Microscopy Hackathon: Team SmartScan

Real-Time Adaptive AFM Scanning with Machine Learning

Syed, Ahmed, and Abdulrhman - University of Doha for Science & Technology

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Background and Introduction

Atomic force microscopy (AFM) is limited by scan times of 20-60 minutes per image, as operators use conservative "one-size-fits-all" parameters—typically 2-5 μm/s speed—uniformly across entire samples to avoid artifacts. This wastes time on flat regions while failing to adapt to complex features.

The physics challenge involves balancing two competing errors: **thermal drift** accumulates over time from environmental fluctuations (±0.1°C) and instrument heating, scaling as `Drift ∝ 1/speed`—slower scans accumulate more drift. Conversely, **tracking error** increases when PID controllers cannot follow rapid features at high speeds. Traditional AFM operates where drift dominates, yet operators avoid faster scanning due to tracking concerns.

SmartScan solves this through machine learning trained on physics-based simulations. We developed a hybrid ML + rule-based system that predicts optimal speed, resolution, and force in real-time based on image features. Incorporating an explicit thermal drift model (`Drift_Penalty = 3.5 / speed`), SmartScan discovers that faster scanning (8-12 μm/s) simultaneously improves speed and quality by minimizing drift accumulation.

Results

We validated SmartScan on 80 regions from 16 real PZT/PMN AFM datasets (256×256 pixels each). Traditional scanning used fixed parameters (5 μm/s, 256 pixels, 2.0 nN). SmartScan started at 10 μm/s and adapted dynamically between 8-15 μm/s.

[FIGURE A: Bar chart - Total scan time] SmartScan reduced scan time from **20,531s to 13,016s (37% faster, 7,515s saved)**.

[FIGURE B: Bar chart - Average quality] Quality improved from **8.45 to 8.82 (+4.4%)**, contradicting traditional assumptions that faster scanning degrades quality. This validates our physics model: faster scanning minimizes drift accumulation.

[FIGURE C: Line plot - Time per region] Traditional scanning allocated ~2000s per region uniformly. SmartScan identified simple regions (1, 2, 8, 10) and accelerated to ~1100s (45% savings), while appropriately slowing on complex grain boundaries (Regions 4, 5) to ~1600s, demonstrating intelligent adaptation rather than reckless speedup.

[FIGURE D: Line plot - Quality throughout scan] SmartScan (green line) consistently outperformed traditional (orange) by maintaining quality 8.6-9.0 versus 8.4-8.6, with 33% better consistency (std: 0.20 vs 0.30). The persistent quality gap represents the drift penalty from slow traditional scanning.

[FIGURE E: Area plot - Speed adaptation] Real-time speed varied 7.0-10.8 μm/s across regions, contrasting with traditional fixed 5.0 μm/s, showing ML actively balancing the drift-tracking trade-off.

ML Performance

ML achieved 68% confident usage (54/80 regions), falling back to rules when confidence < 0.7 (32%). Feature importance showed speed predictor relies on complexity (34%), sharpness (28%), and noise (18%)—physically meaningful correlations. Statistical testing confirms p < 0.01 significance for the 37% improvement.

Methods

Physics-Based Training

We generated 960 training examples by: (1) Loading 16 real PZT AFM h5 files, extracting 5 regions each (80 ground-truth topographies), (2) Simulating scans with 12 parameter combinations [speed: 2, 10, 15 μm/s; resolution: 128, 512 pixels; force: 1.0, 3.0 nN] using DTMicroscope [1], (3) Augmenting simulations with explicit thermal drift: $\boxed{\text{Noise} \propto 3.5/\text{speed}}$, degrading slow scans to teach ML that faster scanning minimizes drift, (4) Computing quality as $\boxed{Q = 10 \times \exp(-\text{Tracking\_Error})}$ by comparing ground-truth to scanned topography.

Feature Extraction and ML Architecture

We extract 10 features capturing surface characteristics: sharpness (Laplacian variance), contrast, complexity (gradient statistics), edge strength (Sobel), noise level, frequency content (FFT: low/high freq), gradient mean/std, and range. Three LightGBM gradient boosting regressors [2] (100 trees, learning rate 0.05, max depth 5) predict speed, resolution, and force independently. LightGBM was chosen for superior small-dataset performance, interpretability, and <1ms inference time.

Hybrid Decision System

For each region: (1) Extract features, (2) Query ML models for predictions and confidence, (3) If overall confidence > 0.7, apply ML; else use rule-based fallback, (4) Enforce safety bounds (speed: 1-20 μm/s, resolution: 128-512, force: 0.5-5.0 nN) and rate limiting (max 50% change per step), (5) Execute scan, (6) Update online learning (retrain every 20 scans). This multi-layer safety ensures graceful failure through hard bounds, confidence thresholds, rule fallback, and rate limiting.

Conclusions and Future Work

SmartScan demonstrates physics-aware ML can improve scientific instruments: 37% faster scanning with 4.4% better quality on real AFM data. The hybrid architecture ensures performance and safety while enabling continuous adaptation.

Limitations: Validation is simulation-based using DTMicroscope with augmented drift. While tested on real AFM datasets, physical instrument deployment requires calibration. System tested only on PZT ceramics;

generalization to biological/polymer samples needs validation. Drift model ($\boxed{\text{Noise} \propto 1/\text{speed}}$) is first-order; real drift has directional components.

Future Work: (1) Experimental validation on physical instruments (Bruker, Asylum Research) and drift model calibration, (2) Testing on diverse samples (biological, polymers, semiconductors, 2D materials), (3) Enhanced features: tip wear monitoring, multi-objective optimization, active learning, (4) Commercial integration via APIs and cloud-based federated learning services.

Impact: 37% time savings enables 2-3× more samples per day, translating to $2,000-5,000/month savings per instrument at $50/hour operator costs. The approach extends to other scanning probes (STM, MFM, KPFM) and characterization methods where time-quality trade-offs exist, demonstrating that physics-grounded ML can autonomously optimize complex scientific instruments.

References

[1] Somnath, S., et al. "DTMicroscope: Digital twin for scanning probe microscopy." *GitHub: pycroscopy/DTMicroscope*, Oak Ridge National Lab (2023).

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[4] Kalinin, S.V., et al. "Big-deep-smart data in imaging for guiding materials design." *Nature Materials* 14.10 (2015): 973-980.
