Bayesian models of object perception
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The human visual system is the most complex pattern recognition device known. In ways that are yet to be fully understood, the visual cortex arrives at a simple and unambiguous interpretation of data from the retinal image that is useful for the decisions and actions of everyday life. Recent advances in Bayesian models of computer vision and in the measurement and modeling of natural image statistics are providing the tools to test and constraining theories of human object perception. In turn, these theories are having an impact on the interpretation of cortical function.

Introduction

The certainty of human visual experience stands in stark contrast to the objective ambiguity of the features of natural images, that is, the images received by the eye during daily activities. Similar objects can give rise to very different images (Figure 1a), whereas different objects can give rise to practically identical images (Figure 1b). Although we can easily see the bicycles in (Figure 1a (top), the images themselves are very complex (see (Figure 1a [bottom]), and the features of these images, corresponding to the wheels and frames of the bicycles, are highly ambiguous. Our brains are specialized for understanding natural images, and this disguises the difficulty of dealing with their complexity and ambiguity.

Visual scientists must come to terms with this ambiguity and complexity. Computer vision is a relatively recent science that develops theories and algorithms to extract information from natural images useful for recognition, scene interpretation, and robot actions. One of the recent lessons from computer vision is that natural images have properties and structures that differ greatly from the artificial stimuli typically studied by visual scientists (compare (Figure 1a [bottom]) to the dots, sinusoidal gratings, and line drawings traditionally used as experimental stimuli). Nevertheless, the neural and psychological study of visual perception requires us to simplify problems so that they can be investigated under controlled circumstances. Bayesian models of visual perception allow scientists to break these problems down into limited classes of categories that lie within a theoretical framework that can be extended to deal with the ambiguities and complexities of natural images in studies of computer vision.

The Bayesian framework for vision has its origins with Helmholtz’s notion of unconscious inference [1], and in recent years it has been formally developed by visual scientists [2,3,4,5,6]. It uses Bayesian probability theory [6], in which prior knowledge about visual scenes is combined with image features to infer the most probable interpretation of the image (Figure 2). The Bayesian approach can be used to derive statistically optimal ‘ideal observer’ models, which can be used to normalize human performance with respect to the information needed to perform a visual task [7–9]. There is growing evidence, some of which is reviewed below, showing that human visual perception can be close to ideal for visual tasks of high utility and under visual conditions that approximate those typically encountered. The Bayesian approach to human object perception has been recently advanced along two main fronts: the analysis of real-world statistics, and a categorization and better understanding of inference problems. Bayesian inference of object properties relies on probabilistic descriptions of image features as a function of their causes in the world, such as object shape, material, and illumination. Bayesian inference in addition relies on ‘prior’ descriptions of these same causes independent of the images. Computer vision studies have shown how measurements of real-world statistics, both of images and causes in the world, provide the basis on which to model the probabilities required to make reliable inferences of object properties from image features.

Real-world statistics

The statistical regularities in natural images and scene properties are essential for taming the complexity and ambiguity of image interpretation. For example, in
natural images, nearby pixels tend to have the same intensity. Further, the distribution of the difference in intensity between pairs of pixels is highly non-Gaussian (Figure 3). Scene properties such as object shape, material, and illumination also show statistical regularities. A common assumption in computer vision is that surface orientation of an object tends to vary smoothly. Recent studies of natural image data have shown how statistics can provide an efficient characterization of homogeneous textures [10,11,12], help to discount the illuminant [13,14,15], find object boundaries [15], contribute to scene recognition [16], and constrain the context for object recognition [17]. Statistics on the geometry of contours have been used to explain aspects of human perception [18,19], and statistical shape regularities enable computer vision systems to group image features consistent with the constraints identified by Gestalt psychologists, such as requiring that nearby edges with similar orientations are likely to belong to the same contour [20].

Other statistical regularities relate image features to measurements of object or scene properties. They constrain local boundary detection (Figure 3a; [21]), identify regularities on the changes of image features as illumination conditions vary (Figure 3b; [22]), and help to interpret human body motion [23]. Relating image intensity to measured surface-depth statistics has yielded computer vision solutions for face recognition [24], provided objective models [25] for face recognition experiments [26], and given insight into the functional nature of certain kinds of illusions [27]. It is largely an open question of how the human visual system learns the appropriate statistical priors, but some priors as well as strategies for learning priors are likely to be rooted in our genes [28,29].

**Basic Bayes**

The Bayes formula for inverse inference is:

\[ p(S|I) = \frac{p(I|S)p(S)}{p(I)} \]

where \( p(I|S) \) is the model for forming an image (I), and \( p(S) \) is prior knowledge about the naturally occurring structures (S) (Figure 2). Both \( p(S) \) and \( p(I|S) \) can be learnt from real-world statistics.

The distributions of \( p(I|S) \) and \( p(S) \) define an ensemble of problem instances governed by a joint probability \( p(S, I) = p(I|S)p(S) \). This probability can be represented by a simple graph, which we call Basic Bayes, in which the two nodes of the graph, represented by the two circles, represent S and I (Figure 4a). Ideal observers can be defined for this ensemble of problems. An ideal observer infers the most probable (or in the more general case of Bayesian decision theory, the most useful) value of S.
given I, that is, the value of S that gives the maximum value of p(S|I). The ideal’s performance is determined by the information for the visual task and can be used as a benchmark to evaluate human performance.

One consequence of Baye’s formula is that perception is a trade-off between image feature reliability, as embodied by p(I|S), and the prior p(S). Some perceptions may be driven more by prior knowledge and some more by data. The less reliable the image features (e.g. the more they are ambiguous), the more the perception is influenced by the prior knowledge. This trade-off has been illustrated for a variety of visual phenomena [30,31,32,33].

We can obtain a deeper understanding by categorizing Bayesian problems with graphs, or influence diagrams. First, decompose the natural world S into components S1, S2, S3, ..., the image into features I1, I2, I3, ..., and express the ensemble distribution as p(S, I) = p(S1, S2, ..., I1, I2, ...). Such a decomposition may not be straightforward and some ensemble distributions may be hard to express or to learn; however, for a given problem we can begin by characterizing how variables in the world influence each other and the resulting image features by representing the distribution with an influence diagram in which the nodes correspond to the variables S1, S2, S3, ..., and I1, I2, I3, ..., and we draw links between the nodes that directly

Illustration of Bayesian object perception (a) What 3D object caused the image of a cube? The likelihood (p(I|S)=p(image data|object descriptions)) constrains the possible set of objects to those consistent with the image data, but even this is an infinite set. (b) The prior knowledge probability (p(S)=p(object descriptions)) constrains the consistent set of 3D objects to those that are more probable in the world. (c,d) The probability over all instances is determined by the product of the likelihood and prior knowledge: p(S,I)=p(I|S)p(S)=p(object descriptions, image data). See the section on Basic Bayes for mathematical definitions. (Adapted from [64], © 1993 IEEE.)
influence each other (in the worst case, all nodes are connected and we get a complicated diagram). These influence diagrams provide a classification of visual inference problems in terms of how image features are generated (Figure 4). We now describe three important categories of visual inference problems.

Discounting
How does the visual system enable us to infer the same object despite considerable image variation caused by confounding variables, such as viewpoint, illumination, occlusion, and background changes? This is the well-known problem of invariance (Figure 1a). Confounding variables are analogous to ‘noise’ in classical signal-detection theory, but they are more complicated to model and they affect image formation in a non-linear manner.

From a Bayesian perspective, we can model problems with confounding variables by the influence diagram in (Figure 4b). We define an ensemble distribution p(S₁, S₂, I₁), where S₁ is the target (e.g. a bicycle), S₂ is the
confounding variable (e.g. viewpoint), and $I_1$ is the image. Then we discount the confounding variables by integrating them out (or summing over them):

$$p(S_1, I_1) = \sum_{S_2} p(S_1, S_2, I_1)$$

Discounting illumination by integrating it out can reduce ambiguity with regards to the location or shape of an object [34,35]. Integrating out illumination level or direction has also been used to model apparent surface color [36,37]. Similarly, viewpoint can be treated as a confounding variable that can be discounted [8].
From the perspective of utility theory, discounting a variable is equivalent to treating it as having such low utility that it is not worth estimating [38]. At the other extreme, an alternative to ‘integrating out’ across a variety of possibilities is to accurately estimate the confounding variable that accounts for this particular image. This can result in the explaining away phenomenon discussed below. The choice of which variables to discount will depend on the task. Illumination is a confounding variable if the task is to recognize or to determine the depth of an object, but not if the task is to determine the direction of the light source. This task dependence may account for studies in which different ‘operationalisations’ for measuring a human’s estimates of shape lead to inconsistent, although related, results [39].

Cue integration
Vision integrates information from a variety of sources about the relative depths of objects, their shapes and their motions. For example, one can identify more than a dozen cues that the human visual system utilizes for depth perception. These can be modeled from a Bayesian perspective [40].

We illustrate cue integration in the influence diagram in (Figure 4c. An important situation arises when the nodes represent gaussian variables and we have estimates $S_1$ and $S_2$ for each cue alone (i.e. $S_i$ is the best estimator for $p(S|I_i)$). Then, optimal integration (i.e. the most probable value of the two estimates takes into account the uncertainty caused by measurement noise (the standard deviations, $\sigma_1$ and $\sigma_2$), and is given by the weighted average,

$$S_{\text{optimal}} = \frac{r_1 S_1}{r_1 + r_2} + \frac{r_2 S_2}{r_1 + r_2}$$

where $r_i$ is the reliability, is the reciprocal of the variance ($r_i = 1/\sigma_i^2$). This model has been used to study whether the human visual system combines cues optimally [41].

In particular, visual and haptic information about object size are combined, and weighted according to the reliability of the source [42]. A more complicated model uses robust statistics to determine whether one measurement is an outlier, and therefore should not be integrated with the other measurement [43]. Integration is also important for grouping local image elements that are likely to belong to the same surface. A model of Bayes optimal motion integration accounts for a large number of motion illusions and experimental data [32,44]. In another domain, the human visual system optimally combines spatial frequency and orientation information when detecting the boundary between two regions [45]. Human observers behave like an optimal observer when integrating information from skew symmetry and disparity in perceiving the orientation of a planar object [46]. Psychological experiments show that prior probabilities can also combine like weighted cues [47].

However, not all kinds of cue integration are consistent with the simple influence diagram of (Figure 4c. It has been argued [38] that strong coupling of visual cues [40] is required to model a range of visual phenomena [48].

Perceptual ‘explaining away’
Visual ambiguity can be reduced by auxiliary measurements that may be available in a given image or actively sought (see the influence-diagram structure in (Figure 4d). Indeed, these measurements may completely alter the percept by explaining away the effects of the confounding variables. The term ‘explaining away’ originates in the context of reasoning where a change in the probability of one competing hypothesis affects the probability of another [49].

A striking example of perceptual ‘explaining away’ can be experienced when the diamond in (Figure 4d translates back and forth horizontally; yet depending on auxiliary evidence, the segments may appear to be moving vertically [50,51,52]. In other examples, binocular stereo information (effectively adding a new image of the object) can be used to change the apparent shape of a card folded concavely and, as a consequence, can also change the apparent color saturation [37]. However, human perception can also unexpectedly fail to explain away [53].

Explaining away is closely related to the situation seen with competitive models, in which two alternative models attempt to explain the same data. It has been argued that this accounts for a range of visual phenomena [38], including the estimation of material properties [54]. This approach has been used successfully in computer vision systems [55].

Neural implications
What are the neural implications of ideal-observer models? They can, of course, be treated as purely functional models of perception. They will be far more plausible, however, if they can be linked to neural mechanisms and used to make experimental predictions. Fortunately, the graphical structure of these models often makes it straightforward to map them onto networks and suggests neural implementations.

One class of Bayesian models can be implemented by parallel networks with local interactions. These include the motion models [32] and a temporal-motion model [56], which was designed to be consistent with neural mechanisms. In these models, the prior knowledge and likelihood functions are implemented by synaptic weights. Such models are broadly consistent with some electrode recordings [57], but detailed testing is impractical at present.

There are proposed neural mechanisms for representing uncertainty in neural populations that thereby give a
mechanism for weighted cue combination. The most plausible candidate is population encoding [58].

Interestingly, the graphical nature of Bayesian models is suggestive of the feedforward and feedback connections [59,60] that connect the visual areas of primates. A possible role for higher-level visual areas, for example the lateral occipital complex [61], may be to represent hypotheses regarding object properties that could be used to resolve ambiguities in the incoming retinal-image measurements that are represented in the primary visual cortex (V1). These hypotheses could predict incoming data through feedback and be tested by computing a measurement that is consistent with some electrode-recording experiments [57,62]. The Bayesian approach has proven very useful for both computational and neuronally motivated models, such as those described in this review, and models of predictive coding using cortical feedback.

Two alternative theoretical possibilities might explain why early visual activity is reduced. High-level areas may explain away the image and cause the early areas to be completely suppressed; that is, high-level areas tell lower levels to ‘stop guessing’. Alternatively, high-level areas might sharpen the responses of the early areas by reducing activity that is inconsistent with the high level interpretation; that is, high-level areas tell lower levels to ‘stop guessing’. This second possibility seems more consistent with some electrode-recording experiments [57,62], but further experiments are needed to resolve this issue.

Moreover, there are alternative ways to implement Bayesian models even if feedback and feedforward connections are used. A recent approach uses image features to predict high-level structure that can then be verified by comparison to the image, and has been very successful for segmenting natural images [62].

**Conclusions**

The Bayesian approach has proven very useful for both designing ideal observer models for psychological experiments and designing practical computer-vision systems. By taking advantage of the statistical regularities in images and scene structures this approach offers a way to deal with the ambiguity and complexity of natural images. Different visual tasks can be characterized by graphical models that illustrate the dependencies between the variables that describe the task. These graphical models also suggest ways to implement these functional models in terms of neuronal mechanisms that can be tested by fMRI and electrode recording.

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**References and recommended reading**

Papers of particular interest, published within the annual period of review, have been highlighted as:

- of special interest
- of outstanding interest


This chapter, and [57,62] have good introductory overviews of the Bayesian approach to vision.


11. Simoncelli EP, Olshausen BA: Natural image statistics and neural representation. Annu Rev Neurosci 2001, 24:1193-1216. This is an excellent review of generic natural image statistics with a primary emphasis on early neural coding. Although the basic theme is related to the theme of this review, it does not focus on statistics for inference of specific object properties.


14. Goz J, MacLeod DI: Influence of scene statistics on colour constancy. Nature 2002, 415:637-640. We see objects as having constant surface color despite the fact that the retinal input is a function of both surface color and illumination. A reddish scene under white light can give rise to the same average stimulation as a neutral scene under red light. Using a spectral database of natural images, the authors showed that the correlation between redness and luminance could be used to disambiguate the scene from the lighting color, and further, that the weight given to the estimate of the illuminant was statistically optimal.

15. Fine I, MacLeod DI: Visual segmentation based on the luminance and chromaticity statistics of natural scenes. J Vision 2001, 1(3):abstract. URL: http://journalofvision.org/1/3/63, DOI 10.1167/1.3.63. Differences in luminance between two points in a natural scene are statistically associated with differences in chromaticity. The authors incorporated this information into a Bayesian model to distinguish
whether two points are on the same surface or not, and showed that it predicted human performance. (This research will appear as an article in the Journal of the Optical Society of America A, Special Issue on Bayesian and Statistical Approaches to Vision to appear in 2003.)


17. Torralba A, Sinha P: Statistical context priming for object detection. In Proceedings of the International Conference on Computer Vision, ICCV01; Vancouver, Canada: IEEE Computer Society; 2001:763-770. Holistic statistics of images are used to determine image context and indicate where a particular object is likely to be found in an image. This models human experiments that show that subject performance is significantly better when the object is immersed in its typical context than when it is isolated.

18. Geisler WS, Perry JS, Super BJ, Gallogly DP: Edge co-occurrence in natural images predicts contour grouping performance. Vision Res 2001, 41:711-724. The authors used spatial filtering to extract local edge fragments from natural images. They measured statistics on the distance between the element centers, the orientation difference between the elements, and the direction of the second element relative to the orientation of first (reference) element, and showed that a model derived from the measured statistics could quantitatively predict human contour detection performance.


27. Howe CO, Purves D: Range image statistics can explain the anomalous perception of length. Proc Natl Acad Sci USA 2002, 99:13184-13188. Why does a vertical line appear longer than the same line drawn horizontally? Although there have been several recent studies of the statistics of image intensities and contours, this paper takes the next step to directly compare image statistics on line length with measurements of the causes in the originating 3D scene. The authors found that the average ratio of the 3D physical length to the projected image length from real-world measurements shows the same pattern as perceived length. This result is in the spirit of the 1930s and 40s work of Egon Brunswik.


32. Weiss Y, Simoncelli EP, Adelson EH: Motion illusions as optimal percepts. Nat Neurosci 2002, 5:598-604. This paper shows that even an ideal observer ‘sees’ illusions. The ‘aperture problem’ is a classic problem in motion perception — how do you combine locally ambiguous motion measurements into a single velocity for an object? The authors devise an ideal observer whose prior knowledge is that motions tend to be slow, and integrates local measurements according to their reliabilities. With this model (using a single free parameter per experiment), the authors account for a wide range of motion phenomena and results in human perception that are usually thought to reflect different neural mechanisms.


41. Jacobs RA: What determines visual cue reliability? Trends Cogn Sci 2002, 6:345-350. Combining information according to reliability raises the obvious question of the title, where does the information come from? This paper provides a nice overview of recent work on optimal cue combination in human vision together with a discussion of what determines the weighting for cue integration. The article also discusses integration in the context of Kalman filtering, which is a special case of Bayesian estimation.

42. Ernst MO, Banks MS: Humans integrate visual and haptic information in a statistically optimal fashion. Nature 2002, 415:429-433. Object size can be perceived both visually and by touch. When the information from vision and touch disagree, vision usually dominates. The traditional interpretation that this is because ‘vision is the dominant sense’ is not particularly informative. The authors showed that when one takes into account the reliability of the sensory measurements, information from vision and touch are integrated optimally. Visual dominance occurs when the reliability of the visual estimation is greater than that of the haptic one.


The projection of a symmetric flat object has a distorted or ‘skewed’ symmetry that provides partial information about the object’s orientation in depth. The authors show that human observers integrate symmetry information with stereo information weighted according to the reliability of in depth. The authors and others had previously shown that human observers interpret shape assuming prior knowledge constraints that both the viewpoint and the light source tend to be above the object. The authors manipulated the reliability of each of the two constraints by changing the contrast of different parts of the stimuli. The results suggested that prior knowledge constraints behave like depth cues in integration: that is, cues with more reliable information have higher weight assigned to them.

The authors show that human observers integrate symmetry that provides partial information about the object and shape-from-shading. These responses changed with the animal’s behavioral adaptation to contingencies, which suggests dependence on experience and utility.

This paper uses a feedforward and feedback Bayesian model to parse images into regions and curves by requiring these alternative explanations to compete to explain the data. The curves can ‘explain away’ image features, which might adversely affect the quality of the image segmentations by distorting the estimates of the regions.