

VISUALIZATION AND EXTRACTION OF STRUCTURAL COMPONENTS FROM
RECONSTRUCTED VOLUMES

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DEDICATION

Para Oliva, Leopoldo y Gustavo quienes siempre han estado . . .

To Oliva, Leopoldo y Gustavo who have always been present. . .

Por todos los ladrones y ángeles que pasarón, y los que pasarán . . .

Con todo el corazón y cariño.

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This dissertation could fall into the category of “Nomad Ph.D.s” as I have visited several laboratories in different parts of the U.S. and abroad. I first arrived to the Medical Image Processing Group at the University of Pennsylvania, then to the Biocomputing Unit at the C.N.B. (Spain), later to the Center for Computer Science and Applied Mathematics (Temple University) and finally to the Mathematical Sciences Research Institute (Berkeley), respectively. The final experiments and the final version of my thesis were finished in the Discrete Imaging and Graphics Group at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. In all these laboratories and institutions I was always welcome and assisted by their members. In particular I want to thank the support from José María Carazo, Gabor T. Herman and Jayaram K. Udupa. I am also very thankful to Samuel Matej, Robert M.

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ABSTRACT

VISUALIZATION AND EXTRACTION OF STRUCTURAL COMPONENTS FROM RECONSTRUCTED VOLUMES

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Algorithms for image reconstruction from projections have expanded our ability to visualize the structure of objects. Image reconstruction covers a wide range of physical applications from electron microscopy of molecular structures to radio astronomy of cosmic structures. In this work we will focus on molecular structures, namely biological macromolecules imaged by a transmission electron microscope (*TEM*) and then reconstructed from such images.

Biological macromolecules are the main structural components from which living matter is built. This group of molecules consists of four broad subclasses: proteins, nucleic acids, polysaccharides and lipids. All of these macromolecules exhibit a complex structure which determines the interaction of the macromolecule with itself or with others. In particular, proteins have a functional role which is not present in the other three macromolecules. Different proteins carry out their diverse functions due to the extremely wide range of configurations they can exhibit. Indeed, it is believed that this specialization is largely due to the structure they possess.

TEM technology has been commonly used to obtain reconstructions of macromolecu-

lar structures because of the meaningful information this technology produces. Algebraic Reconstruction Techniques (*ART*) are methods for the reconstruction of macromolecular complexes in TEM. The process of reconstructing a macromolecular complex yields three-dimensional arrays of real numbers representing the macromolecular complex. After reconstruction, the approximation of the macromolecular complex is generally corrupted by noise, resulting from the noise in the data collection, and by errors inherent in the reconstruction algorithm. As a result, the reconstruction is typically an imprecise approximation of the macromolecular complex. Consequently, this approximation has to be further processed to obtain an accurate representation of the macromolecule.

Reconstructions with ART produce volumes expressed as linear combinations of some basis functions. Recently, spherically symmetric functions (*blobs*) have been introduced as efficacious basis functions for reconstruction. In this dissertation we propose a method of selecting blob parameters to obtain accurate reconstructions and visual representations of the three-dimensional structure of macromolecular complexes.

ART produces as output the set of weights for the basis functions, that we refer to as the set of coefficients. In order to produce fast and accurate visual representations of macromolecules we first propose a method that takes advantage of the properties of ART and blobs, together with simple thresholding of the set of coefficients that provides a “good” estimate of those blobs that contribute to the formation of the object of interest and, thus, simplifying the search for significant blobs. Furthermore, we also take advantage of the

various ways of placing the blobs in the three-dimensional space to produce more accurate visual representations and reduce the number of coefficients.

One characteristic of biological macromolecules, which distinguishes them from specimens used in other fields, is that they very frequently present some kind of symmetry. In fact, the functional form of many biological macromolecules is obtained by merging or joining several copies of one or several subunits. We propose to take advantage of the repetitive presence of subunits to improve the signal-to-noise ratio of the reconstruction of a macromolecular complex.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Medical imaging has provided physicians with new tools to diagnose or plan treatment on patients with non-invasive or almost non-invasive techniques. Nowadays the imaging techniques in use in medicine are capable of producing two-dimensional or three-dimensional images from the human body. These devices measure the interaction of organs and tissues with some type of energy, e.g., Computerized Tomography uses X-rays, Positron Emission Tomography uses positrons. The measurements are treated as line integrals, of some spatially-varying physical parameter which is related to the local interactions of the tissue with the energy, through the body from the source to the detector. The distribution of the spatially-varying physical parameter is recovered from these measurements. Medicine and biology also rely on other imaging techniques to visualize microorganisms, pathogens and some organelles. Technology has even provided tools for the dissection of objects at the micro-scale.

At the micro-scale and the body-scale humankind has acquired sufficient knowledge

to recognize structures and shapes so that it is possible to distinguish between a “normal” structure and an “irregular” one. Thus, it is possible to distinguish between a healthy bone and osteoporotic bone, or between a *staphylococcus* and a *vibro cholerae* bacterium from acquired images.

There are several mechanisms by which cells interact with each other, microorganisms and pathogens attack cells, cells protect the body, or organelles produce substances. Microorganisms, pathogens, organelles and the substances they produce are made of molecules that cannot be observed with optical devices. Therefore, it has been necessary to invent other instruments to obtain information on objects at a such small scale, in particular on macromolecules. However, many of the instruments capable of yielding images of nano-scale objects produce only two-dimensional images. For reasons that are exposed later in this dissertation, it is important to obtain the three-dimensional structure of objects at the nano-scale and consequently it is necessary to apply image processing techniques to the two-dimensional images to produce three-dimensional representations. Whereas at the body-scale and micro-scale it is possible to compare the images with the objects imaged, at the nano-scale it is impossible with the current technology to make such a comparison, see Fig. 1.1.

Images produced by a device are usually post-processed. There are two main reasons for the further processing of the images, the first being that imaging devices are not perfect and they introduce noise into the images. Another reason for processing is to compen-

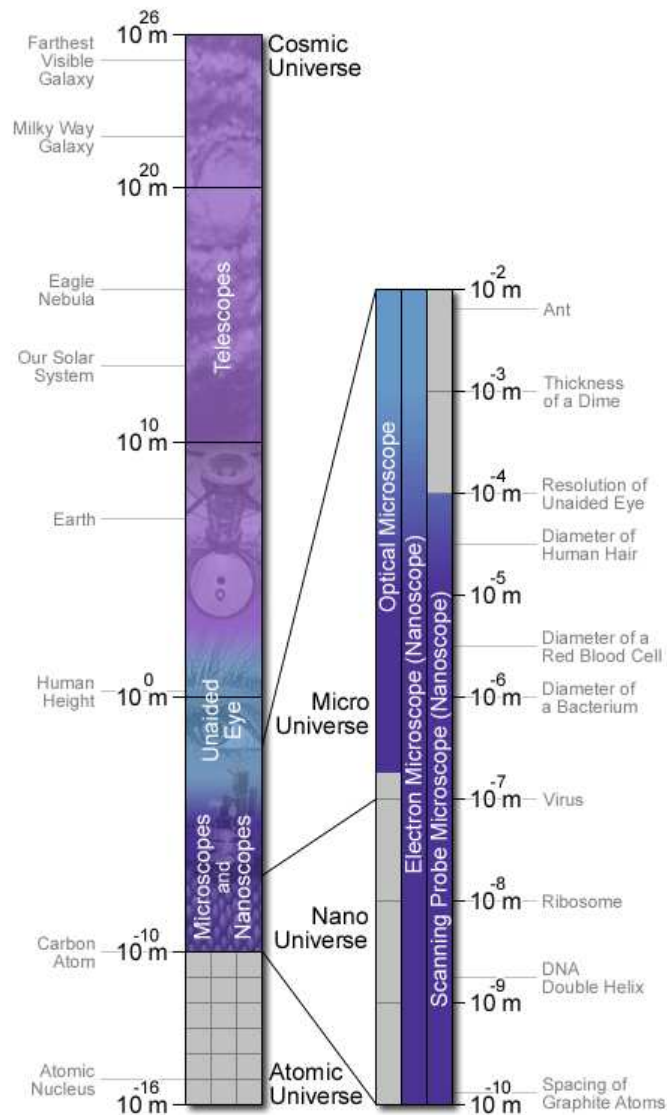


Fig.1.1: Relative size of several objects from the cosmic-scale to the nano-scale together with the instruments used to observe them (image courtesy of the INVSEE project at Arizona State University, Dr. B. L. Ramakrishna, Project Director, INVSEE).

sate for artifacts in computer-produced three-dimensional images. Finally, the user of the images may want to obtain higher level knowledge from the images, such as extracting meaningful portions of the objects or visualizing the objects.

In Chapter 2 we present a summary of the importance of studying macromolecules and proteins, and the methods and techniques used to obtain three-dimensional density functions, together with some of their limitations. In Chapter 3 we propose a method to improve the visualization of the computer representation of macromolecules and in Chapter 4 we propose methods to produce computer representations of the three-dimensional density functions by improving the raycasting method introduced in Chapter 3 and by an approximation, by polygons, to the surface of the density function. Finally, in Chapter 5 we propose to take advantage of the repetition of subunits that form some macromolecular complexes to improve the accuracy of their representation.

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 $S^{\bar{y}}$, 24
 S^{n-1} , 20
 T^n , 20
 \mathbb{R}^n , 20
 \mathbb{Z}^n , 20
 δ , *see* Dirac function
 \mathcal{S} , *see* Schwartz space
 \mathcal{S}' , *see* tempered distributions
 $\vec{\sigma}^\perp$, 20
 \AA , *see* angstrom
 \mathbb{C} , 19
DnaB·DnaC, 52, 58, 68
 \mathbb{R} , 19
 \mathbb{Z} , 19
bcc, *see* body-centered cubic grid
fcc, *see* face-centered cubic grid
sc, *see* simple cubic grid

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