24 **Irregular sampling algorithm for general subspaces** [4119-03]  
S. Li, San Francisco State Univ. (USA)
- 36 **Sampling for shift-invariant and wavelet subspaces** [4119-04]  
J. A. Hogan, Macquarie Univ. (Australia); J. D. Lakey, New Mexico State Univ. (USA)
- 48 **OFDM, Laurent operators, and time-frequency localization (Invited Paper)** [4119-05]  
T. Strohmer, Univ. of California/Davis (USA)

### SESSION 2 CONTINUOUS WAVELET TRANSFORM AND FEATURE DETECTION

---

- 58 **Analysis of random cascades using the wavelet transform: from theoretical concepts to experimental applications (Invited Paper)** [4119-06]  
A. Arneodo, J. Delour, J. F. Muzy, Ctr. de Recherche Paul Pascal (France)
- 70 **Application of two-dimensional continuous wavelet transform for pose estimation (Invited Paper)** [4119-07]  
L. M. Kaplan, R. Murenzi, Clark Atlanta Univ. (USA)
- 82 **Wavelet-based contrast computation and application to digital image watermarking (Invited Paper)** [4119-08]  
P. Vandergheynst, M. Kutter, S. Winkler, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Lausanne
- 93 **Shape from texture using continuous wavelet transform (Invited Paper)** [4119-09]  
H. Führ, Technische Univ. München (Germany); W.-L. Hwang, Institute of Information Science (Taiwan); B. Torrèsani, Univ. de Provence (France)
- 108 **Curvelets and reconstruction of images from noisy radon data (Invited Paper)** [4119-10]  
E. J. Candès, D. L. Donoho, Stanford Univ. (USA)

### SESSION 3 FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS OF WAVELETS I

---

- 118 **Multiplexing of signals using superframes (Invited Paper)** [4119-11]  
R. Balan, Siemens Corporate Research (USA)

- 130 **Nonuniform sampling and spiral MRI reconstruction (Invited Paper)** [4119-12]  
J. J. Benedetto, Univ. of Maryland/College Park (USA); H.-C. Wu, Digital Systems Resources, Inc. (USA)
- 142 **Classifying characteristic functions giving Weyl-Heisenberg frames (Invited Paper)** [4119-13]  
P. G. Casazza, Univ. of Missouri/Columbia (USA); M. C. Lammers, Univ of South Carolina (USA)
- 153 **Density of Gabor Schauder bases (Invited Paper)** [4119-14]  
B. Deng, Columbus State Univ. (USA); C. E. Heil, Georgia Institute of Technology (USA)
- 165 **Generalized frame multiresolution analysis of abstract Hilbert spaces and their applications (Invited Paper)** [4119-15]  
M. Papadakis, Univ. of Houston (USA)

---

#### SESSION 4 NATURAL IMAGE MODELING

---

- 176 **Hierarchical wavelet-based image model for pattern analysis and synthesis (Invited Paper)** [4119-16]  
C. Scott, R. D. Nowak, Rice Univ. (USA)
- 185 **Learning optimal codes for natural images and sounds (Invited Paper)** [4119-17]  
M. S. Lewicki, Carnegie Mellon Univ. (USA)
- 200 **Learning sparse wavelet codes for natural images (Invited Paper)** [4119-18]  
B. A. Olshausen, P. Sallee, Univ. of California/Davis (USA); M. S. Lewicki, Carnegie Mellon Univ. (USA)
- 208 **Morphological statistics of natural images and consequences (Invited Paper)** [4119-19]  
Y. Gousseau, École Normale Supérieure de Cachan (France)
- 215 **Multiscale image segmentation using joint texture and shape analysis** [4119-20]  
R. Neelamani, J. K. Romberg, H. Choi, R. M. Riedi, R. G. Baraniuk, Rice Univ. (USA)
- 229 **Random cascades on wavelet trees and their use in analyzing and modeling natural images (Invited Paper)** [4119-132]  
M. J. Wainwright, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (USA); E. P. Simoncelli, New York Univ. (USA); A. S. Willsky, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (USA)

---

#### SESSION 5 PATTERN RECOGNITION/EXTRACTION

---

- 241 **Dyadic wavelet-based affine invariants for planar object recognition** [4119-21]  
M. I. Khalil, M. M. Bayoumi, Queen's Univ. (Canada)
- 253 **Multiresolution wedgelet transform for image processing** [4119-22]  
R. L. Claypoole, Jr., Air Force Institute of Technology (USA); R. G. Baraniuk, Rice Univ. (USA)
- 263 **Dyadic frames of directional wavelets as texture descriptors** [4119-23]  
G. Menegaz, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Lausanne; A. Rivoldini, Univ. Catholique de Louvain (Belgium); J.-Ph. Thiran, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Lausanne

- 274 **Rotation-invariant texture retrieval using steerable wavelet-domain hidden Markov models** [4119-24]  
M. N. Do, A. C. Lozano, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Lausanne; M. Vetterli, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Lausanne and Univ. of California/Berkeley (USA)
- 286 **Learning optimal wavelets from overcomplete representations** [4119-25]  
H. Eghbalnia, A. H. Assadi, Univ. of Wisconsin/Madison (USA)
- 294 **High-resolution formant estimation and its application in frequency scaling of speech** [4119-26]  
D. J. Nelson, U.S. Dept. of Defense; S. Umesh, Indian Institute of Technology/Kanpur;  
L. Cohen, CUNY/Hunter College (USA)

---

#### SESSION 6 LIFTING AND APPLICATIONS

---

- 302 **Denoising via adaptive lifting schemes (Invited Paper)** [4119-28]  
W. K. Trappe, K. J. R. Liu, Univ. of Maryland/College Park (USA)
- 313 **Minimum memory implementations of the lifting scheme** [4119-29]  
C. G. Chrysafis, Hewlett-Packard Labs. (USA); A. Ortega, Univ. of Southern California (USA)

---

#### SESSION 7 FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS OF WAVELETS II

---

- 325 **Modular frames for Hilbert C\*-modules and symmetric approximation of frames (Invited Paper)** [4119-32]  
M. Frank, Univ. Leipzig (Germany); D. R. Larson, Texas A&M Univ. (USA)
- 337 **Gabor frames and operator algebras (Invited Paper)** [4119-33]  
J.-P. Gabardo, D. Han, McMaster Univ. (Canada); D. R. Larson, Texas A&M Univ. (USA)
- 346 **Compactly supported wavelets and representations of the Cuntz relations II (Invited Paper)** [4119-34]  
P. E. T. Jorgensen, Univ. of Iowa (USA)
- 356 **Biorthogonality and multiwavelets in Hilbert spaces (Invited Paper)** [4119-35]  
W.-S. Tang, National Univ. of Singapore

---

#### SESSION 8 MULTIWAVELETS

---

- 363 **Image denoising using a local Gaussian scale mixture model in the wavelet domain (Invited Paper)** [4119-38]  
V. Strela, Drexel Univ. (USA); J. Portilla, E. P. Simoncelli, New York Univ. (USA)
- 372 **Multiwavelet characterization of function spaces adapted to the Navier-Stokes equations (Invited Paper)** [4119-40]  
J. D. Lakey, S. Obeidat, New Mexico State Univ. (USA); M. C. Pereyra, Univ. of New Mexico (USA)
- 384 **Algorithm for the construction of symmetric and antisymmetric M-band wavelets (Invited Paper)** [4119-41]  
Q. Sun, National Univ. of Singapore

- 395 **Necessary conditions for the existence of multivariate multiscaling functions (Invited Paper)** [4119-42]  
C. A. Cabrelli, Univ. de Buenos Aires (Argentina) and Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas (Argentina); C. E. Heil, Georgia Institute of Technology (USA); U. M. Molter, Univ. de Buenos Aires (Argentina) and Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas (Argentina)

---

## SESSION 9 THEORETICAL ISSUES

---

- 407 **Classification of transforms** [4119-44]  
L. Cohen, CUNY/Hunter College (USA); A. R. Lindsey, B. W. Suter, Air Force Research Lab. (USA)
- 411 **Perturbation stability of various coherent Riesz families** [4119-45]  
W. Kozek, Siemens AG (Germany); G. E. Pfander, G. Zimmermann, Univ. Hohenheim (Germany)
- 420 **Lower bounds for finite wavelet and Gabor systems (Invited Paper)** [4119-46]  
O. Christensen, Technical Univ. of Denmark; A. M. Lindner, Univ. of Erlangen-Nuremberg (Germany)

---

## SESSION 10 NOVEL WAVELET FEATURES AND COMPUTATIONS

---

- 425 **Pseudo power signatures for image classification: SVD and projector approaches** [4119-47]  
V. Venkatachalam, Rice Univ. (USA)
- 434 **Beamlet pyramids: a new form of multiresolution analysis suited for extracting lines, curves, and objects from very noisy image data** [4119-49]  
D. L. Donoho, Stanford Univ. (USA); X. Huo, Georgia Institute of Technology (USA)

---

## SESSION 11 SPARSITY AND STATISTICAL INDEPENDENCE IN IMAGE REPRESENTATIONS

---

- 445 **Learning sparse overcomplete image representations (Invited Paper)** [4119-51]  
B. A. Olshausen, K. J. Millman, Univ. of California/Davis (USA)
- 453 **Learning classes of efficient codes (Invited Paper)** [4119-52]  
T.-W. Lee, Univ. of California/San Diego (USA); M. S. Lewicki, Carnegie Mellon Univ. (USA)
- 459 **FOCUSS-based dictionary learning algorithms (Invited Paper)** [4119-53]  
K. Kreutz-Delgado, B. D. Rao, Univ. of California/San Diego (USA)
- 474 **Sparsity vs. statistical independence from a best-basis viewpoint (Invited Paper)** [4119-54]  
N. Saito, B. M. Larson, B. Bénichou, Univ. of California/Davis (USA)

---

## SESSION 12 WAVELET DESIGN I

---

- 487 **Wavelets and radial basis functions: a unifying perspective (Invited Paper)** [4119-55]  
M. A. Unser, T. Blu, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Lausanne
- 494 **Rhomboidal local cosine transform (Invited Paper)** [4119-57]  
D. W. Warner, Vexcel Corp. (USA); D. M. Healy, Jr., DARPA (USA); D. N. Rockmore, Dartmouth College (USA)

- 506 **Multiresolution analysis structures generated by spline multiscaling functions (Invited Paper)** [4119-58]  
A. Cammilleri, E. P. Serrano, Univ. de Buenos Aires (Argentina)

---

## SESSION 13 WAVELET DESIGN II

---

- 519 **Balanced nonseparable orthogonal multiwavelets with two and three vanishing moments on the quincunx grid (Invited Paper)** [4119-59]  
A. M. C. Ruedin, Univ. de Buenos Aires (Argentina)
- 528 **Generalized Haar wavelets and frames** [4119-60]  
G. E. Pfander, Univ. Hohenheim (Germany)
- 536 **Directional complex-wavelet processing** [4119-61]  
F. C. A. Fernandes, Rice Univ. (USA); R. van Spaendonck, Delft Univ. of Technology (Netherlands); M. J. Coates, C. S. Burrus, Rice Univ. (USA)
- 547 **Canonical angles, subspace partitioning, and hybrid wavelet packets** [4119-62]  
R. A. Hedges, Air Force Research Lab. (USA)
- 556 **Unconditional Haar bases for Lebesgue spaces on spaces of homogeneous type** [4119-63]  
H. Aimar, O. Gorosito, Univ. Nacional del Litoral (Argentina)
- 564 **Lifting scheme of biorthogonal wavelet transform based on discrete interpolatory splines** [4119-64]  
A. Z. Averbuch, Tel Aviv Univ. (Israel); A. B. Pevnyi, Syktyvkar Univ. (Russia); V. A. Zheludev, Tel Aviv Univ. (Israel)

## Part Two

---

## SESSION 14 WAVELETS AND MEDICAL IMAGING

---

- 576 **Tomographic reconstruction with nonlinear diagonal estimators (Invited Paper)** [4119-66]  
J. Kalifa, A. F. Laine, Columbia Univ. (USA); P. D. Esser, Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Ctr. (USA)
- 587 **Reconstruction in emission tomography via a Bayesian multiscale statistical framework (Invited Paper)** [4119-67]  
E. D. Kolaczyk, Boston Univ. (USA); R. D. Nowak, Rice Univ. (USA)
- 596 **Wavelet-based image processing for digital mammography (Invited Paper)** [4119-68]  
W. Qian, L. Li, X. Sun, R. A. Clark, Univ. of South Florida (USA)
- 605 **Spatiotemporal directional analysis of 4D echocardiography (Invited Paper)** [4119-69]  
E. D. Angelini, A. F. Laine, Columbia Univ. (USA); S. Takuma, S. Homma, Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Ctr. (USA)
- 615 **Activation detection in fMRI data via multiscale singularity detection** [4119-71]  
R. Mekerle, Columbia Univ. (USA); A. F. Laine, Columbia Univ. (USA) and Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Ctr. (USA); G. M. Perera, R. DeLaPaz, Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Ctr. (USA)
- 626 **Optimizing wavelets for the analysis of fMRI data** [4119-72]  
M. Feilner, T. Blu, M. A. Unser, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Lausanne

- 638 **Decomposition of fMRI data into multiple components [4119-73]**  
F. G. Meyer, Univ. of Colorado/Boulder (USA) and Univ. of Colorado Health Sciences Ctr. (USA)

#### **SESSION 15 WAVELETS AND APPROXIMATION THEORY**

---

- 650 **Image data compression with three-directional splines (Invited Paper) [4119-75]**  
M. Charina, Univ. Hohenheim (Germany); C. Conti, Univ. degli Studi di Firenze (Italy);  
K. Jetter, Univ. Hohenheim (Germany)
- 660 **Cone-beam x-ray tomography using continuous wavelet transformation (Invited Paper) [4119-76]**  
S. Zhao, Univ. of Missouri/St. Louis (USA); G. Wang, Univ. of Iowa (USA)
- 668 **Connection between p-frames and p-Riesz bases in locally finite SIS of  $L^p(\mathbb{R})$  [4119-78]**  
A. Aldroubi, Vanderbilt Univ. (USA); Q. Sun, W.-S. Tang, National Univ. of Singapore

#### **SESSION 16 MULTISCALE IMAGE PROCESSING**

---

- 675 **Information-theoretic interpretation of Besov spaces [4119-79]**  
H. Choi, R. G. Baraniuk, Rice Univ. (USA)
- 686 **Mixed memory model for image processing and modeling with complex Daubechies wavelets [4119-80]**  
D. Clonda, J.-M. Lina, B. Goulard, Univ. de Montréal (Canada)
- 698 **Multiplicative multiscale image decompositions: analysis and modeling [4119-81]**  
J. K. Romberg, R. M. Riedi, H. Choi, R. G. Baraniuk, Rice Univ. (USA)
- 710 **Non-Euclidean pyramids [4119-82]**  
A. Muñoz, T. Blu, M. A. Unser, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Lausanne
- 721 **Karhunen-Loève multispectral and multiscale image restoration [4119-83]**  
J.-L. Starck, Stanford Univ. (USA) and CEA Saclay (France); P. Querre, CEA Saclay (France);  
D. L. Donoho, Stanford Univ. (USA)

#### **SESSION 17 MULTIRATE FILTER BANK APPLICATIONS**

---

- 733 **Iterated oversampled filter banks and wavelet frames (Invited Paper) [4119-84]**  
I. W. Selesnick, L. Sendur, Polytechnic Univ. (USA)
- 745 **Minimum-redundancy ISI-free FIR filterbank transceivers (Invited Paper) [4119-85]**  
Y.-P. Lin, National Chiao Tung Univ. (Taiwan); S.-M. Phoong, National Taiwan Univ.
- 756 **Issues in nonuniform filter banks (Invited Paper) [4119-86]**  
S. Dasgupta, A. Pandharipande, Univ. of Iowa (USA)
- 768 **Nonuniform principal component filter banks: definitions, existence, and optimality (Invited Paper) [4119-87]**  
S. J. Akkarakaran, P. P. Vaidyanathan, California Institute of Technology (USA)

- 780 **Multiresolution analysis with decimated wavelet transform for image zooming (Invited Paper)**  
[4119-88]  
F. Nicolier, F. Truchetet, Univ. de Bourgogne (France)

---

#### SESSION 18 ADVANCES IN MULTIPLE DESCRIPTION CODING

---

- 787 **Optimal overcomplete subband expansions for multiple description coding (Invited Paper)**  
[4119-90]  
S. Mehrotra, Microsoft Corp. (USA)
- 799 **Setting priorities: a new SPIHT-compatible algorithm for image compression (Invited Paper)**  
[4119-91]  
D. Dugatkin, M. Effros, California Institute of Technology (USA)
- 806 **Graphical statistical modeling of wavelet coefficients and its applications (Invited Paper)**  
[4119-92]  
I. V. Kozintsev, Intel Corp. (USA); S. Xiao, Univ. of Illinois/Urbana-Champaign (USA);  
K. Ramchandran, Univ. of California/Berkeley (USA)

---

#### SESSION 19 DENOISING

---

- 821 **Shift-invariant Gibbs-free denoising algorithm based on wavelet transform footprints**  
[4119-94]  
P. L. Dragotti, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Lausanne; M. Vetterli, Swiss Federal  
Institute of Technology Lausanne and Univ. of California/Berkeley (USA)
- 831 **Image denoising using orthonormal finite ridgelet transform [4119-95]**  
M. N. Do, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Lausanne; M. Vetterli, Swiss Federal Institute  
of Technology Lausanne and Univ. of California/Berkeley (USA)
- 843 **Wavelet and multirate denoising for signal-dependent noise [4119-96]**  
B. Aiazzi, Research Institute on Electromagnetic Waves (Italy); L. Alparone, Univ. degli Studi  
di Firenze (Italy); S. Baronti, Research Institute on Electromagnetic Waves (Italy); A. Garzelli,  
Univ. degli Studi di Siena (Italy)
- 853 **Wavelet despiking of fractographs [4119-98]**  
J.-M. Aubry, N. Saito, Univ. of California/Davis (USA)
- 861 **Wavelet denoising by MSFI and NSFI (Invited Paper) [4119-99]**  
E.-B. Lin, Univ. of Toledo (USA)

---

#### POSTER SESSION

---

- 870 **Early recognition of Alzheimer's disease in EEG using recurrent neural network and wavelet transform [4119-100]**  
A. A. Petrosian, Texas Tech Univ. Health Sciences Ctr. (USA); D. Prokhorov, Ford Research  
Lab. (USA); R. B. Schiffer, Texas Tech Univ. Health Sciences Ctr. (USA)
- 878 **Adaptive Kalman filtering deconvolution via dyadic wavelet transform [4119-101]**  
E. Dong, G. Liu, Z. Zhang, Xi'an Jiaotong Univ. (China)

- 886 **Application of local discriminant bases discrimination algorithm for theater missile defense** [4119-103]  
M. L. Cassabaum, H. A. Schmitt, H.-W. Chen, J. G. Riddle, Raytheon Systems Co. (USA)
- 894 **Multiscale edge representation applied to image fusion** [4119-105]  
P. Scheunders, Univ. of Antwerp (Belgium)
- 902 **Robust lifting wavelet transform for subimage extraction** [4119-106]  
S. Takano, K. Niijima, Kyushu Univ. (Japan)
- 911 **Image compression with adaptive Haar-Walsh tilings** [4119-107]  
M. Lindberg, Åbo Akademi Univ. (Finland); L. F. Villemoes, Royal Institute of Technology (Sweden)
- 922 **Tunable continuous wavelet and frame transforms** [4119-108]  
J. F. Scholl, D. L. Barker, H. A. Schmitt, Raytheon Systems Co. (USA); J. D. Langan, Computational Sensors Corp. (USA)
- 934 **Very low bit-rate video coding using a new kind of compact biorthogonal wavelet** [4119-109]  
W. Hou, Y. Mo, H. Liu, H. Hu, Shanghai Univ. (China)
- 942 **Q-wave: a flexible and low-complexity quadtree wavelet encoder** [4119-110]  
M. Grangetto, E. Magli, G. Olmo, Politecnico di Torino (Italy)
- 950 **Performance of integer wavelets for the lossy compression of smooth images** [4119-111]  
M. Grangetto, E. Magli, G. Olmo, Politecnico di Torino (Italy)
- 959 **Wavelet-based algorithm for acoustic detection of moving ground and airborne targets** [4119-112]  
A. Z. Averbuch, V. A. Zheludev, Tel Aviv Univ. (Israel); I. Kozlov, Electro-Optics Research and Development Ltd. (Israel)
- 971 **Efficient seismic volume compression using the lifting scheme** [4119-113]  
F. M. Khene, S. H. Abdul-Jauwad, King Fahd Univ. of Petroleum and Minerals (Saudi Arabia)
- 983 **Attenuation and dispersion of a monopulse in layered and lossy media using an adaptive multiscale wavelet collocation method** [4119-114]  
Y. Wang, R.-S. Wu, Univ. of California/Santa Cruz (USA); W.-B. Wang, Xi'an Jiaotong Univ. (China)
- 991 **Combining speckle reduction and data compression for synthetic aperture radar (SAR) images in wavelet domain** [4119-115]  
P. Thitimajshima, King Mongkut's Institute of Technology Ladkrabang (Thailand)
- 996 **Improved zerotree coding algorithm for wavelet image compression** [4119-116]  
J. Chen, Y. Li, C. Wu, Xidian Univ. (China)
- 1002 **Calculating rhythmicity of infant breathing using wavelets** [4119-118]  
K. E. Macey, Univ. of Canterbury (New Zealand) and Univ. of California/Los Angeles (USA); W. H. Page, The Open Group (New Zealand); R. M. Harper, P. M. Macey, Univ. of California/Los Angeles (USA); R. P. K. Ford, Christchurch Hospital (New Zealand)
- 1011 **Nonuniform spatially adaptive wavelet packets** [4119-119]  
P. Carré, C. Fernandez, Univ. de Poitiers (France)

- 1020 **Exponential-quadratic optimal signal reconstruction in noisy filter banks [4119-121]**  
H. Vikalo, A. T. Erdogan, Stanford Univ. (USA); B. Hassibi, Lucent Technologies/Bell Labs. (USA); T. Kailath, Stanford Univ. (USA)
- 1029 **Perspective invariant function using dyadic wavelet transform [4119-122]**  
M. I. Khalil, M. M. Bayoumi, Queen's Univ. (Canada)
- 1038 **Evaluation of a multiscale enhancement protocol for digital mammography [4119-124]**  
R. Mekle, Columbia Univ. (USA); A. F. Laine, Columbia Univ. (USA) and Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Ctr. (USA); S. Smith, C. Singer, T. Koenigsberg, M. Brown, Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Ctr. (USA)
- 1050 **Automatic detection of epileptic events in scalp EEG [4119-125]**  
S. I. Isaacson, C. E. D'Attellis, R. O. Sirne, Univ. de Buenos Aires (Argentina)
- 1058 **Discrete wavelet approach to multifractality [4119-126]**  
S. I. Isaacson, S. C. Gabbanelli, J. R. Busch, Univ. de Buenos Aires (Argentina)
- 1066 **Differential affine motion estimation for medical image registration [4119-128]**  
S. Periaswamy, Dartmouth College (USA); J. B. Weaver, Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Ctr. (USA) and Dartmouth College (USA); D. M. Healy, Jr., Univ. of Maryland/College Park (USA); D. N. Rockmore, P. J. Kostelec, H. Farid, Dartmouth College (USA)
- 1076 **Multiscale nonrigid data registration using adaptive basis functions [4119-129]**  
T. Dinschenbacher, G. K. Rohde, D. P. Hardin, A. Aldroubi, B. M. Dawant, Vanderbilt Univ. (USA)
- 1084 **Gerchberg-Papoulis algorithm and the finite Zak transform [4119-130]**  
A. K. Brodzik, Scientific Software (USA); R. Tolimieri, Psypher, Inc. (USA)
- 1094 **Superriium of perturbation for sampling in shift-invariant subspaces [4119-134]**  
W. Chen, S. Itoh, J. Shiki, Univ. of Electro-Communications (Japan)
- 1104 *Addendum*
- 1106 *Author Index*

# Tomographic reconstruction with non-linear diagonal estimators

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## ABSTRACT

In tomographic reconstruction, the inversion of the Radon transform in the presence of noise is numerically unstable. Reconstruction estimators are studied where the regularization is performed by a thresholding in a wavelet or wavelet packet decomposition. These estimators are efficient and their optimality (minimax sense for bounded variation images) can be established when the decomposition provides a near-diagonalization of the inverse Radon transform operator and a compact representation of the object to be recovered. Several new estimators are investigated in different decompositions. First numerical results already exhibit a strong metrical and perceptual improvement over current reconstruction methods. These estimators are implemented with fast non-iterative algorithms, and are expected to outperform Filtered Back-Projection and iterative procedures for PET, SPECT and X-ray CT devices.

**Keywords:** Global tomographic reconstruction, wavelets and wavelet packets, bounded variation images, minimax optimality.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Tomographic reconstruction

We are interested in the recovery of an image  $f$  from its tomographic projections  $Y$ , also called sinograms, and defined as:

$$Y = \mathcal{R}f + W \quad (1)$$

where  $f[n_1, n_2] \in \mathbb{C}^{N^2}$  is the observed image,  $W$  is an additive noise, usually modeled as Gaussian or Poisson, and  $\mathcal{R}$  is the discrete Radon transform. The discrete Radon transform is derived from its continuous version  $\mathcal{R}_c$ , which is equivalent to the X-ray transform in two dimensions and is defined as<sup>1</sup>

$$(\mathcal{R}_c f_c)(t, \alpha) = \int_{-\infty}^{\infty} \int_{-\infty}^{\infty} f_c(x_1, x_2) \delta(x_1 \cos \alpha + x_2 \sin \alpha - t) dx_1 dx_2. \quad (2)$$

where  $f_c(x_1, x_2) \in L^2(\mathbb{R}^2)$ ,  $\delta$  is the Dirac mass,  $\alpha \in [0, 2\pi)$ , and  $t \in \mathbb{R}$ . In the discrete Radon transform, a line integral along  $x_1 \cos \alpha + x_2 \sin \alpha = t$  can be approximated by a summation of the pixel values inside the strip  $t - 1/2 \leq n_1 \cos \alpha + n_2 \sin \alpha < t + 1/2$ .

Tomographic reconstruction is ubiquitous in medical imaging. Imaging devices such as X-ray CTs, Positron Emission Tomography (PET), Single Positron Emission Computerized Tomography (SPECT) measure the density or the metabolic activity of a section of the patient's body (ie, roughly speaking, produce sinograms  $Y$ ), and an estimation of the image  $f$  representing the observed section is derived by a tomographic reconstruction procedure from the sinograms.

A direct inversion of the Radon transform is computed with an amplification of high frequency components of  $Y$  in the direction of  $t$ , followed by a spatial interpolation. A fundamental difficulty of tomographic reconstruction comes from the fact that the Radon transform is a smoothing transform, and inverting the Radon transform in presence of additive noise is an *ill-posed* inverse problem,<sup>2</sup> because  $\mathcal{R}_c^{-1}$  is not a bounded linear operator; numerically speaking, a direct computation of  $\mathcal{R}^{-1}f$  would be contaminated by a huge additive noise  $Z = \mathcal{R}^{-1}W$ .

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## 1.2. Regularization Procedures

Filtered Back-Projection (FBP) and its derivatives are the most popular regularization methods for tomographic reconstruction. These are linear filtering techniques in the Fourier space. In these procedures, the amplification of high frequencies to compute the inverse Radon transform is attenuated to damp out high frequency components in which the amplitude of the noise  $Z = \mathcal{R}^{-1}W$  would be too high. However, FBP suffers from serious performance limitations, due to the fact that the vectors of the Fourier basis provide a good representation (diagonalization) of the Radon operator, but are not adapted to represent spatially inhomogeneous data such as medical images. In other words, the Fourier basis is suboptimal for the denoising and restoration of piece-wise regular signals because it does not provide a compact representation of this type of objects.

To improve the performance of tomographic reconstruction procedures, researchers have studied iterative statistical model-based techniques, designed to implement Expectation-Maximization (EM) and Maximum A Posteriori (MAP) estimators.<sup>3,4</sup> In some cases, these approaches can provide a significant improvement over FBP. However, these estimators suffer from the following drawbacks:

- Computation time. Almost all the corresponding algorithms are too computer-intensive and not usable yet for clinical applications, with the exception of OS-EM<sup>5</sup> (an accelerated implementation of an EM estimator). In MAP methods, useful priors usually give local maxima, and the computational cost of relaxation methods is prohibitive.
- Theoretical understanding and justification. EM estimators lack theoretical foundations to understand and characterize the estimation error. Some MAP estimators are in some cases better understood, yet no optimality for a realistic model has been established.
- Convergence. EM estimators are ill-conditioned, in the sense that the corresponding iterative algorithms have to be stopped after a limited number of iterations. Beyond this critical number, the noise is magnified, and EM and OS-EM converge to a non-ML (Maximum Likelihood) solution.

This study aims at building a family of non-linear estimators, for which the estimation error is understood and the optimality is established for a realistic prior model of the data, which can be implemented with fast non-iterative algorithms, and which provide better numerical results, both metrically and perceptually. Such algorithms should also be flexible enough to be compatible with other specific needs, such as local tomographic reconstruction, limited angle tomography, and post-processing algorithms.

## 1.3. Non-linear Diagonal Estimators

A general strategy was recently advocated by Kalifa and Mallat<sup>6</sup> to solve linear inverse problems:

1. "Diagonalization" of the problem. Design a decomposition in which the Gram inverse operator -here,  $\mathcal{R}^{-1*}\mathcal{R}^{-1}$ - of the operator to be inverted is nearly diagonal, and in which the object to be estimated is compactly represented.
2. Design diagonal operators (typically thresholding rules) in this representation to estimate the decomposition coefficients of the signal to be recovered.

The Wavelet-Vaguelette Decomposition of Donoho,<sup>7</sup> which has been studied numerically by Kolaczyk<sup>8</sup> for tomographic reconstruction and refined by Lee and Lucier,<sup>9</sup> and the curvelet-based estimator of Candès and Donoho,<sup>10</sup> are particular examples. Section 2 briefly recalls the underlying formalism and the justifications of this approach. The asymptotic optimality is characterized on a set modeling the prior information on the signals, which often happens, especially for natural images, to be a more realistic and simpler model than probabilistic priors. Section 3 implements this strategy to build simple minimax optimal estimators for bounded variation images in 1-D and 2-D orthogonal wavelet bases. Section 4 investigates the benefits of wavelet packets, as well as directional selectivity on images using better 2-D wavelet transforms. The corresponding estimators have similar minimax optimality properties than the estimators in orthogonal wavelet bases of section 3, but can provide significant numerical enhancements. Section 5 shows a numerical application on a simulation of PET acquisition of the Shepp-Logan phantom. Preliminary results already show a strong metrical and perceptual improvement over Filtered Back-Projection.

**Notation:** if  $\beta_1$  and  $\beta_2$  depend upon the parameters of the problem, such as the signal size  $N$  or any other parameter, we write  $\beta_1 \sim \beta_2$  and say that they are equivalent, if there exists two constant  $A, B > 0$  such that for all values of these parameters  $A\beta_1 \leq \beta_2 \leq B\beta_1$ .

## 2. DIAGONAL ESTIMATORS FOR LINEAR INVERSE PROBLEMS

The results summarized in this section are detailed in.<sup>6</sup> We consider the estimation problem in (1), which is also equivalent to the denoising problem

$$X = f + Z \quad (3)$$

where  $X = \mathcal{R}^{-1}Y$  and  $Z = \mathcal{R}^{-1}W$ . The noise  $W$  is considered Gaussian of variance  $\sigma^2$  to simplify the explanations.  $Z$  is still Gaussian because the inverse Radon transform is a linear operator. Its covariance operator is  $K = \sigma^2 \mathcal{R}^{-1*} \mathcal{R}^{-1}$ .

### 2.1. Thresholding Estimators

A thresholding estimator  $\tilde{F}$  of  $f$  in a basis  $\mathcal{B} = \{g_m\}_m$  is computed with

$$\tilde{F} = \sum_m \rho_{T_m}(\langle X, g_m \rangle) g_m, \quad (4)$$

when the denoising is performed after the application of the inverse operator  $\mathcal{R}^{-1}$ , or with

$$\tilde{F} = \mathcal{R}^{-1} \left( \sum_m \rho_{T_m}(\langle Y, g_m \rangle) g_m \right), \quad (5)$$

when the denoising is performed before the application of  $\mathcal{R}^{-1}$ .  $\rho_{T_m}$  is a thresholding operator.  $T_m$  are the threshold values, and are different in (4) and (5). Typical thresholding rules include hard thresholding

$$\rho_{T_m}(x) = \begin{cases} x & \text{if } |x| > T_m \\ 0 & \text{if } |x| \leq T_m \end{cases}, \quad (6)$$

and soft thresholding

$$\rho_{T_m}(x) = \begin{cases} x - T_m & \text{if } x \geq T_m \\ x + T_m & \text{if } x \leq -T_m \\ 0 & \text{if } |x| \leq T_m \end{cases}. \quad (7)$$

If the noise  $Z$  in (3) was white, the choice of the basis  $\mathcal{B}$  would only depend on the prior information on the object  $f$ . Indeed, Donoho and Johnstone<sup>11</sup> proved that, with a proper choice of threshold values  $T_m$ , thresholding estimators in an orthonormal basis are nearly optimal for white noise removal if the basis provides a sparse signal representation, which means that the basis concentrates the energy of the signal on a few coefficients. In our situation, the choice of  $\mathcal{B}$  also depends on the noise  $Z$ .

### 2.2. Near-Diagonalization of the Estimation Problem

The assumption underlying diagonal estimators in a basis is that each coefficient in this decomposition can be estimated independently. As a consequence, such estimators are efficient if the coefficients of the noise and of the object to be recovered are indeed nearly independent in the basis  $\mathcal{B}$ . This means that  $\mathcal{B}$  must provide a near-diagonalization of the covariance operator  $K$  of the noise  $Z$  and of the prior information on the object  $f$ .

The near-diagonalization of the covariance operator  $K$  of  $Z$  is measured by preconditioning  $K$  with its diagonal. Let  $K_d$  be the diagonal operator in the basis  $\mathcal{B}$ , whose diagonal values are equal to the diagonal values of  $K$ , noted  $\sigma_m^2$ :

$$\sigma_m^2 = \langle K g_m, g_m \rangle.$$

The square root  $K_d^{1/2}$  is the diagonal matrix whose coefficients are  $\sigma_m$ . The diagonal preconditioning factor of  $K^{-1}$  in the basis  $\mathcal{B}$  is defined as

$$\lambda_B = \|K_d^{1/2} K^{-1} K_d^{1/2}\|_s. \quad (8)$$

It satisfies  $\lambda_B \geq 1$ . We have  $\lambda_B = 1$  if and only if  $K = K_d$ , which means that  $K$  is diagonal in  $\mathcal{B}$ . The closer  $\lambda_B$  is to 1 the more diagonal  $K$ .

The best method to measure the near-diagonalization of the prior information on  $f$  depends on its nature. In a classical Bayes estimation framework,  $f$  is modeled as a realization of a random process  $F$ , whose probability distribution is known

a priori. However, complex signals such as natural images are highly non-Gaussian, and there is no probabilistic model that incorporates their spatial inhomogeneity. The prior information often defines a set  $\Theta$  to which signals are guaranteed to belong, without specifying their probability distribution. For example, many images have some form of piecewise regularity, which can be characterized by bounded Besov norms<sup>12</sup> or a bounded total variation, which specify a prior set  $\Theta$ . With this type of prior model, the near-diagonalization of the prior information can be measured with orthosymmetric sets. Any signal  $f$  can be decomposed as  $f = \sum_m f_B[m] g_m$ . A set  $\Theta$  is *orthosymmetric* in  $\mathcal{B}$  if for any  $f \in \Theta$  and for any  $a[m]$  with  $|a[m]| \leq 1$  then

$$\sum_m a[m] f_B[m] g_m \in \Theta.$$

This means that the set  $\Theta$  is elongated along the directions of the vectors  $g_m$  of  $\mathcal{B}$ .

### 2.3. Minimax estimation

When the prior model on the signals is a set  $\Theta$ , the estimation error for an estimator  $\tilde{F} = DX$  is characterized by the maximum risk over  $\Theta$ :

$$r(D, \Theta) = \sup_{f \in \Theta} E\{\|DX - f\|^2\}.$$

The *minimax risk* is the lower bound computed over all operators  $D$ :

$$r^n(\Theta) = \inf_{D \in \mathcal{O}_n} r(D, \Theta).$$

In practice, one must find a decision operator  $D$  that is simple to implement and such that  $r(D, \Theta)$  is close to the minimax risk  $r^n(\Theta)$ .

Minimax estimation aims at studying the robustness of estimators; In a Bayesian framework, one has to be careful to design a Bayes prior which is not too optimistic, otherwise its performance will be overestimated for some natural signals. This task is difficult for complex signals such as natural images, and yields Bayes priors which are usually close to the “worst” signals of the set  $\Theta$  used as a model for minimax estimation. This means that, for complex signals, a robust Bayesian prior will be roughly similar to a minimax prior, while more complex to design and with a less convenient formalism.

### 2.4. Minimax optimality

Let  $\mathcal{B}$  be a decomposition in which the covariance  $K$  of the noise  $Z$  is nearly diagonal with a preconditioning factor  $\lambda_B$  defined in (8), and in which the set  $\Theta$  is orthosymmetric. Let  $D$  be a thresholding estimator in  $\mathcal{B}$ , as defined in section 2.1. The corresponding maximum thresholding risk is  $r^t(\Theta) = r(D, \Theta) = \sup_{f \in \Theta} E\{\|DX - f\|^2\}$ , and we clearly have  $r^t(\Theta) \geq r^n(\Theta)$ . Let us choose  $T_m = \sigma_m \sqrt{2 \log_e N}$  for the threshold values in (6) and (7) when the estimator is given by equation (4), and let  $T_m = \sigma \sqrt{2 \log_e N}$  when the estimator is given by equation (5). One can show<sup>6</sup> that

$$r^t(\Theta) \sim r^n(\Theta) \lambda_B \log_e N. \quad (9)$$

This shows that the thresholding risk  $r^t(\Theta)$  remains of the same order as the minimax risk  $r^n(\Theta)$  up to a  $\lambda_B \log_e N$  factor. In some cases, the factor  $\log_e N$  can even be reduced to a constant independent of  $N$ .  $\lambda_B$  is independent of  $N$  is  $\mathcal{R}^{-1} \mathcal{R}^{-1}$  is nearly diagonal in  $\mathcal{B}$ .

We now apply these results to the tomographic reconstruction of images.

## 3. APPLICATION TO THE INVERSION OF THE RADON TRANSFORM

This section shows that orthogonal 1-D and 2-D wavelet transforms are simple examples of decompositions which satisfy the conditions of section 2 for the inversion of the Radon transform. The prior set  $\Theta$  of images is defined with a bounded variation norm.

The thresholding estimation for tomographic reconstruction can be performed in the spatial domain, on the signal  $X[n_1, n_2]$  of equation (3), which is obtained after the application of the inverse Radon transform. It can also be performed in the Radon domain on the sinograms  $Y$  of equation (1), before applying the inverse Radon transform.

### 3.1. Bounded Variation Images

The set  $\Theta$  used as a prior model on the object  $f$  is defined with a bounded variation norm. Bounded variation images may include sharp transitions such as discontinuities. Large classes of images including medical images, in fact images with no fractal textures, have a bounded total variation. For square discrete image of  $N^2$  pixels, the total variation is defined as

$$\|f\|_V = \frac{1}{N} \sum_{n_1, n_2=0}^{N-1} \left( \left| f[n_1, n_2] - f[n_1 - 1, n_2] \right|^2 + \left| f[n_1, n_2] - f[n_1, n_2 - 1] \right|^2 \right)^{1/2}.$$

We say that an image has a bounded variation if  $\|f\|_V$  is bounded by a constant independent of the resolution  $N$ . Let  $\Theta$  be the set of images that have a total variation bounded by  $C$

$$\Theta = \{f : \|f\|_V \leq C\}.$$

The co-area formula<sup>13</sup> proves that the total variation has a simple interpretation as the average length of level sets in the image.

### 3.2. Wavelet bases

**1-D Wavelet Basis** A discrete orthonormal wavelet basis of  $\mathbb{C}^N$  is constructed with a dilated discrete wavelet  $\psi_j[n]$  at each scale  $1 < 2^j \leq N$ . The wavelet  $\psi_j$  is translated:  $\psi_{j,m}[n] = \psi_j\left[\frac{n-2^j m}{2^j}\right]$ , and at the largest scale  $\psi_{N,0}[n] = 1$ . One can construct such discrete wavelets so that the resulting family

$$\mathcal{B}_1 = \{\psi_{j,m}\}_{1 < j \leq \log_2(N), 0 \leq m < 2^j} \quad (10)$$

is an orthonormal basis of  $\mathbb{C}^N$ . Moreover, the  $N$  wavelet coefficients in this basis can be calculated with  $O(N)$  operations, with a fast filter bank algorithm.<sup>14</sup>

**2-D Wavelet Basis** A separable wavelet basis of  $\mathbb{C}^{N^2}$  is constructed with the one-dimensional wavelets  $\psi_j$  defined in (10). At each scale  $2^j$  there are three wavelets  $\psi_j^\alpha[n_1, n_2]$  for  $\alpha = 1, 2, 3$ . These wavelets are uniformly translated to define  $\psi_{j,m_1,m_2}^\alpha[n_1, n_2] = \psi_j^\alpha\left[\frac{n_1-2^j m_1}{2^j}, \frac{n_2-2^j m_2}{2^j}\right]$ , and  $\psi_N^0[n_1, n_2] = 1/N$ . The separable wavelet family

$$\mathcal{B}_2 = \left\{ \psi_N^0, \psi_{j,m_1,m_2}^1, \psi_{j,m_1,m_2}^2, \psi_{j,m_1,m_2}^3 \right\}_{1 < j \leq \log_2(N), 0 \leq m_1, m_2 < 2^j}$$

is an orthonormal basis of  $\mathbb{C}^{N^2}$ . Fast wavelet decomposition and reconstruction algorithms are implemented with  $O(N^2)$  operations, with a separable filter bank algorithm.<sup>14</sup>

**Orthosymmetry in Wavelet Bases** The set  $\Theta$  of bounded variation images is not orthosymmetric in the 2-D wavelet basis. However, it can be embedded in two close orthosymmetric sets  $\Theta_1$  and  $\Theta_2$  such that  $\Theta_1 \subset \Theta \subset \Theta_2$ . For a given estimator  $\bar{F} = DX$ , the estimation risks satisfy  $r(D, \Theta_1) \leq r(D, \Theta) \leq r(D, \Theta_2)$ . If one can show that  $r(D, \Theta_1) \sim r(D, \Theta_2)$ , it follows immediately that  $r(D, \Theta)$  is of the same order. The set  $\Theta$  of bounded variation images can be embedded in two sets defined with discrete Besov norms<sup>12</sup> in which the risk equivalence is satisfied for the estimators under study.

The representation of bounded variation images using the 1-D wavelet basis is slightly more difficult to characterize, but follows a similar idea. Images are segmented in different directions, and each direction is studied independently. Once again, the set  $\Theta$  is embedded in two close sets in which the orthosymmetry can be established for the different directions.

### 3.3. Near-Diagonalization of the Operator

For a given  $\alpha$ , let  $\mathcal{R}_\alpha f(t) = \mathcal{R}f(t, \alpha)$ , and let  $Y_\alpha = \mathcal{R}_\alpha f + W_\alpha$  be the noisy tomographic projection of  $f$  at the angle  $\alpha$ . The 1-D orthogonal wavelet decomposition in  $\mathcal{B}_1$  is used to estimate each projections  $Y_\alpha$ ; here, the operator to be inverted is  $\mathcal{R}_\alpha$ , and the operation is repeated for each value of  $\alpha$ .

The 2-D wavelet basis  $\mathcal{B}_2$  is used to perform the whole estimation on the sinograms  $Y$  or on the back-projected data  $\mathcal{R}^{-1}Y$  in a single pass, without separating the estimation in each direction  $\alpha$ . In that case,  $\mathcal{R}$  is the operator to be inverted.