

The use of the
**SCANNING
ELECTRON
MICROSCOPE**

J.W.S. Hearle
J.T. Sparrow
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*The Use of the
Scanning Electron Microscope*

BY
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AND
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Contents

LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

1. Introduction to Scanning Electron Microscopy	1
J. W. S. HEARLE	
1.1. <i>The background</i>	1
1.1.1. <i>History of microscopy</i>	1
1.1.2. <i>Direct and indirect images</i>	2
1.2. <i>The scanning electron microscope</i>	4
1.2.1. <i>The instrument</i>	4
1.2.2. <i>The practical advantages</i>	5
1.3. <i>The logic of scanning electron microscopy</i>	8
1.3.1. <i>Image formation</i>	8
1.3.2. <i>The analogy with the reflected light microscope</i>	8
1.3.3. <i>Detail, contrast and resolution</i>	18
1.3.4. <i>Some numbers</i>	21
1.3.5. <i>The transmission scanning electron microscope: reciprocity</i>	22
1.3.6. <i>The formal advantages of the scanning system</i>	22
2. The Interaction of Electrons with Solids	24
D. C. NORTHROP	
2.1. <i>Introduction</i>	24
2.2. <i>Electron range</i>	25
2.3. <i>Secondary electron emission</i>	29
2.3.1. <i>The energy distribution of emitted secondaries</i>	29
2.3.2. <i>Selection of secondaries in the SEM</i>	30
2.3.3. <i>Secondary electron yield</i>	30
2.3.4. <i>The effect of angle of incidence on secondary electron emission</i>	32
2.3.5. <i>Specimen charging effects</i>	34
2.3.6. <i>Voltage and field contrast</i>	37
2.4. <i>Specimen currents and voltages induced by the primary electron beam</i>	39
2.5. <i>Cathodoluminescence</i>	40
2.6. <i>X-ray emission</i>	42
2.7. <i>Auger electron emission</i>	44
2.8. <i>Summary and conclusions</i>	46
3. The Design and Use of the Scanning Electron Microscope	49
J. E. CASTLE	
3.1. <i>Introduction</i>	49

3.2. <i>The formation of an electron beam</i>	50
3.2.1. <i>The electron gun</i>	51
3.2.2. <i>The cathode</i>	52
3.2.3. <i>The lens system</i>	53
3.3. <i>Resolution and contrast in the scanning electron microscope</i>	53
3.3.1. <i>The display system</i>	54
3.3.2. <i>The electron probe</i>	55
3.3.3. <i>The specimen</i>	60
3.3.4. <i>The collector</i>	63
3.4. <i>The basic facilities required in an operating microscope</i>	65
3.4.1. <i>The vacuum system</i>	65
3.4.2. <i>The specimen stage</i>	65
3.4.3. <i>The electron-optical column</i>	66
3.4.4. <i>Data treatment</i>	67
3.5. <i>Main features of commercially available microscopes</i>	68
3.5.1. <i>High-resolution microscopes</i>	68
3.5.2. <i>Simplified instruments</i>	69
3.5.3. <i>Scanning attachments for transmission electron microscopes</i>	69
3.5.4. <i>Optional extras</i>	70
3.6. <i>Conclusion</i>	74
4. Specimen Preparation	75
MRS. P. M. CROSS	
4.1. <i>Introduction</i>	75
4.1.1. <i>Simple preparation</i>	75
4.1.2. <i>More complex preparation</i>	76
4.2. <i>Specimen coating</i>	76
4.2.1. <i>Coating with a thin layer of metal or carbon</i>	76
4.2.2. <i>Practical coating procedure</i>	80
4.2.3. <i>The use of antistatic agents</i>	82
4.3. <i>Low beam energy work</i>	83
4.4. <i>Replication</i>	85
4.5. <i>Conclusion</i>	85
5. Procedures for Using a Scanning Electron Microscope	87
MRS. P. M. CROSS	
5.1. <i>Introduction</i>	87
5.1.1. <i>Techniques to gain topographical information</i>	87
5.1.2. <i>Techniques to gain chemical composition information</i>	88
5.1.3. <i>Techniques to gain other information</i>	88
5.1.4. <i>Learning how to use the instrument</i>	90
5.2. <i>Use procedure of the emissive mode</i>	90
5.2.1. <i>Conditions for optimum topographical detail</i>	90
5.2.2. <i>Operational sequence</i>	91
5.2.3. <i>Photography</i>	92
5.2.4. <i>Summary of procedure</i>	93
5.2.5. <i>Y-modulation of data</i>	94
5.2.6. <i>Electric and magnetic field mapping</i>	97
5.2.7. <i>Use of Auger electrons</i>	97

5.3. <i>Use procedure of the reflective mode</i>	98
5.3.1. <i>General observation</i>	98
5.3.2. <i>Electron channelling patterns</i>	98
5.4. <i>Cathodoluminescent mode</i>	99
5.5. <i>X-ray spectroscopy</i>	99
5.6. <i>Specimen current mode</i>	101
5.7. <i>The mirror mode</i>	101
5.8. <i>The transmission mode</i>	101
5.9. <i>Conclusions</i>	102
6. Applications to Metallurgy	104
J. E. CASTLE	
6.1. <i>Introduction</i>	104
6.2. <i>Fractography in the study of failure mechanisms</i>	109
6.2.1. <i>Introduction</i>	109
6.2.2. <i>Cleavage fracture</i>	110
6.2.3. <i>Ductile failure</i>	113
6.2.4. <i>Fatigue failure</i>	114
6.2.5. <i>Stress corrosion cracking</i>	115
6.2.6. <i>Embrittlement</i>	116
6.2.7. <i>Conclusions</i>	117
6.3. <i>Physical structure of metals, alloys and composite materials</i>	117
6.3.1. <i>Physical structure revealed by fracture</i>	117
6.3.2. <i>Deep etching techniques: eutectic alloys</i>	119
6.3.3. <i>Study of composite materials</i>	119
6.3.4. <i>Structure of sinters and compacts</i>	120
6.4. <i>Studies of surface morphology</i>	124
6.4.1. <i>Pitting, etching and surface damage</i>	124
6.4.2. <i>Electrodeposits</i>	127
6.4.3. <i>Adhesion and orientation of metal films</i>	129
6.5. <i>Chemical metallurgy</i>	129
6.5.1. <i>Products of high-temperature oxidation</i>	129
6.5.2. <i>Porosity of oxide layers</i>	131
6.5.3. <i>The oxide/metal interface</i>	134
6.5.4. <i>Other areas of chemical metallurgy</i>	134
6.6. <i>Conclusions</i>	135
7. Applications to Fibres and Polymers	139
J. T. SPARROW	
7.1. <i>Introduction</i>	139
7.2. <i>Operating conditions for polymers and fibres</i>	141
7.3. <i>Coating materials</i>	141
7.4. <i>Textile fibres</i>	142
7.4.1. <i>Introduction</i>	142
7.4.2. <i>Surface studies</i>	142
7.4.3. <i>Fracture studies</i>	144
7.4.4. <i>Studies of cross-sections</i>	147
7.4.5. <i>Studies of internal structure</i>	151

7.5. <i>Textile yarns and fabrics</i>	153
7.5.1. <i>Introduction</i>	153
7.5.2. <i>Preparation techniques</i>	153
7.5.3. <i>Use of X-ray microanalysis</i>	155
7.6. <i>Bulk polymers</i>	157
7.6.1. <i>Introduction</i>	157
7.6.2. <i>Powders</i>	157
7.6.3. <i>Large specimens</i>	157
7.6.4. <i>Thin films</i>	157
7.7. <i>Dynamic and special experiments</i>	158
7.7.1. <i>Introduction</i>	158
7.7.2. <i>Special stages</i>	158
7.7.3. <i>Recording of information</i>	161
7.7.4. <i>Coating for dynamic experiments</i>	162
7.8. <i>Conclusions</i>	162
8. Applications to Solid-state Electronics	164
D. C. NORTHROP	
8.1. <i>Introduction</i>	164
8.2. <i>Investigation of materials</i>	165
8.2.1. <i>Internal specimen currents</i>	165
8.2.2. <i>Specimen voltages</i>	167
8.2.3. <i>Total specimen current</i>	168
8.2.4. <i>Cathodoluminescence</i>	168
8.3. <i>Investigation of semiconductor devices</i>	169
8.3.1. <i>Measurements on devices</i>	171
9. Applications to Biological Materials	177
P. ECHLIN	
9.1. <i>Introduction</i>	177
9.2. <i>Modes of examination</i>	178
9.2.1. <i>Topographical detail</i>	179
9.2.2. <i>Cathodoluminescence</i>	180
9.2.3. <i>X-ray microanalysis</i>	182
9.2.4. <i>Transmissive operating mode</i>	183
9.3. <i>Ancillary techniques</i>	184
9.3.1. <i>Introduction</i>	184
9.3.2. <i>Low-voltage operation</i>	184
9.3.3. <i>Ion beam etching</i>	186
9.3.4. <i>Examination of specimens at low temperatures</i>	189
9.4. <i>Preparation of labile biological material</i>	192
9.4.1. <i>Introduction</i>	192
9.4.2. <i>Minimal preparation</i>	193
9.4.3. <i>Fixation and dehydration techniques</i>	194
9.4.4. <i>Sectioned material</i>	194
9.4.5. <i>Freeze drying</i>	197
9.4.6. <i>Critical point drying</i>	197
9.4.7. <i>Examination of living material</i>	198
9.4.8. <i>Examination of materials at low temperatures</i>	200
9.4.9. <i>Surface coating</i>	200
9.4.10. <i>Surface replication</i>	200

10. Faults	203
MRS. P. M. CROSS	
10.1. <i>Introduction</i>	203
10.2. <i>Faults which result in no image on the display tube</i>	203
10.2.1. <i>Electronic faults</i>	203
10.2.2. <i>Vacuum faults</i>	204
10.3. <i>Faults which result in an obvious distorted image or image of low quality</i>	205
10.3.1. <i>Poor electron emission</i>	205
10.3.2. <i>Charging</i>	205
10.3.3. <i>Beam damage</i>	209
10.3.4. <i>Vacuum damage</i>	211
10.3.5. <i>Poor image quality due to a magnetized specimen</i>	212
10.3.6. <i>Faults in the column and collector system</i>	213
10.3.7. <i>Electronic faults</i>	215
10.4. <i>Faults which may not be obvious on the final photomicrograph</i>	216
10.4.1. <i>Faults due to the condition and position of the specimen</i>	216
10.4.2. <i>Faults due to instrument conditions</i>	217
 11. Dimensional Measurements	 219
G. S. LANE	
11.1. <i>Introduction</i>	219
11.2. <i>Three-dimensional viewing</i>	219
11.2.1. <i>Unaided viewing</i>	220
11.2.2. <i>Optical stereoscopes</i>	220
11.2.3. <i>The viewing of stereopairs of electron micrographs</i>	222
11.3. <i>Simple quantitative measurement techniques</i>	222
11.3.1. <i>Lateral measurements using a single micrograph</i>	222
11.3.2. <i>Measurement of height differences</i>	224
11.4. <i>Rigorous treatment</i>	226
11.4.1. <i>The two-dimensional case</i>	226
11.4.2. <i>The three-dimensional case</i>	229
11.4.3. <i>The effects of measurement errors</i>	230
11.5. <i>The use of stereographic equations</i>	230
11.5.1. <i>Measurement of parameters</i>	230
11.5.2. <i>The use of the computer</i>	232
11.6. <i>Extension of the basic theory to the low magnification case</i>	233
11.7. <i>Further applications of stereographic techniques</i>	234
11.7.1. <i>The equation of a plane</i>	234
11.7.2. <i>The angle between two planes</i>	234
11.7.3. <i>The angle between two lines</i>	235
11.8. <i>Miscellaneous measurement techniques</i>	235
11.8.1. <i>Contour mapping</i>	235
11.8.2. <i>The production of three-dimensional models</i>	236
11.8.3. <i>The estimation of lengths and areas</i>	236
 12. Management of the SEM	 239
A. J. SHERRIN	
12.1. <i>Introduction</i>	239
12.2. <i>Organization</i>	239
12.2.1. <i>Planning and policy</i>	239
12.2.2. <i>Supervisor</i>	240

12.3. <i>Location and facilities</i>	240
12.3.1. <i>Accommodation and installation</i>	240
12.3.2. <i>SEM accommodation</i>	241
12.3.3. <i>Specimen preparation</i>	242
12.3.4. <i>Office accommodation</i>	242
12.3.5. <i>Photographic facilities</i>	243
12.4. <i>Operation</i>	243
12.4.1. <i>Usage</i>	243
12.4.2. <i>Operators</i>	244
12.4.3. <i>Operator training</i>	244
12.4.4. <i>Operating procedures</i>	245
12.4.5. <i>Instrument allocation</i>	245
12.4.6. <i>Specimen processing</i>	245
12.4.7. <i>Examination procedure</i>	246
12.4.8. <i>Filing and dispatching</i>	248
12.5. <i>Maintenance</i>	248
12.5.1. <i>SEM</i>	248
12.5.2. <i>Ancillary apparatus</i>	249
12.6. <i>Rental service</i>	249
12.7. <i>Photography</i>	249
12.8. <i>Visitors</i>	250
12.9. <i>Conclusion</i>	250
13. The Future of Scanning Electron Microscopy	251
J. W. S. HEARLE and D. C. NORTHROP	
13.1. <i>The pattern of development</i>	251
13.2. <i>Instrument developments</i>	253
13.2.1. <i>High-resolution versions of current instruments</i>	253
13.2.2. <i>Crewe's microscopes</i>	254
13.2.3. <i>A high-voltage SEM</i>	254
13.3. <i>Techniques</i>	255
13.3.1. <i>Dynamic viewing</i>	255
13.3.2. <i>Environmental stages</i>	256
13.3.3. <i>Element identification</i>	257
13.3.4. <i>Electron channelling</i>	257
13.3.5. <i>Stroboscopic techniques</i>	259
13.4. <i>Signal processing</i>	259
13.4.1. <i>The range of the SEM</i>	259
13.4.2. <i>The isolation of potential contrast from surface topology</i>	260
13.5. <i>Conclusions</i>	262
13.5.1. <i>Sources of information</i>	262
13.5.2. <i>Review of 1971 Chicago Symposium</i>	262
LIST OF MANUFACTURERS AND SUPPLIERS	266
AUTHOR INDEX	269
SUBJECT INDEX	273

CHAPTER 1

Introduction to Scanning Electron Microscopy

J. W. S. HEARLE

1.1. THE BACKGROUND

1.1.1. History of microscopy

The first microscopes were made in the seventeenth century. The most effective were probably those made by Leeuwenhoek—tiny glass beads mounted in a metal plate, held close to the eye, and capable of showing detail down to $1\text{ }\mu\text{m}$ on a carefully sited and illuminated object. Other types of microscopes of the same period gave a poor image, and it was not until the nineteenth century that the compound microscope achieved technical superiority over the simple-lens microscope: it was much easier to use, and by advances in design technology, the resolution was improved and aberrations were reduced. In 1876 Abbé showed by his theory of image formation that there was a limit of about $0.2\text{ }\mu\text{m}$, set by the wavelength of light. The instrument was near its peak, and since 1900 the major advances have been mainly in techniques of use, in methods of illumination and in ways of promoting contrast.

By 1900 another possibility was available, electrons could be guided in curved paths and so could be used to form magnified images. Time was needed for the development of the technology, but in 1932 the first electron microscope was made. Contrary to the usual myth, this was based on "particle optics" and owed little to de Broglie's presentation in 1924 of a successful theory of the wave nature of the electron. Only later was this used in conjunction with Abbé's theory to calculate the limit of resolution of the electron microscope, far beyond that of the light microscope because of the much smaller wavelength of electrons. Until the 1950s development of electron microscopy was concentrated on technical improvements in the instrument; but since then advances have come more from developments in methods of use based on an understanding of the interaction between electrons and the specimen, and the methods of image formation.

It is interesting to see in Table 1.1 the similar sequence of stages in the development of each type of microscope, for the same stages are apparent in scanning electron microscopy, though some have been reduced to years rather than decades.

By 1960 the combination of light and electron microscopes covered the whole range of magnification needed to study the super-atomic world; but there were still important

limitations in their use, notably the limited depth of focus of the optical microscope and the fact that the ordinary electron microscope, which was not much use in reflection, was almost entirely restricted to the examination of very thin specimens, requiring special preparation. Scanning electron microscopy has filled these gaps, and also contributed some other new possibilities.

TABLE 1.1. STAGES IN THE DEVELOPING TECHNOLOGY OF A MICROSCOPE

Stage	Significant dates (approximate)		
	Optical microscope	Direct electron microscope	Scanning electron microscope
1. The ideal "geometrical idea" of the microscope, with no aberrations and no limit to magnification; realization limited by available technology	1600	1900	1935
2. Early design improvements	1800-1870	1932-1950	1945-1955
3. Basic understanding	1875	1935	1955
4. Commercial availability	1800	1940	1965
5. Further design improvements	1875-1900 1950-1960	continuing	continuing
6. Better techniques of use	1930-1960	continuing	continuing

1.1.2. Direct and indirect images

In an ordinary optical microscope the light passes directly into the eye and no real magnified image is formed: the image on the retina is such that the eye "sees" an enlarged virtual image. Using electrons this is not, of course, possible; and the electrons have to be focused on a screen where they stimulate light emission and so give a real, direct, enlarged image of the specimen. The same principle is used in the projection light microscope. Figure 1.1 is a schematic diagram of either type of microscope.

The best term for an electron microscope of this sort is probably a *direct electron microscope* (referring to the direct image formation) but more commonly used adjectives have been *conventional* or *traditional* (an historical distinction which will soon lose significance) or *transmission* (unsatisfactory because scanning electron microscopes are now being used in transmission).

Instead of direct image formation, it is possible, with light (as in the flying-spot microscope) or electrons, to form a magnified image indirectly by a scanning system. One way—the way in which an ordinary television system works—is to illuminate the object generally, collect the radiation, form an image and scan across it so as to pick up separately the response from each part. A corresponding signal is then transmitted on a spot scanning across a screen in register with the original scan. This method is illustrated in Fig. 1.2 (a). The magnification, or reduction, in image size is controlled by the relative areas of scan.

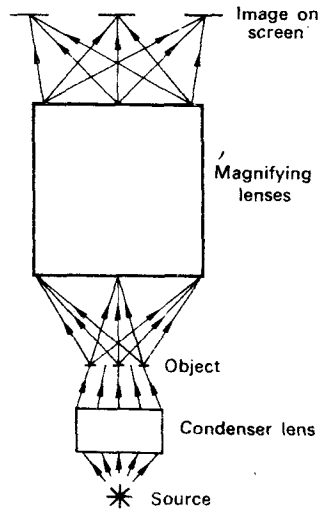


FIG. 1.1. Schematic diagram of light microscope or direct electron microscope.

For microscopy, an alternative scanning system is preferable. There is no need for general illumination. The light or electrons can be concentrated on one spot, which is then traversed across the specimen as indicated in Fig. 1.2 (b), and the complete response at each instant used to modulate the signal governing the image on the screen.

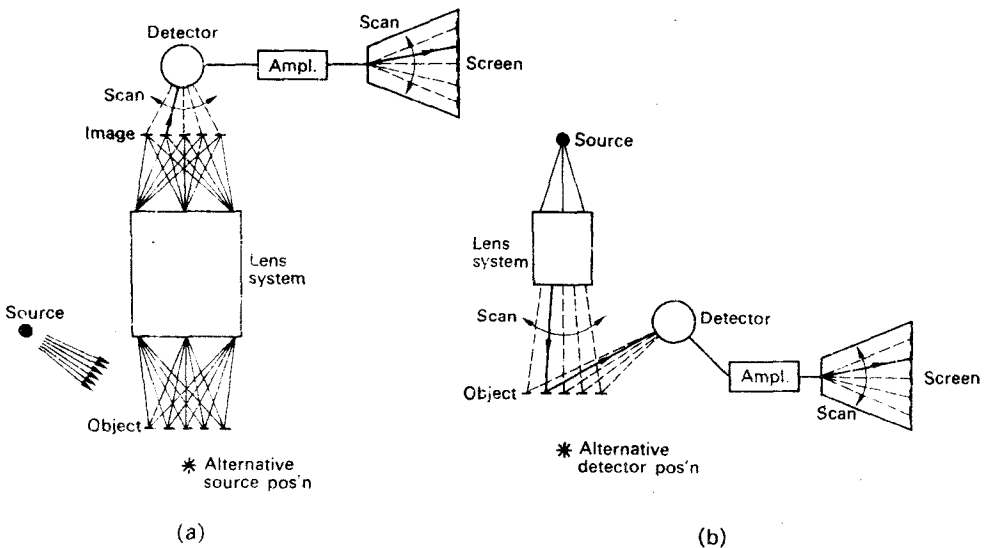


FIG. 1.2. (a) Scanning system applied to radiation which has come from specimen.
(b) Scanning system applied to radiation incident on specimen. Asterisks (*) show position of source or detector for viewing in transmission.

1.2. THE SCANNING ELECTRON MICROSCOPE

1.2.1. The instrument

The idea of making an electron microscope on this principle was suggested by M. Knoll in 1935, and as a result M. von Ardenne constructed a scanning electron microscope in 1938. This, and other early instruments, seemed of little practical value: the resolution was little better than an optical microscope and recording times were long. Great improvements in design were made by C. W. Oatley and his group at Cambridge, and resolution of the order of 250 \AA , similar to that of the first commercial

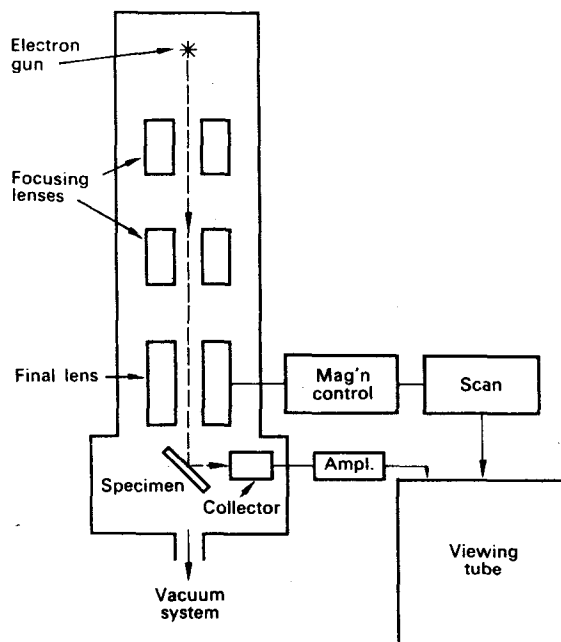


FIG. 1.3. Block diagram of scanning electron microscope.

instruments, had been achieved by 1955. This was still much worse in resolution than could be achieved with direct electron microscopes. Consequently with all the thrust in electron microscopy directed towards magnification and high resolution, the fact that most electron microscope work does not make use of the available resolution,* and that the humdrum virtues of depth of focus and convenience in use are very important, was not appreciated. Widespread exploitation of the scanning electron microscope was delayed; but, once started, it grew at an enormous rate. In 1955 there were only two or three instruments; in 1965, when the first commercial model was introduced, perhaps ten; in 1970 there were over 500 in use.

* A recent survey indicated that 60% of conventional electron micrographs were taken at less than 40,000 times magnification.

The essential features of a scanning electron microscope, indicated in Fig. 1.3, are:

1. an electron source,
2. a means of focusing a tiny spot of electrons from the source on the specimen,
3. a means of scanning the spot across the specimen,
4. a means of detecting the response from the specimen,
5. a display system, capable of being scanned in register with the incident scan,
6. a means of transmitting the response from the specimen to the display system.

Figure 1.3 indicates the commonest mode of use in which it is the electrons scattered by the specimen which are collected as the response of the specimen.

1.2.2. The practical advantages

Table 1.2 compares the three important instruments—optical, direct electron, and scanning electron microscopes. They should not be regarded as competitive, but as complementary; and, indeed, some of the most useful research results come from a combination of the use of more than one type of microscope, or from a combination with other instruments.

TABLE 1.2. COMPARISON OF MICROSCOPES

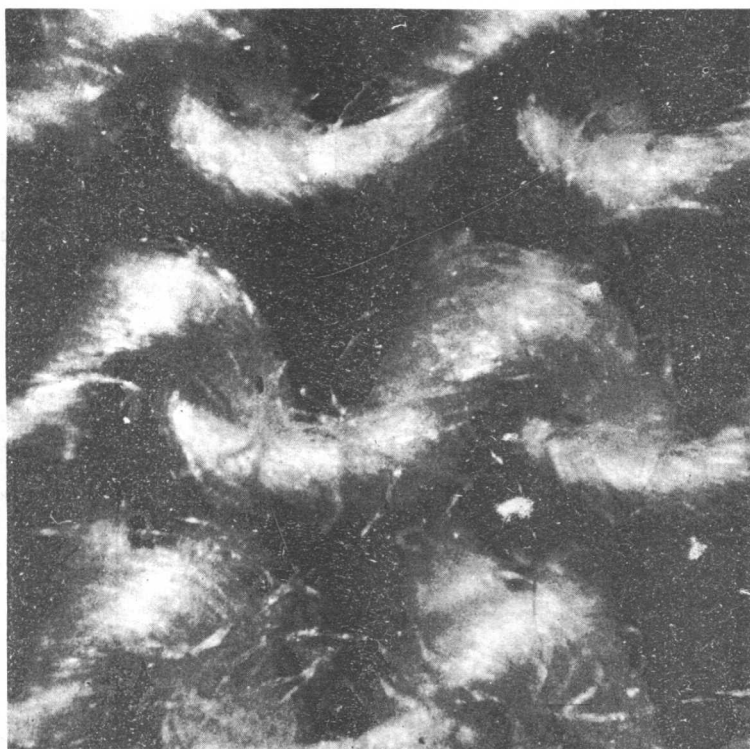
	Optical	Scanning electron	Direct electron
Resolution—easy	5 μm	0.2 μm	100 Å (10 nm)
—skilled	0.2 μm	100 Å (10 nm)	10 Å (1 nm)
—special	0.1 μm	5 Å (0.5 nm)	2 Å (0.2 nm)
Depth of focus	<i>poor</i>	high	<i>moderate</i>
Mode—transmission	yes	yes	yes
—reflection	yes	yes	<i>not satisfactory</i>
—diffraction	yes	yes	yes
—other	some	many	<i>no</i>
Specimen—preparation	usually easy	easy	<i>skilled, liable to artefacts</i>
—range and type	versatile	versatile	<i>only thin, or replica</i>
—maximum thickness for transmission	thick	medium	<i>very thin</i>
—environment	versatile	usually vacuum but can be modified	<i>vacuum</i>
—available space	small	large	small
Field of view	large enough	large enough	<i>limited</i>
Signal	only as image	available for processing	only as image
Cost	low	high	high

Advantages over others are indicated in bold type; disadvantages in italics.

The obvious advantages of the scanning electron microscope are:

- (a) great depth of focus, as illustrated in Fig. 1.4 in comparison with the use of an optical microscope at comparatively low magnification—this is a much greater asset than might at first be imagined;
- (b) the possibility of direct observation of the external form of real objects, such as complex fracture surfaces, at high magnification—thus avoiding the necessity to make thin replicas for use in direct transmission electron microscopy;
- (c) the ability to switch over a wide range of magnification, so as to zoom down to fine detail on some part identified in position on the whole object;
- (d) the ease of operation, and the large space available for dynamic experiments on the specimen.

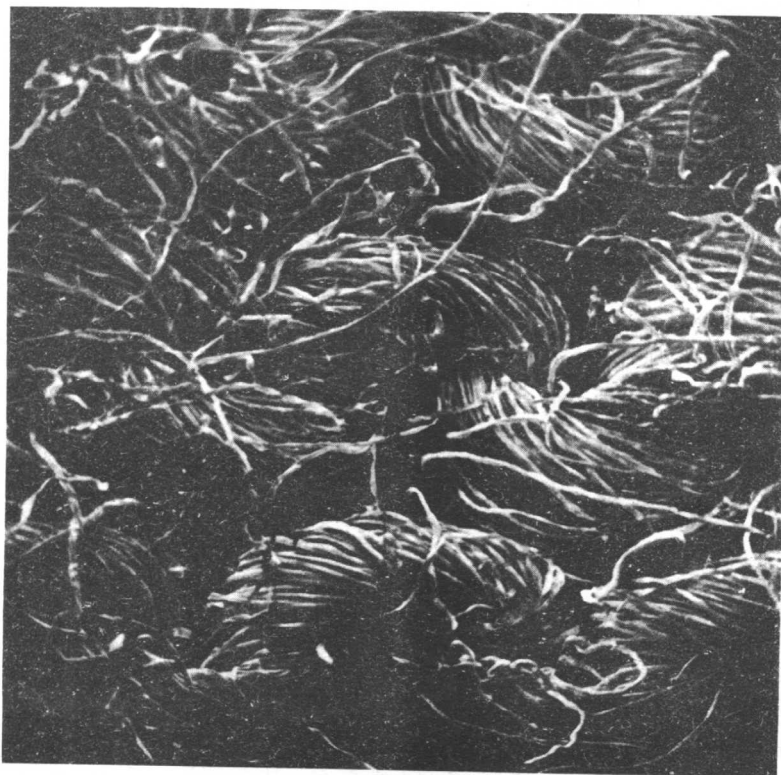
There are two other advantages which are more specialized. Firstly, an image can be formed as a result of any response of the specimen stimulated differentially by the electron spot which impinges on the specimen. The usual mode of operation is to pick up secondary electrons knocked out of atoms on the surface of the specimen, but scattered primary electrons, light emission, X-ray emission, current in the specimen, and many other responses described in the next chapter can also be used to generate



(a)

FIG. 1.4. Comparison of depth of focus in optical and scanning electron microscope. (a) Optical micrograph of knitted cotton fabric.

an image and obtain useful information about the specimen. Secondly, since the information is available in the form of an electric signal, it can be processed in various ways to present images in different forms. For example, two different responses may be added or subtracted; a contour map of image intensity may be presented; the image may be tilted or rotated; or quantitative measurements made.



(b)

FIG. 1.4 (*cont.*). (b) SEM micrograph of the same fabric.

Apart from its cost, the obvious limitations of a scanning electron microscope are:

- (a) lack of the highest resolution;
- (b) the vacuum environment of the specimen;
- (c) the inability to show up internal detail, visible in an optical microscope;
- (d) the lack of colour response, which gives a means of contrast in light microscopy, additional to intensity differences (though some analagous contrast mechanisms may be involved in scanning electron microscopy).

Some of the factors which limit the quality of a scanning electron microscope image in practice are listed in Table 1.3. Much of this book will be concerned with ways of minimizing these faults.

TABLE 1.3. FACTORS LIMITING QUALITY OF A SCANNING ELECTRON MICROSCOPE IMAGE

Spot size + penetration and spread in specimen.
Spherical aberration.
*Distortion, anisotropic distortion.
*Astigmatism, anisotropic astigmatism.
Chromatic aberration, rotational chromatic aberration.
Space-charge distortion.
Diffraction.
*Departure from symmetry.
*Distortion by external fields.
*Scan faults.
*Other design or operational faults.
Distortion by internal fields, e.g. charging on specimen.
Uncontrolled emission due to charging of specimen.
Noise.
Vibration.
Specimen damage.

* Avoided by good design and maintenance.

1.3. THE LOGIC OF SCANNING ELECTRON MICROSCOPY

1.3.1. Image formation

Image formation can be approached in various ways, and, at first sight, the method indicated in Fig. 1.2 (b) or 1.3 looks very different from what happens in other microscopes. Indeed, it was apparently a source of surprise that the image formed on the screen looked just like the object! And what is more, like the object viewed from the source of electrons.

While, in the absence of ordinary familiarity with the viewing of objects, the relations between incident radiation, object, emitted radiation and image might most logically be dealt with in other ways, it turns out that the analogy with a conventional microscope is surprisingly close, and extremely useful.

1.3.2. The analogy with the reflected light microscope

For the commonest usage of the scanning electron microscope, with an image formed by scattered electrons in order to show up topographical detail, the analogy is with a projection light microscope used to examine a specimen in reflection. Figure 1.5 is a diagram which applies to either type of microscope, with the following differences:

	<i>Direct optical</i>	<i>Scanning electron</i>
Radiation	light	electrons
Direction of radiation	$C \rightarrow B \rightarrow A$	$A \rightarrow B \rightarrow C$
Focusing action	$PBQ \equiv LAM$	$A \equiv P$ at time t_1
or object-image	(image formed	$A \equiv B$ at time t_2
relation	by separation	$A \equiv Q$ at time t_3
	in space)	(image formed
		by separation
		in time)