

**PlanetarySystemStacker for High-Resolution
Imaging of Planetary System Objects through
Turbulent Air**



User Guide (Version 0.5.0, May 19, 2019)

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1. Introduction

PlanetarySystemStacker (PSS) processes a large number of video frames or still images of a planetary system object, taken in rapid succession, into a high-resolution image. It selects the sharpest sections of the best frames, removes the image warping caused by atmospheric turbulence, and combines the resulting snippets into a single image with maximum detail. In a second step, PSS offers the option to remove image blur by applying a multi-level sharpening filter.

With the introduction of digital image technology the photography of planetary system objects (the moon, sun and planets) has taken a great leap forward. The so-called ["Lucky Imaging"](#) technique today allows amateur astronomers to record surface details which in the old days of analog photography were out of reach even to professional astronomers with access to the best earth-bound telescopes. For high-resolution work today the camera of choice is a video module which connects to the USB interface (preferably 3.0 or higher, allowing high data transfer speed) of a portable computer. With such a camera one can take many images in a short time and store them

without compression artefacts in a [RAW image](#) sequence, using typically a SER or AVI video file container. On the negative side, however, the image sensors are quite small and exhibit relatively low pixel counts.

As an alternative, digital cameras (such as a DSLR) can be used to capture many images of the object in rapid succession. These images are stored as single files with identical pixel counts in a folder. Input to PSS can be either a video file or a directory containing still images of the same scene.

PlanetarySystemStacker is the first open-source software of its kind. The complete [source code](#) is published on Github, together with a detailed [documentation of the mathematical algorithms](#) used.

2. Changelog

2.1 Initial release 0.5.0 (May 2019)

- The Windows installer was built on a Windows 10 system. The software and the installation process were tested on Windows 10 only.

3. System Requirements and Software Installation

PlanetarySystemStacker in principle runs on any computer where a Python 3.5 environment and the required Python libraries are available. For the time being, however, an automatic installer is available for Windows only. For a future release it is planned to provide a Linux installer as well.

3.1 Windows (7 / 8 / 10)

The whole software was tested on an Acer laptop computer (type "Acer Aspire V5-573G", Intel Core i5-4200U, 12 GBytes RAM), and on a PC (Intel Core i7-7700K, 64GBytes RAM), both running Windows 10 Professional, version 1803. Video stacking very much benefits from large RAM. A minimum of 16Gbytes of RAM is recommended. For large video files processed on a system with less RAM it is unlikely that all data can be held in memory, so re-reading and re-computing data will slow down the execution.

The PlanetarySystemStacker software is distributed as a single file: the Windows installer "[PlanetarySystemStacker Vo.5.0 Windows-Installer.exe](#)". Before installation, any earlier PlanetarySystemStacker version should be de-installed first using the "Uninstall" entry in the program menu. When the installer is started, a wizard guides the user through the installation process. Apart from the program start entries, PlanetarySystemStacker does not write any parameters into the Windows Registry and can be installed at any file system location. An uninstaller is provided with the software. It removes all installed files. The following temporary files which are created at execution time in the user's home directory are not removed:

- .PlanetarySystemStacker.ini (configuration during the latest PlanetarySystemStacker run)
- PlanetarySystemStacker.log (logfile)

Those files can be deleted manually at any time. Please note that all configuration parameters are lost if the .PlanetarySystemStacker.ini file is deleted.

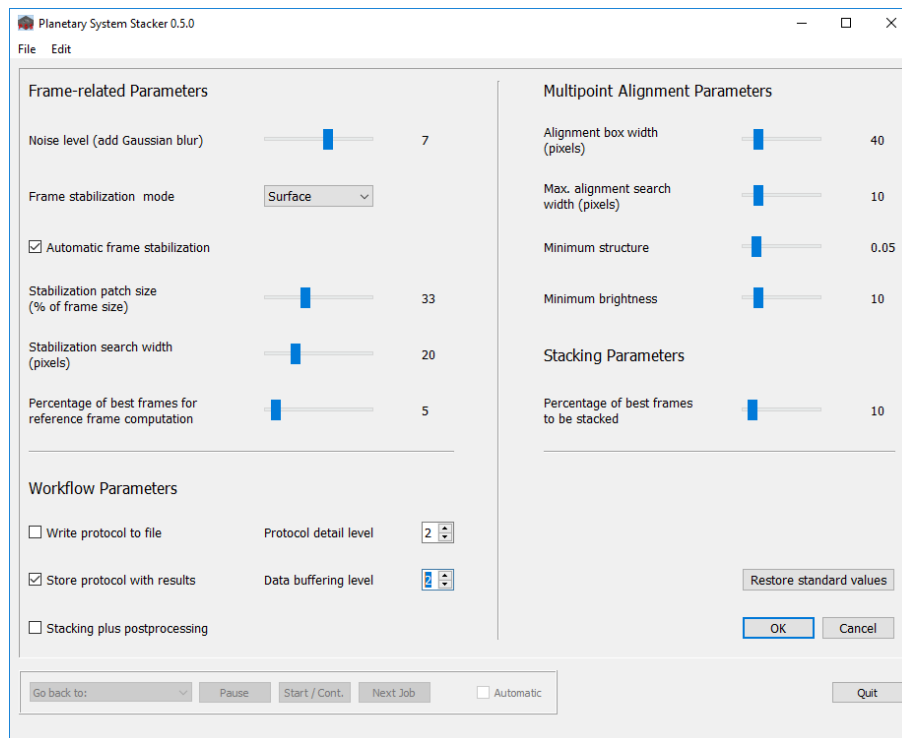
The Windows installation wizard offers to place a program starter on the desktop. It is decorated with the PlanetarySystemStacker icon automatically, which can be found under the filename “PlanetarySystemStacker.ico” in the installation folder.

4. Program Execution

PlanetarySystemStacker communicates with the user via a graphical user interface (GUI). Good usability was a high-priority design criterion. In particular, at any time the GUI presents to the user only the information which is of current relevance. The user interface was developed using the QT5 toolkit.

4.1 Program Start / Setting Parameters

When the program is started for the first time, a view opens automatically for the input of individual parameters. The parameters are arranged in groups relating to frame stabilization, multi-point alignment, stacking and workflow control.



Predefined parameter values should work okay in many cases, but the user is encouraged to experiment with different settings for optimization. If the mouse pointer hovers over a parameter name, a tooltip appears describing its meaning. A detailed explanation of all parameters can be found in “Appendix A: ”.

The pre-defined parameter values can be restored at any time by pressing the button “Restore standard values”.

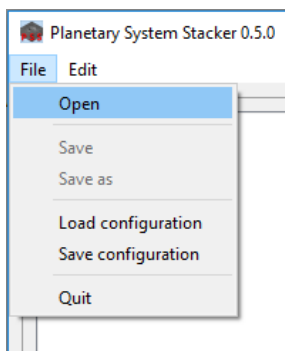
When leaving the parameter dialog, and at program termination, PSS writes the configuration file “PlanetarySystemStacker.ini” into the user’s home directory. At later program runs the parameters

are loaded from this file silently, the input dialog does not open, and PSS is ready for job input. Parameters can still be changed via the “Edit / Edit configuration” menu.

Additionally to the standard configuration file in the home directory, the current parameter configuration can be saved to any file system location via the “File / Save configuration” menu entry. Later on, this configuration can be loaded via “File / Load configuration” to replace the current parameter configuration. Please note that the configuration not only comprises the parameters shown at the dialog above, but also all active postprocessing variants (see Section 4.11).

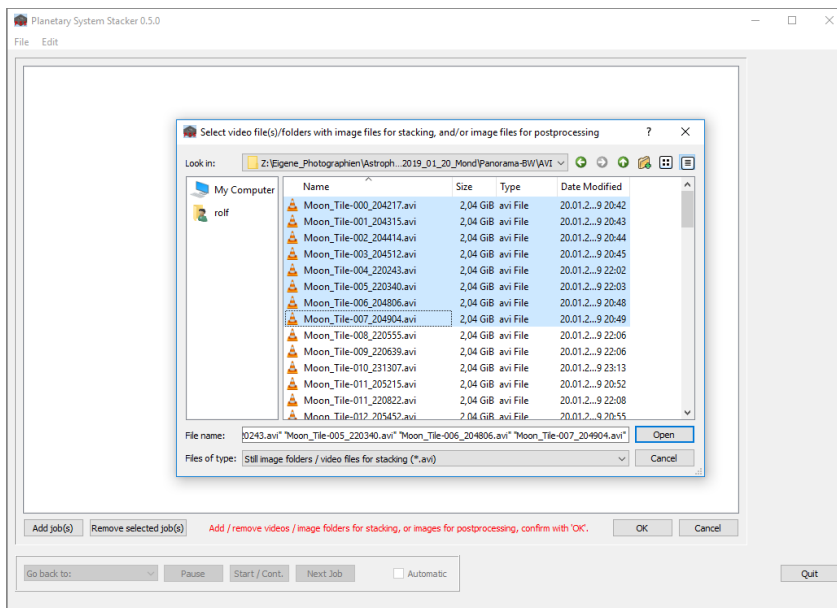
4.2 Job Specification

Throughout the program, user instructions are displayed in red print in the status line at the bottom of the main GUI, or within a dialog window. When the parameters are set, the user is asked to open the “File / Open” dialog, and to define the jobs to be processed.

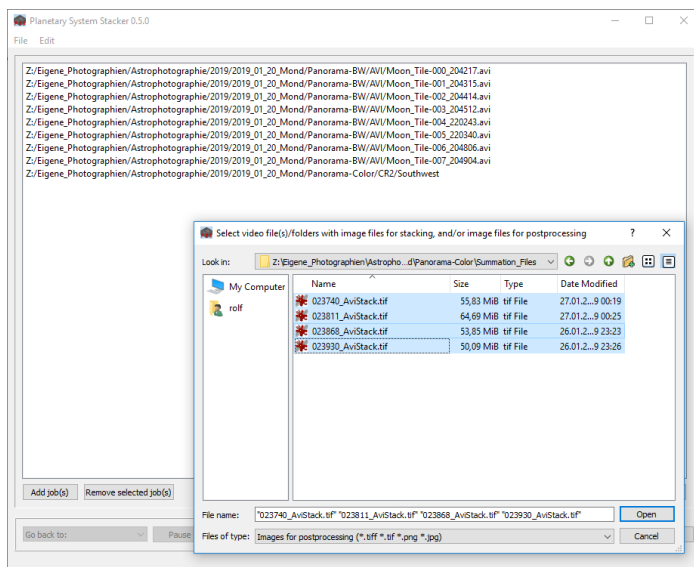


Upon choosing “File / Open”, a window opens where jobs can be specified. At this point it is important to understand how PSS processes jobs.

Basically, the user specifies a list of jobs which PSS then processes one after the other. There are two different job types which PSS recognizes by the kind of input specified:

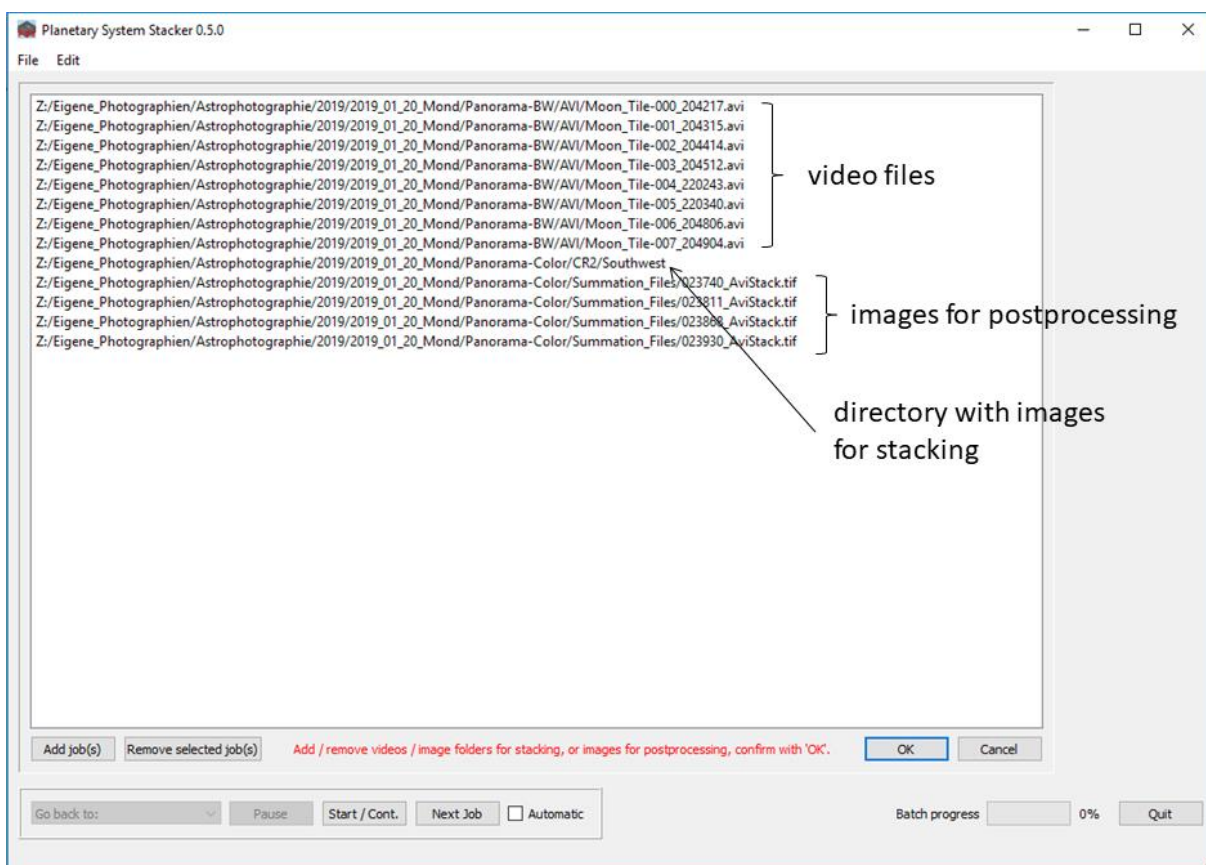


- To define a stacking job, the user selects a video file (extension “.avi”) or a directory containing still image files with identical pixel dimensions. At the bottom of the file dialog window “Files of type” must be set to “Still image folders / video files for stacking (*.avi)”. Selecting a directory with image files which do not match will result in an error message later on.



- To define a postprocessing job, the user selects a single image file (with the extension .tiff, .tif, .png, or .jpg). At the bottom of the file dialog window "Files of type" must be set to "Images for postprocessing (*.tiff *.tif *.png *.jpg)"

When the user presses "Open" to close the dialog window, the selected jobs are added to the list of jobs presented in the main window. This list may contain stacking and postprocessing jobs in any order. Additional jobs can be defined by pressing "Add job(s)" to re-open the job selection dialog again. Jobs can be removed from the list by clicking on them and pressing "Remove selected job(s)".



When all jobs are defined, pressing "OK" completes the job specification.

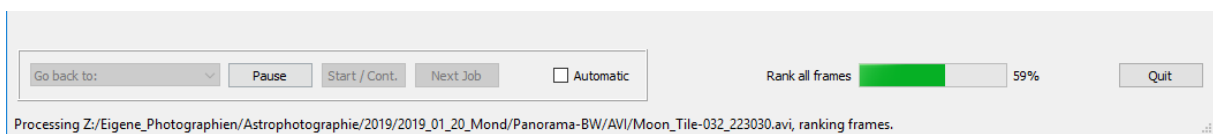
4.3 Starting and Controlling the Workflow

Pressing "Start / Continue" triggers PlanetarySystemStacker to start processing the jobs in sequential order, either interactively or in batch mode (fully automatic). By checking / unchecking

the “Automatic” checkbox at the bottom of the main GUI, the user can switch back and forth between the two modes at any time during execution.

If a large number of similar video files are to be processed, or many images of the same moon panorama are to be postprocessed, the recommended procedure is to process the first job in interactive mode (“Automatic” unchecked). PSS then stops at every processing step and prompts the user to adapt parameters as he or she likes. After the first job the user checks the “Automatic” box, and PSS continues processing all the remaining jobs automatically using the adapted set of parameters.

When batch processing is active, the user at any time can seize control by unchecking the “Automatic” box. PSS just finishes the current processing step and switches back to interactive mode.



During computationally intensive processing phases PSS displays a progress bar at the bottom of the GUI. If more than one job is being processed, a second progress bar shows the fraction of finished jobs. The status line displays information about the files being processed and the current processing step.

4.4 Execution Protocol

Being able to look at the execution details of a job can be very useful, especially if something went wrong in batch mode, or if the resulting image is of lower quality than expected. With PSS the user can choose among various protocol variants.

First of all, the parameter “Protocol detail level” selects the amount of information provided. Level “0” means no output at all. At level “2” detailed info is provided, e.g. on the number of alignment points and the warp distribution. If parameter “Write protocol to file” is checked, all protocol data is appended to the standard file “PlanetarySytemStacker.log” in the user’s home directory. It is a good idea to delete this file every once in a while.

In particular if many jobs are processed, it is recommended to set the option “Store protocol with results”. In this case, additional to the sequential protocol file the part pertaining to a given job is written as a separate file. Its name is derived from the name of the job result, with the stacking suffix “_pss.tiff” being replaced with “_stacking-log.txt”. This way it is easy to associate the log file with the corresponding job output. In the case of postprocessing jobs, the ending “_postproc-log.txt” corresponds to the postprocessing result “_gpp.tiff”.

4.5 Reading Input Data and Buffering

Input data for stacking can be large. In the worst case, the input video file itself is larger than the available RAM. To make things worse, additional to the original video frames PSS uses several image variants which result from applying certain filters (e.g. Gaussian or Laplacian filters). Since those variants in general are used more than once, processing is fastest if they can be kept in memory. If the RAM is too small, however, this is not an option. Unfortunately, relying on the paging

mechanism of the operating system isn't an option, either, since this tends to slow down execution too much.

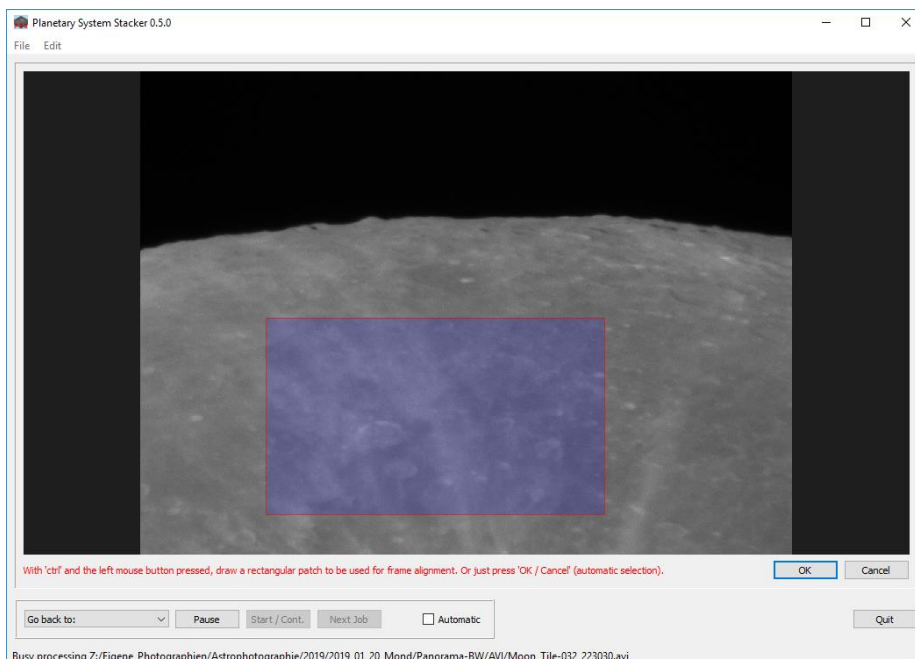
PSS, therefore, offers a range of buffering levels. Which one is best depends on the size of input data and the size of the available RAM. The user can choose the most appropriate scheme in the configuration dialog (parameter "Data buffering level"). At level "0", data is not buffered at all. The original frames are read several times during job execution, and derived images are recomputed when needed. Obviously, this mode leads to maximum computational load. At the other end of the scale, at buffering level "4" all data is kept in memory until a job is finished. On computers with enough RAM this is the best choice. In general, the default setting "2" is a good compromise between speed and RAM usage.

4.6 Frame stabilization

Before frames are stacked they first have to be roughly aligned with each other. This way, drift effects of poor mount alignment or guiding inaccuracies are removed. PSS offers two stabilization modes:

- In "Planetary" mode, it is assumed that a planet is located somewhere in the frame, completely surrounded by dark sky. In this case, frame stabilization is very simple and reliable. Therefore, it is strongly recommended to use this option whenever appropriate.
- In all other cases, "Surface" must be used. This is usually the case for moon or sun imaging. In Surface mode, a so-called "stabilization anchor" must be selected in the image. By comparing its position in all frames, PSS determines the drift between them. Obviously, it is crucial to choose the anchor appropriately.

PSS offers to identify the stabilization anchor automatically (check "Automatic frame stabilization"). If this option is chosen, additional parameters ("patch size" and "search width") can be modified to control the automatic algorithm. Obviously, in batch mode automatic stabilization is the only choice, so the configuration parameter "Automatic frame stabilization" is ignored.



If the user chooses to define the stabilization anchor manually in interactive mode, he or she must uncheck the box "Automatic frame stabilization". PSS interrupts the workflow, shows the full scene covered by the video to the user and asks to draw the stabilization anchor as a rectangular patch. Since this is the first time in the workflow where the frame viewer appears, this is the time to explain its general features:

- Initially the viewer shows the full frame. Using the scroll wheel (or the keys "+" and "-"), the user can zoom in and out. Moving (panning) the scene laterally is accomplished by moving the mouse while keeping the left mouse button pressed.
- If the contents of the view are to be manipulated, like in this case by drawing the rectangular patch, the "ctrl" key must be kept pressed during the manipulation. As long as the key is pressed, the hand symbol at the mouse pointer location changes into an arrow.
- Drawing a rectangular patch is done by pressing a mouse button (in this case the left one) at one corner of the patch and moving the mouse to the opposite corner.
- Other manipulation options depend on the use case and are described there.

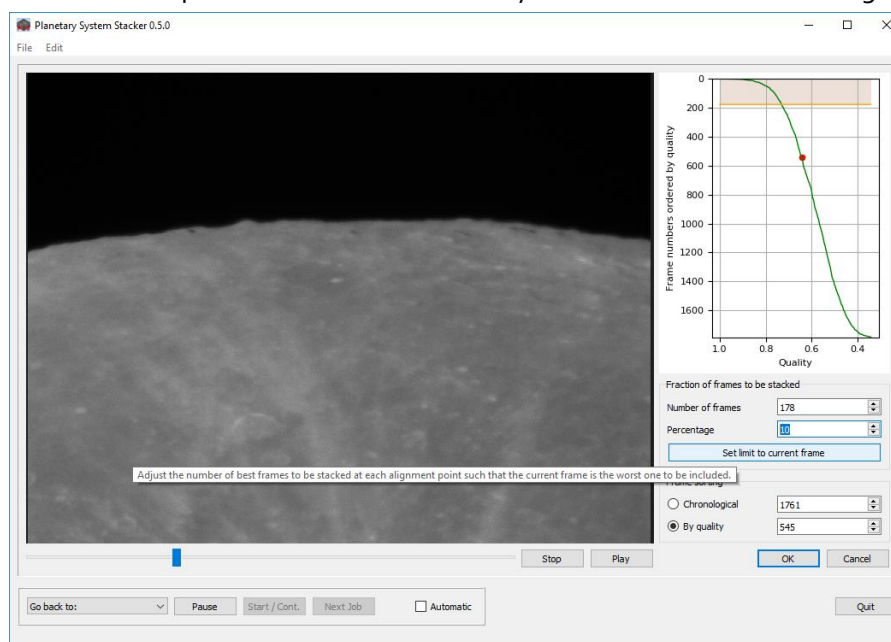
The area chosen as the stabilization anchor should contain as much small-scale contrast (both vertically and horizontally) as possible, and should be large enough. Usually some 30% of the frame size (per coordinate direction) is a good choice.

Once the patch is selected, the user acknowledges the choice by pressing "OK". If "Cancel" is pressed instead, PSS defines the stabilization anchor automatically. This also happens if the patch selected by the user is too small (less than 20%) or too large (greater than 70%).

After completing the frame stabilization process, PSS computes the image area common to all frames. This area is the basis for all processing steps from this point on.

4.7 Setting the Stacking Fraction

In the next step the user decides how many frames are used for stacking. The GUI opens a view on



the scene where frames can be displayed either ordered by decreasing overall quality or chronologically. With a horizontal slider the user can scroll through all frames. As an alternative, he or she can press "Play" / "Stop" to display frames as a video.

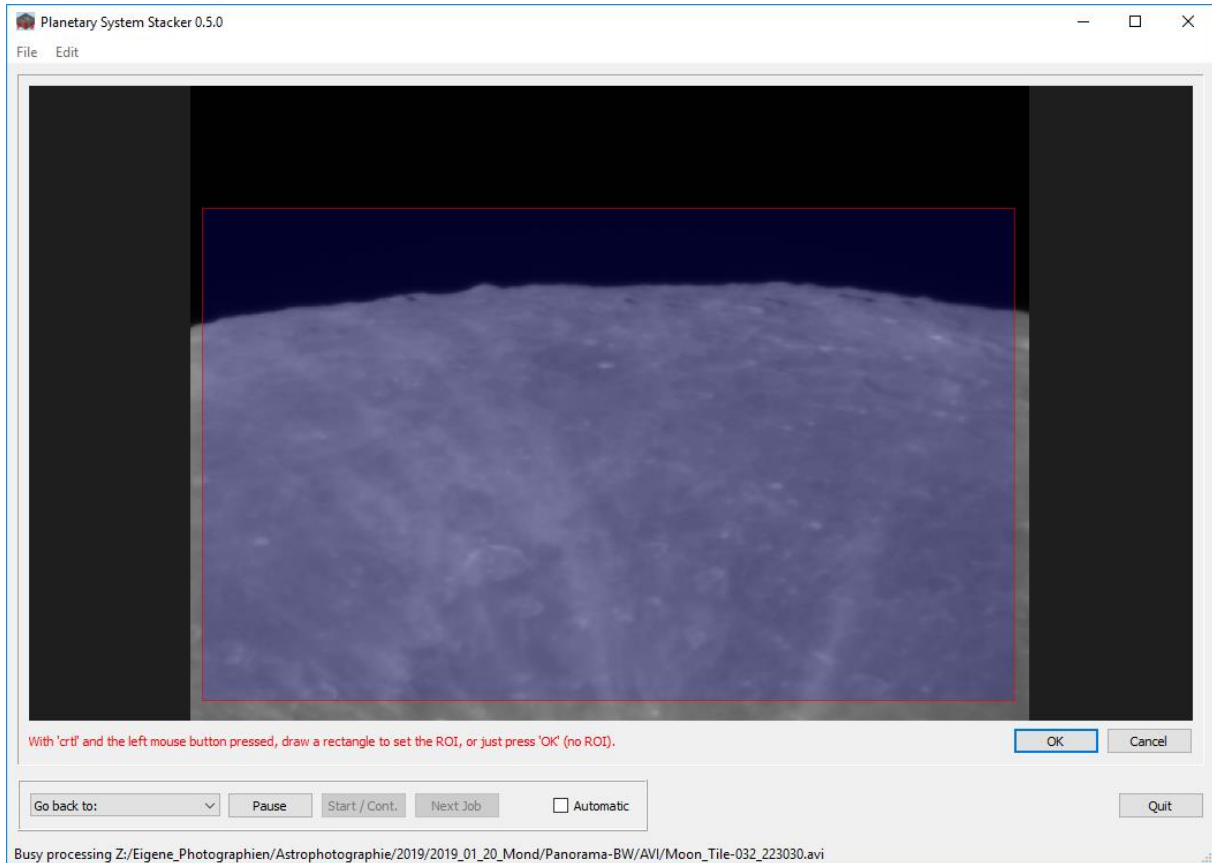
The graph on the right shows the position of

the current frame in the selected order (vertical axis) and its relative quality (horizontal axis). The shaded area shows the fraction of frames to be stacked. The stacking limit can be moved by

changing the input editor fields for “Number of frames” or “Percentage”. As an alternative, pressing the key “Set limit to current frame” moves the border of the shaded area to the position of the frame being displayed.

The selection of the stacking limit is acknowledged by pressing “OK”.

4.8 Setting a Region of Interest (ROI)

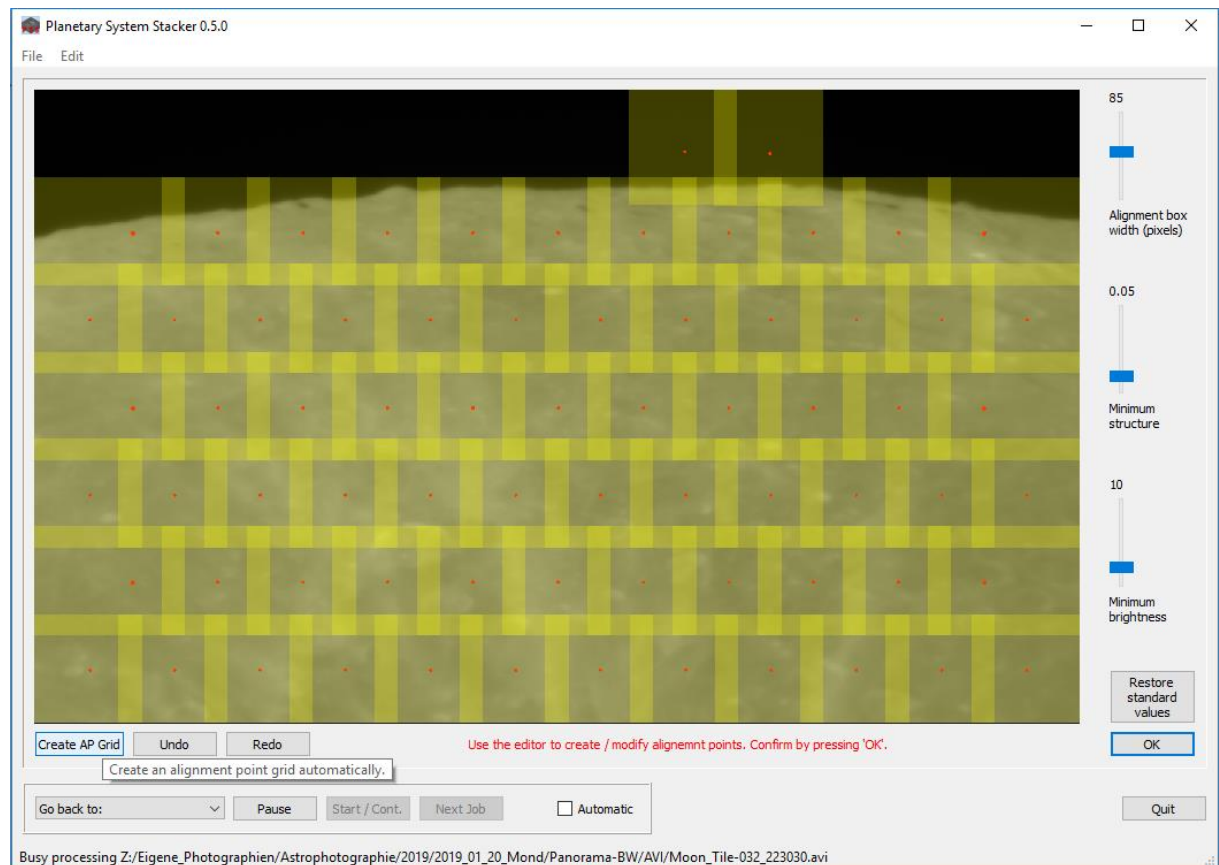


Optionally, stacking can be restricted to a so-called region of interest smaller than the intersection of all frames. To specify its size a viewer opens and prompts the user to select the ROI as a rectangular patch (as described in Section 4.6 above). Selecting the full view instead of a ROI is accomplished by just pressing “OK”.

4.9 Selecting Alignment Points

In the next view the alignment points (APs) used to de-warp the individual frames are selected. Again, a viewer opens, along with controls to the right and below. Initially, the view shows the complete scene (if a ROI was selected, the view is restricted to this area). Alignment points can be generated automatically or set individually by the user:

- To create APs automatically, press the button “Create AP Grid”. The size of individual AP patches is controlled by changing the “Alignment box width” slider on the right. Thresholds for excluding areas which are too dim (e.g. sky background) or contain too little structure can be changed by moving the two other sliders.



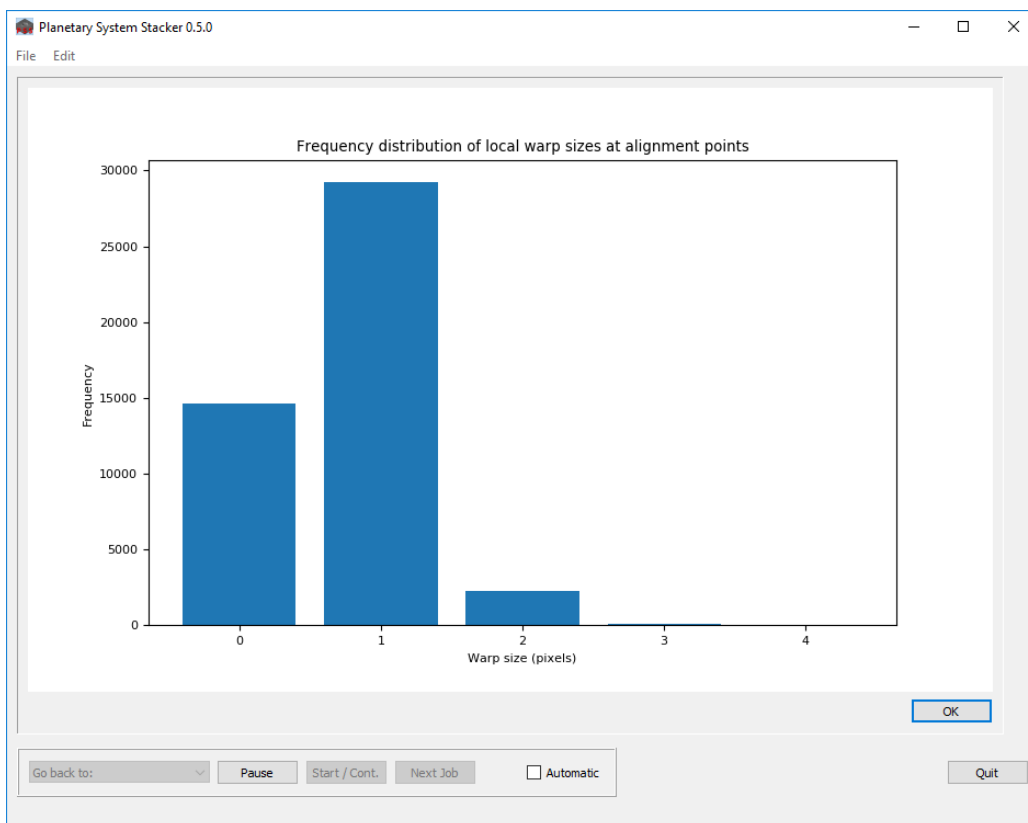
- If slider settings have been changed, they can be reset to default values by pressing the button "Restore standard values".
- After changing the slider settings, press "Create AP Grid" again to compute a new AP grid using these settings.
- APs can be deleted, added and modified manually. This way the user can adapt the grid as required. Remember that all these manipulations are done while keeping the "ctrl" key pressed.
 - To delete an AP, place the mouse pointer close to its center (red dot), and press the right mouse button.
 - To delete a whole AP region, open a rectangular patch by moving the mouse while keeping the right mouse button pressed. When the button is released, all APs in the patch are removed.
 - To move an AP, press the left mouse button at an AP and drag the AP with the mouse to the new location.
 - To change the size of an AP patch, move the mouse close to the AP center and use the scroll wheel to change its size.
 - To add an AP, left click on the desired location. An AP with (initially) the standard size (see slider on the right) is created there.
- All those AP operations can be undone / redone by pressing the buttons "Undo" or "Redo". The size of the undo stack is unlimited. And, as with all other PSS viewers zooming and panning is supported here as well.

The optimal AP size very much depends on the quality of the input data. If frames show very little local contrast, larger AP patches lead to better results. If the resolution is very good, but seeing-

induced warping is strong, small AP patches are better. The best practice is to experiment with different AP sizes, starting with a somewhat larger value (e.g. 100 pixels), and trying smaller sizes until the quality of the stacked image does not improve any more.

4.10 Frame Stacking

When the AP selection is completed, PSS has gathered all the information it needs to stack the frames. First, at every AP it identifies the sharpest frames to be used for stacking. Since the seeing is a very local phenomenon, frame sets will be different for different APs. Then, for every AP and every contributing frame the local displacement relative to a reference frame is measured, and the shifted AP patch added to the stacking buffer. Progress bars are updated regularly throughout the process.



Once the stacking is complete, a graph shows the frequency distribution of local displacements at all APs and all contributing frames. Usually, small displacements (a few pixels) occur most often. If the distribution extends too much towards larger numbers, this could be due to a low stacking quality. In this case it is recommended to experiment with different parameters, for example:

- Increase the "Noise level (Gaussian blur)" parameter.
- Increase the AP size.
- Eliminate APs in areas with too little structure.

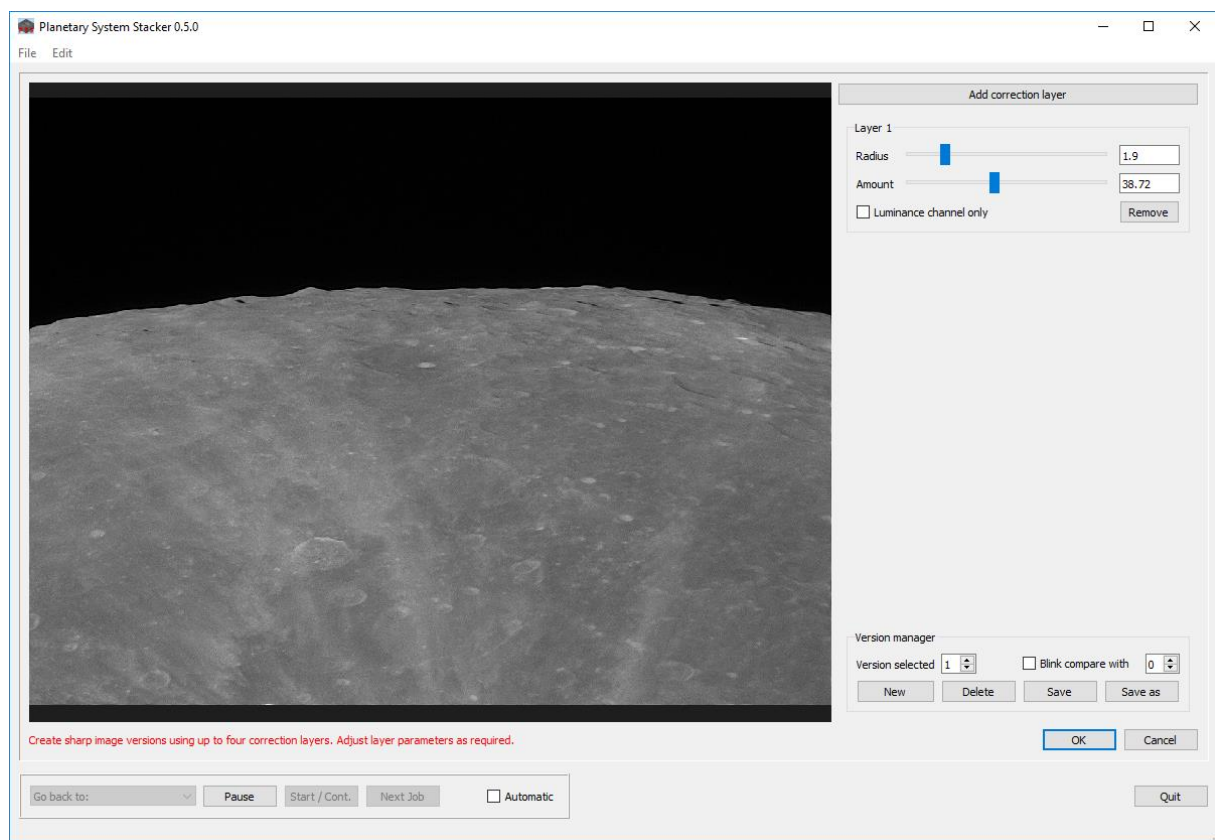
After inspecting the warp distribution, press "OK" to finish the current job. The stacked summation image is written in 16bit Tiff format to the file system into the same folder where the input is located. The name is taken from the input video file or image directory, extended by the suffix "_pss.tiff".

4.11 Postprocessing (Image Sharpening)

As explained in Section 4.2, PSS can sharpen a still image in a postprocessing job. Input to this type of job is a single image file, and tailoring and applying the sharpening filter is the only job activity.

As an alternative, postprocessing of a stacked summation image can be included as the last step in a stacking job. In this case, the configuration parameter “Stacking plus postprocessing” must be checked before the end of the stacking job.

This section describes how postprocessing works in PSS. As explained above for stacking, postprocessing can be performed either interactively, or in fully automatic batch mode. In the case of postprocessing a bunch of similar images, executing the first job interactively and then continuing in batch mode (by setting the “Automatic” checkbox) is recommended as best practice. The reason is that for sharpening no reasonable default values can be specified, so finding a good set of sharpening parameters is possible only in an interactive trial and error loop. PSS was designed to support this interactive process as effectively as possible.



To support experimentation with different sharpening configurations, PSS offers to define and compare an arbitrary number of versions. With the “version manager” at lower right new versions can be created. With the “Version selected” spin box a different version can be selected. Other GUI elements in this view, such as “Delete”, “Save”, “Save as”, and the filter details in the panel at upper right, refer to the version currently selected. Version number “0” is reserved for the original image, with no correction being applied.

Sharpening in PSS is implemented using a multi-layer unsharp masking algorithm. A hierarchy of up to four layers can be defined. Each layer is defined by

- its spatial frequency (in pixels),
- the strength (or amount) with which the layer is applied, and
- whether the sharpening should only affect the luminance channel or all color channels.

When the postprocessing view opens in the GUI, the viewer to the left shows the input image, with the sharpening model selected in the version manager being applied. If PSS is called for the first time, additionally to the original image (Version "0") it starts with an initial version 1, consisting of a trivial single correction layer (Radius = 1.0, Amount = 0., i.e. no correction is being applied, sharpening in all color channels).

Layers are added / removed by pressing the buttons "Add correction layer" and "Remove", respectively. When layer parameters are changed, the image viewer is updated immediately. In the case of large images, a "busy" message appears in the status line until the update is finished.

Different versions can be compared with each other using the "blink comparator". First, additionally to the selected version, another version is chosen in the spin box to the right. When both versions are set, checking the "Blink compare with" box causes the viewer to alternate between them. While the blink comparator is running, the layer parameters of the selected version can be changed. Layers can be added or removed. Even the selection of the two versions on display can be changed. Last but not least, as with all PSS viewers, zooming and panning can be used to inspect the effect of the sharpening model in detail.

Once the user is satisfied with the selected version, pressing the "OK" button triggers PSS to save this image version along with the input image (as a 16bit Tiff image). The file name is the one of the input image, extended by the suffix "_gpp.tiff". The parameters of all postprocessing versions and the number of the selected version are saved in the configuration file. When the postprocessing view opens next time, all versions and the selection index are restored.

Different postprocessing configurations can be saved and restored at any time using the menu entries "File / Save configuration" and "File / Load configuration" (see above in Section 4.1)..

4.12 End of Program

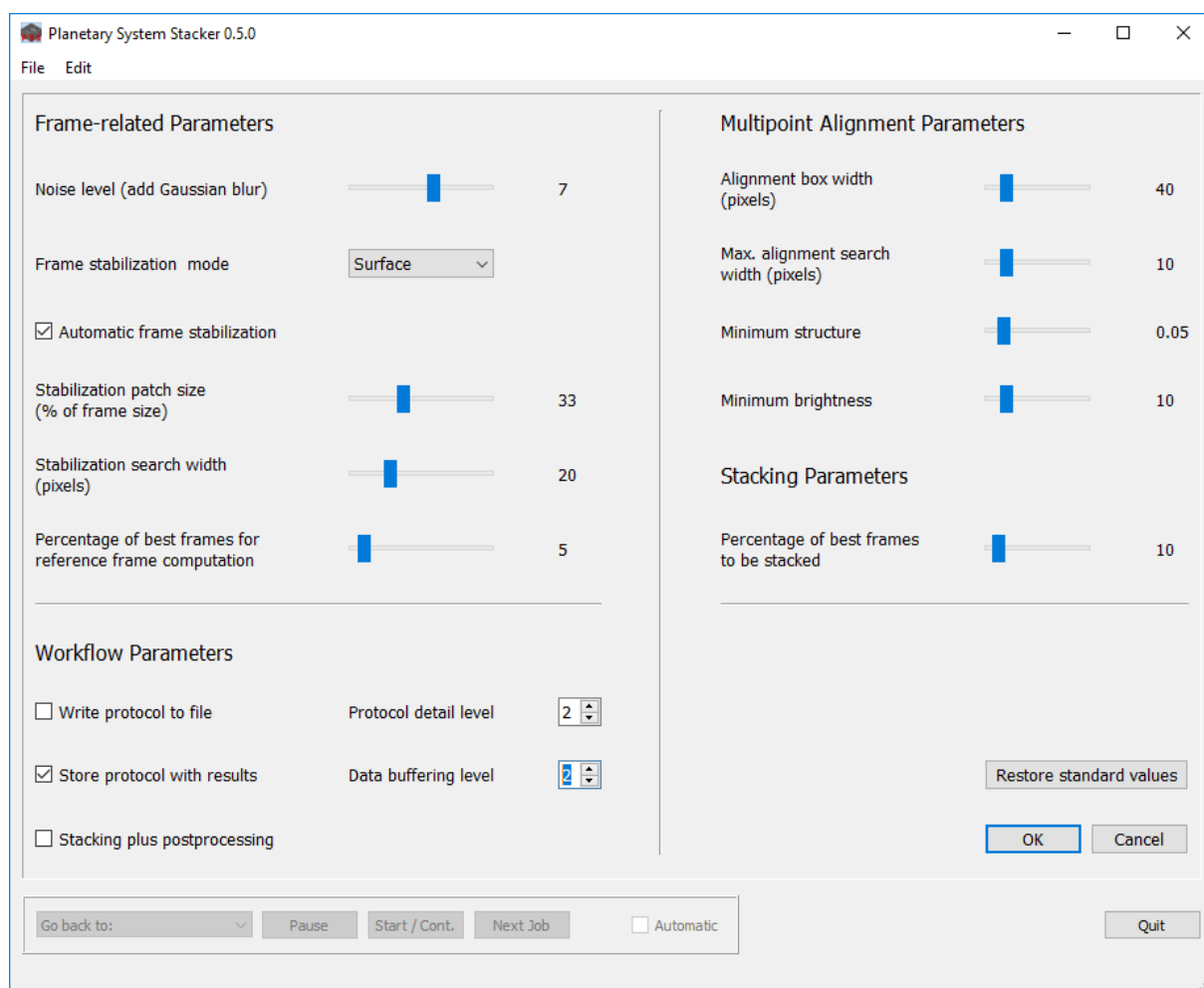
When a job is finished in interactive mode, the user can instruct PSS to repeat the execution starting with a selected job phase. Pressing the combo box "Go back to" opens a panel with the available phases. This can be useful if one wants to change parameters affecting later job phases only, without repeating the whole job.

When all jobs are done, PSS returns to its initial state. New jobs can be selected in the "File / Open" dialog. If no more jobs are left, the user can quit the program by pressing the "Quit" button. As a last activity PSS saves the current configuration in the standard configuration file and closes all protocol files.

Appendix A: Configuration Parameters

The configuration dialog allows entering user-specific values for various parameters. They are arranged in the following groups:

- Frame-related parameters
- Multipoint alignment parameters
- Stacking parameters
- Workflow parameters



The following tables contain definitions of all parameters.

Frame-related parameters

Noise level	Width of the Gaussian filter used to blur the original images before shifts are determined. For noisy images this value should be increased. If the images show very little noise, a lower value can improve the precision.
Frame stabilization mode	For planetary imaging, choose "Planet". This option is valid only if the object in all directions is surrounded by dark sky. In all other cases, "Surface" must be selected.

Automatic frame stabilization	<p>Only used in "Surface" mode (see above). In this case, the global alignment of all frames relative to each other is based on the shift measured at a selected surface patch. The patch should contain good local contrast in both coordinate directions. If this option is checked, PSS selects the patch itself. Otherwise, the user is prompted to select the patch manually.</p> <p>In batch mode, this option is ignored, and PSS always selects the patch itself.</p>
Stabilization patch size	Size of the stabilization patch in both coordinate directions relative to the frame size (in percent).
Stabilization search width	Maximum allowed shift between two consecutive frames in pixels per coordinate direction. If no optimum is found within this search width, the shift is set to zero, and a warning is written to the protocol.
Percentage of best frames for reference frame computation	The reference frame is computed by averaging the best frames after global frame stabilization. This parameter determines the fraction of frames used for the reference frame.

Multipoint alignment parameters

Alignment box width	<p>Standard size of the quadratic alignment patches around each alignment point used for measuring the local warping. In the case of noisy images or low local contrast, a larger box size is recommended.</p> <p>This parameter is used by the automatic AP grid generation.</p>
Max. alignment search width	Maximum local warp displacement (after global frame stabilization). The warp is measured using a local search algorithm. If within the specified search width no optimum is found, the local warp shift is set to zero.
Minimum structure	Threshold used by automatic AP grid generation to avoid alignment points in places with too little local structure. Increase this value if APs with too little structure have been created.
Minimum brightness	Threshold used by automatic AP grid generation to

	avoid alignment points in places with too little light. The main purpose of this feature is to avoid APs in the background sky.
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Stacking parameters

Percentage of best frames to be stacked	At every AP a fixed number of best frames are used for stacking. This parameter specifies the fraction of frames used.
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Workflow parameters

Write protocol to file	If checked, a protocol is written (appended) to the file "PlanetarySystemStacker.log" in the user's home directory.
Protocol detail level	Level of protocol detail. 0: No protocol; 1: Only major steps listed; 2: Detailed info for each processing step.
Store protocol with results	If checked, additionally to the global protocol file, for every job the protocol section related to it is stored in a separate file along with the job result (extension "_stacking-log.txt" or "_postproc-log.txt", depending on the job type).
Data buffering level	Specifies how much data PSS should keep in RAM for reuse. Possible values range from 0 (no buffering) to 4 (keep all intermediate results in RAM). It is recommended to use as high a value as possible. If not all data fit in memory, however, it is better to use a lower buffering level than relying on the paging mechanism of the operating system.
Stacking plus postprocessing	Only used for stacking jobs: If checked, postprocessing is included as an additional phase at the end of the stacking job. In this case, both the stacked summation image and the sharpened version are written to the file system.

Parameters can be modified either in the configuration dialog (menu "Edit / Edit configuration") or during job processing in interactive mode. The configuration also includes the current sharpening models as defined in the postprocessing dialog.

Before PSS terminates, the current parameter set is written into the configuration file "PlanetarySystemStacker.ini" in the user's home directory. The next time PSS starts it restores the configuration using that file. Additionally, at any time during execution the current parameter set

can be saved to or loaded from a file of the user's choice.(menu "File / Save configuration" and "File / Load configuration").