

Article

UNASSISTED QUANTITATIVE EVALUATION OF DESPECKLING FILTERS

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Abstract: SAR (Synthetic Aperture Radar) imaging plays a central role in Remote Sensing due to, among other important features, its ability to provide high-resolution, day-and-night and almost weather-independent images. SAR images are affected from a granular contamination, speckle, that can be described by a multiplicative model. Many despeckling techniques have been proposed in the literature, as well as measures of the quality of the results they provide. Assuming the multiplicative model, the observed image Z is the product of two independent fields: the backscatter X and the speckle Y . The result of any speckle filter is \hat{X} , an estimator of the backscatter X , based solely on the observed data Z . An ideal estimator would be the one for which the ratio of the observed image to the filtered one $I = Z / \hat{X}$ is only speckle: a collection of independent identically distributed samples from Gamma variates. We, then, assess the quality of a filter by the closeness of I to the hypothesis that it is adherent to the statistical properties of pure speckle. We analyze filters through the ratio image they produce with regards to first- and second-order statistics: the former check marginal properties, while the latter verifies lack of structure. A new quantitative image-quality index is then defined, and applied to state-of-the-art despeckling filters. This new measure provides consistent results with commonly used quality measures (equivalent number of looks, PSNR, MSSIM, β edge correlation, and preservation of the mean), and ranks the filters results also in agreement with their visual analysis. We conclude our study showing that the proposed measure can be successfully used to optimize the (often many) parameters that define a speckle filter.

Keywords: Quality assessment, ratio images, Synthetic Aperture Radar (SAR), speckle, speckle filters.

1. Introduction

Speckle reduction has occupied both the scientific literature and the production software industry since the deployment of SAR platforms. Good speckle filters are expected to improve the perceived image quality while preserving the scene reflectivity. The former requires, at the same time, preservation of details in heterogeneous areas and constancy in homogeneous targets.

Early works assessed the performance of despeckling techniques by visual inspection of the filtered images; cf. Refs. [1,2]. Since then, speckle filtering has reached such a level of sophistication [3] that forthcoming improvements are likely to be incremental, and assessing them quantitatively is, at the same time, desirable and hard. Also, as filters are often defined with many parameters, eg. window size, thresholds, etc., finding an optimal setting is also an issue.

The Equivalent Number of Looks (ENL) is among the simplest and most spread measures of quality of despeckling filters. It can be estimated, in textureless areas and intensity format, as the ratio of the squared sample mean to the sample variance, i.e., the reciprocal of the squared coefficient of variation (see [4] for other methods for the estimation of ENL). Being proportional to the signal-to-noise ratio, the higher the ENL is, the better the quality of the image is in terms of speckle reduction. However, it is well known that large ENL values are easily obtained just by overfiltering an image, which severely degrades details and gives the filtered image an undesirable blurred appearance. In particular, $\text{ENL} = \infty$ is obtained in completely flat areas where the sample variance is null. Testing a filter merely by its performance over textureless areas, where a simple generic filter as the Boxcar, would perform well, is bound to produce misleading results.

Other measures of quality commonly used for speckle filter assessment enhance certain characteristics, but suffer from shortcomings. The proposal and assessment of a new filter is frequently supported by a plethora of measures. As such, it is hard to use them to optimize the parameters that often specify a filter.

An alternative approach for assessing the performance of despeckling methods is the analysis of ratio images, as proposed in [4]. This is becoming a standard procedure in the SAR community [5–8]. It consists of checking by visual inspection whether patterns appear in the ratio image $I = Z/\hat{X}$, where Z is the original image and \hat{X} is its filtered version. Under the multiplicative model, the ratio image from the ideal filter should be pure speckle with no visible patterns. The presence of geometric structures, changes of statistical properties, or any detail correlated to the original image Z in I indicates poor filter performance, i.e., not only speckle but also other possible relevant information has been removed from the original image. The visual interpretation of ratio images, being subjective, is qualitative and irreproducible.

Fig. 1 illustrates this idea. This image is part of a single-look HH SAR data set obtained over Oberpfaffenhofen, Germany, with textureless areas, bright scatterers, and urban areas with geometric content as buildings and roads. Fig 1 (top) is the original speckled image, and below left is its filtered version obtained with the SRAD (speckle anisotropic diffusion) filter [9]. The filtered image is acceptable in terms of edge and details preservation: textureless areas look smooth, as expected after a successful despeckling. The middle row right is the resulting ratio image, with a ROI (region of interest) in the urban area. The third row of Fig. 1 (left) presents a zoom of the highlighted area. It shows remaining structures in the ratio image, an evidence that the SRAD filter is not ideal for this case.

The quantitative assessment of such residual geometrical content is a challenging task because, besides being subtle, it has similar properties to the rest of the ratio image: brightness, marginal distribution etc. That is, areas with and without geometrical structure (even narrow edges) are extremely noisy and, therefore, simple algorithms as, for instance, those based on edge detection, fail at detecting them; cf. the result of applying the Canny edge detector in the third row of Fig. 1, right. Also, the better the filter is, the harder will be identifying and quantifying remaining structures in the ratio image.

This work proposes a new measure of quality that does not require any ground reference. Using only the original image, an estimate of its number of looks, and the filtered image, we measure the deviation from the ideal filter as a combination of deviations from the ideal marginal properties with a measure of remaining structure in the ratio image. We test this unassisted measure of quality in both simulated data and on images obtained by an actual SAR sensor, and we show it is able to rank with a single value the results produced by four state-of-the-art filters in a way that captures other measures of quality. We also show it can be used to fine-tune filter parameters.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. Section 2 recalls the basic assumptions underlying this proposal: the multiplicative model. With this in view, we discuss the properties to be measured in a ratio image. Section 3 presents our proposal of an unassisted quantitative measure for assessing the quality of despeckling filters. In Sec. 4 we present the results observed on both simulated

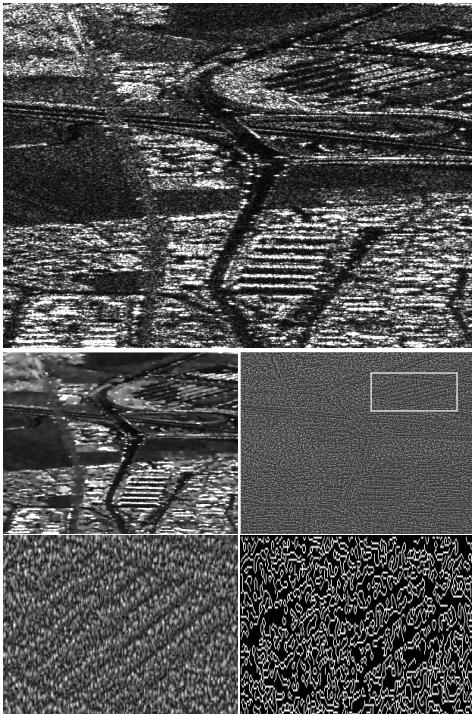


Figure 1. Top: original SAR image. Middle: SRAD ($T = 50$) filtered image and ratio image. Bottom: zoom of a selected area within the ratio image and extracted edges by Canny's edge detector.

and actual SAR images, and show an example of filter parameter tuning. Section 5 concludes the article.

2. SAR image formation and ratio images

Although we recognize the nature of SAR data depends of many system parameters, our work starts by assuming the multiplicative model for the observations. Observations can be, thus, described by the product of two independent variables, X and Y that model, respectively, the (desired but unobserved) backscatter and the speckle noise. So, $Z = XY$ models the observed data, and one aims at obtaining \hat{X} , a good estimator of X .

The usual assumption is that Y is a collection of independent identically distributed Gamma random variables with unitary mean, and shape parameter equal to the number of looks. The backscatter is constant in textureless areas, and otherwise can be described by another random variable.

Our main aim is assessing the quality of despeckling filters by measuring how the ratio images they produce deviate from the idealized result.

The perfect filtered image is $\hat{X} = X$ and, thus, produces a ratio image $Z/\hat{X} = Y$ which consists of pure speckle. Based on this observation, our measure of quality captures departures from the following hypothesis: “the perfect speckle filter leads to a ratio image formed by a collection of independent identically distributed Gamma random variables with unitary mean and shape parameter equal to the (equivalent) number of looks the original image has”.

In the following, we illustrate our idea with images and one-dimensional slices. We elaborate three situations to make our point on the usefulness of ratio images for detecting the performance of a speckle filter.

Firstly, we will see the effect of oversmoothing textured areas.

104 Figure 2(a) shows a step function in pink (the backscatter), and the observed return from this
 105 backscatter in single look fully developed speckle, i.e., exponential deviates with mean equal to 11
 106 (left half) and 1 (right half).

107 Figure 2(b) shows a similar situation, but when the backscatter is no longer constant. In this case,
 108 the backscatter is textured with mean 11 and 1, as in the previous example, but varying according to
 109 exponential deviates. The textured step backscatter is shown in pink. When speckle enters the scene,
 110 modeled here again as unitary mean exponential random variables, the observed data obeys a \mathcal{K}
 111 distribution; shown in lavender.

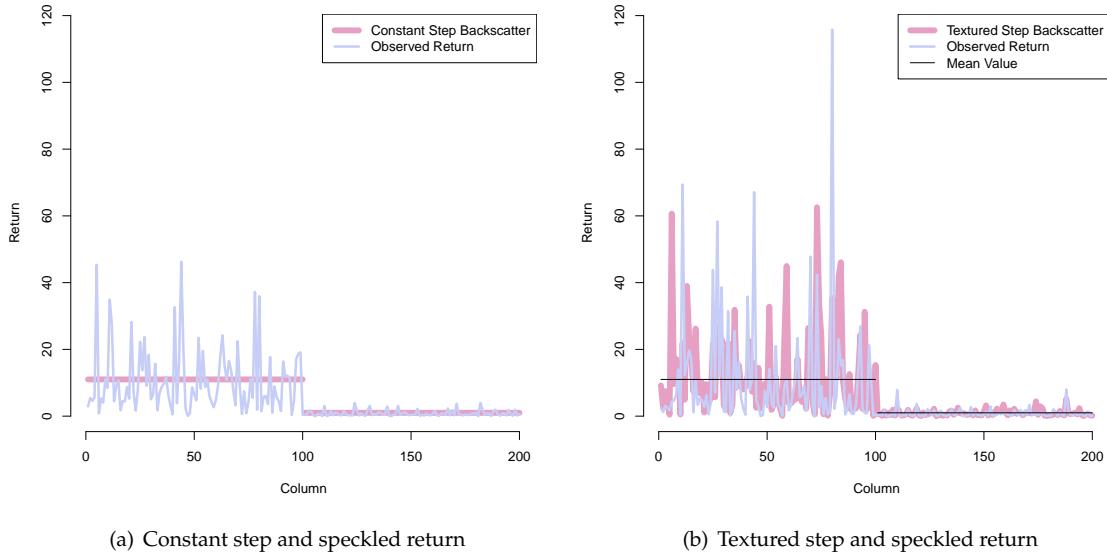


Figure 2. A step: constant and textured versions, and their return.

112 What should the ideal filter return? It is our understanding that \tilde{X} should be the underlying
 113 backscatter, i.e., either the step function in the case where there is no texture, or the textured
 114 observations without speckle (both depicted in pink in Fig. 2).

115 A filter that returns the step function in the textured case (thin black line in Fig. 2(b)) is
 116 oversmoothing. Fig. 3 shows, in semilogarithmic scale, the estimated speckle as produced by the
 117 ideal filter (pink) and by oversmoothing (lavender); these are the resulting ratio images from the
 118 ideal and a poor filter, respectively. This last estimate is the result of dividing the observed return
 119 from Fig. 2(b) by the step function.

120 The effect of oversmoothing is noticeable: the speckle produced by the ideal filter has less
 121 variability than the one resulting from returning the step function as estimator. While the sample
 122 variance of pure speckle is $s^2 = 0.80$, that of the speckle with remaining structure is $s^2 = 2.12$.
 123 Although numerically detectable by first-order statistics, this effect is seldom visible.

124 Secondly, we will see how neglecting structures impacts on ratio images.

125 Fig. 4 shows the situation of fully developed speckle, in this case with three looks. It affects an
 126 structure seen as slowly-varying backscatter, the sine curve depicted in pink. The observed return,
 127 obtained as the point-by-point product of the speckle with the backscatter is shown in lavender;
 128 Fig. 4(a).

129 On the one hand if, as we postulate, the ideal filter retrieves the true backscatter, the ratio image
 130 or estimated speckle will coincide with the true speckle (in pink in Fig. 4(b)). On the other hand, if
 131 the filter oversmooths the backscatter and returns a step function (in black in Fig. 4(a)), the resulting
 132 estimated speckle will retain part of the missing structure; cf. Fig. 4(b) in lavender.

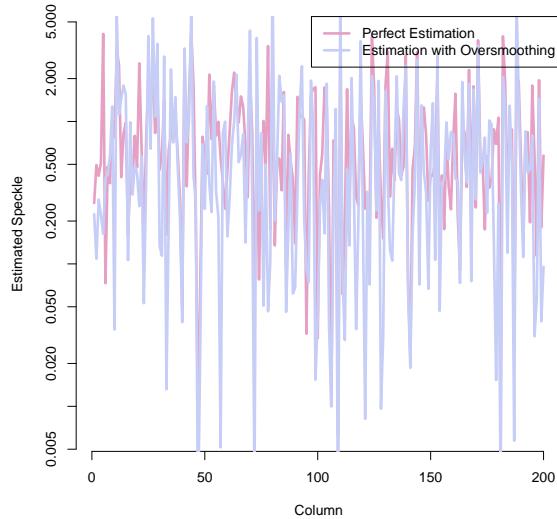


Figure 3. Estimated speckle by the ideal filter and by oversmoothing.

Figures 3 and 4(b) also show that detecting departures from the ideal situation is a hard task. Figure 5 shows how the ratio image obtained from neglecting the slowly varying structure looks like. We postulate and show evidence that this remaining structure can be effectively detected and quantified with second-order statistics.

Finally, we will see how a poor filter will render a ratio image with detectable structure when dealing with edges.

Fig. 6(a) shows a line of the strips image typical of articles that analyze the performance of speckle filters with simulated data; cf. [10,11]. The strips take two values: 1 and 20 (pink), the speckle is a collection of i.i.d. Gamma variates with three looks and unitary mean, and the observed data (in lavender) is the product of the strips and speckle.

Fig. 6(b) shows, again, the strips and the estimated backscatter as returned by a simple filter: the local mean using eleven observations. The oversmoothing is noticeable. It not only degrades the sharpness of the edges, but also reduces observed value. This last effect is more noticeable over narrow strips (to the left of the figure).

The estimated speckle, as expected, will be affected by the poor result returned by the local mean filter, as shown in Fig. 7. The true speckle is shown in pink, while the one estimated using the oversmoothed backscatter tends to have peaks where the smaller strips are (cf. the lavender signal). This will affect the ratio images rendering data whose behavior departs from the ideal situation, which is a collection of i.i.d. deviates from the a Gamma distribution with unitary mean and shape parameter equal to the equivalent number of looks of the original image.

Figure 8 shows these effects in the strips image. Again, we postulate that identifying and quantifying the departure from the ideal filter, i.e., the remaining structure visible in Fig. 8(c), is feasible with both first- and second-order statistics.

3. Unassisted measure of quality based on first- and second-order descriptors

We propose an evaluation based on two components. A statistical measure of the quality of the remaining speckle is the first-order component of the quality measure. The second-order component measures the remaining geometrical content within the ratio image.

As pointed out before, the usual approach to evaluate ratio images consists of, after the visual inspection, to estimate the ENL within an homogeneous area. Then, the best filter is the one for which

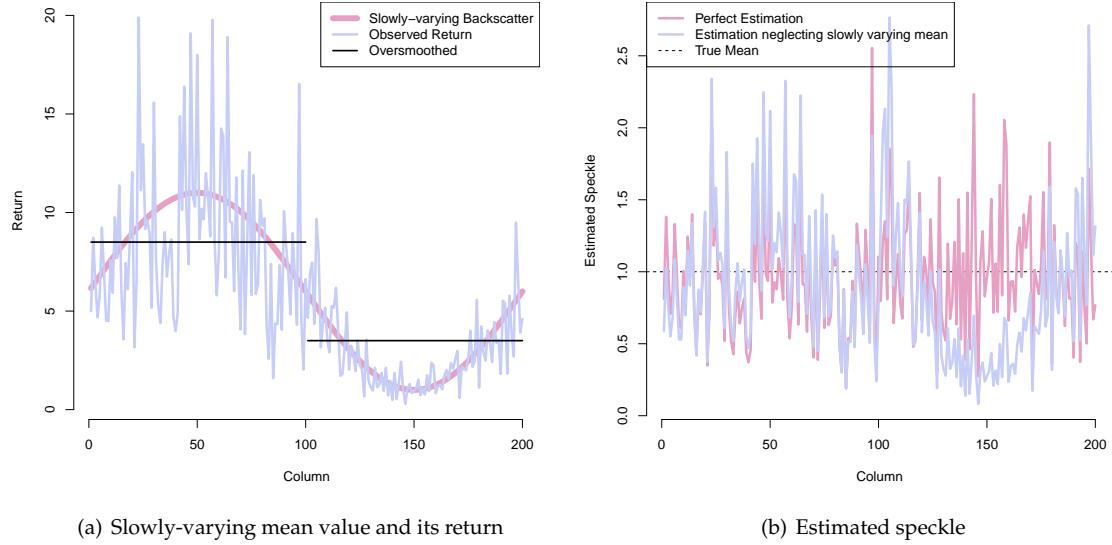


Figure 4. Slowly varying backscatter, fully developed speckle, and estimated speckle.

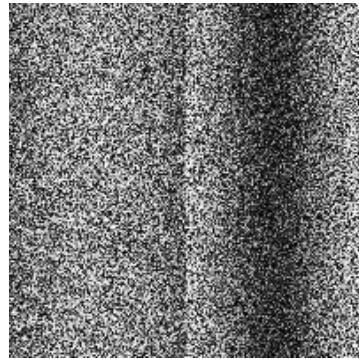


Figure 5. Ratio image resulting from neglecting a slowly varying structure under fully developed speckle.

the ratio image has the mean value closest to unity and the equivalent number of looks closest to the ENL of the original (noisy) image (see for instance [5]).

To avoid user intervention, which is one of the requirements of our proposal, we automatically select suitable textureless areas. First, we estimate the local mean and standard deviation on sliding windows of side w over the original image. With these values, we compute the local ENL ($\widehat{\text{ENL}}_{\text{noisy}}$) as the reciprocal of the squared coefficient of variation. Then, we also compute the local mean and standard deviation on the ratio image with the same window, obtaining $\widehat{\mu}_{\text{ratio}}$ and $\widehat{\text{ENL}}_{\text{ratio}}$.

We select as textureless areas those where both $\widehat{\text{ENL}}_{\text{ratio}}$ is close enough to $\widehat{\text{ENL}}_{\text{noisy}}$ and $\widehat{\mu}_{\text{ratio}}$ is close enough to 1. We stipulate a tolerance for the absolute relative error, and with this we select n areas. This procedure is illustrated in Fig. 9.

Then, for the n selected homogeneous areas, we calculate the first-order residual as

$$r_{\widehat{\text{ENL}}, \widehat{\mu}} = \frac{1}{2} \sum_{i=1}^n \left(r_{\widehat{\text{ENL}}}(i) + r_{\widehat{\mu}}(i) \right), \quad (1)$$

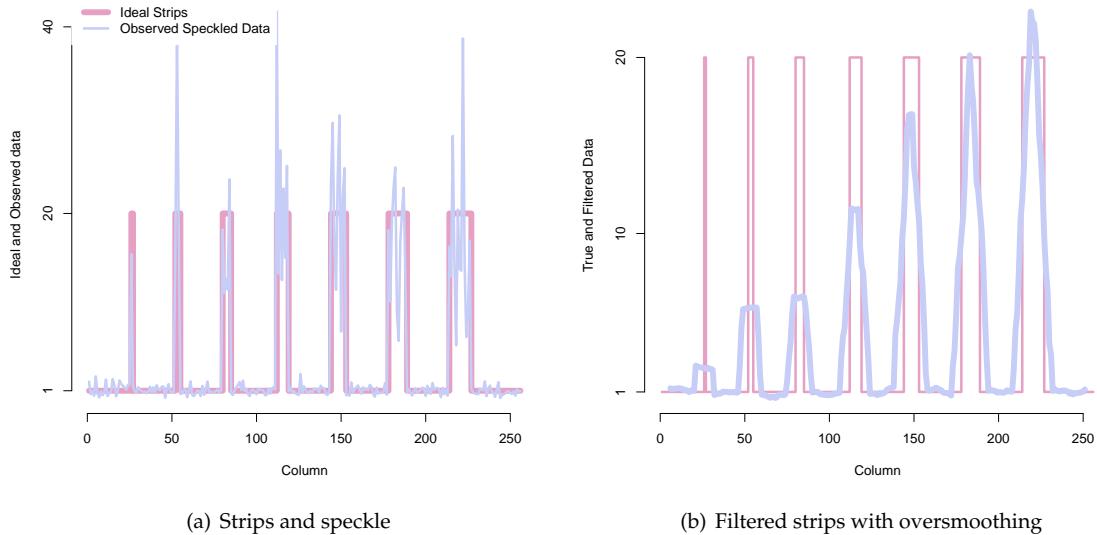


Figure 6. The effect of oversmoothing on an image of strips of varying width.

where, for each homogeneous area i , $r_{\widehat{\text{ENL}}}(i) = |\widehat{\text{ENL}}_{\text{noisy}}(i) - \widehat{\text{ENL}}_{\text{ratio}}(i)|$ is the residual due to deviations from the ideal ENL, and $r_{\widehat{\mu}}(i) = |1 - \widehat{\mu}_{\text{ratio}}(i)|$ is the residual due to deviations from the ideal mean. An ideal despeckling operation would yield $r_{\widehat{\text{ENL}}, \widehat{\mu}} = 0$.

We measure the remaining geometrical content with the inverse difference moment (also called *homogeneity*) from Haralick's co-occurrence matrices [12,13]. Low values are associated with low textural variations and vice versa. Let $P(i,j)$ be a co-occurrence matrix at an arbitrary position, and $p(i,j) = P(i,j)/K$ its normalized version, with K a constant. The homogeneity, our second-order measure, is

$$h = \sum_i \sum_j \frac{1}{1 + (i - j)^2} \cdot p(i, j). \quad (2)$$

¹⁷⁵ This is computed for every coordinate, yielding measures of the remaining structure, but we need a reference to compare it with.

Let G be a finite group of transformations g of a ratio image I onto itself, for example, the permutation group. The null hypothesis implies that the probability distribution of the ratio image I is invariant under the transformations in G , that is, for all $g \in G$, gI and I have the same distribution. Then, applying this idea, we measure the geometric content in a ratio image evaluating h on the ratio image and then on a shuffled version. Measures on ratio images without structural content will not be altered, while there will be changes on those in which there is structure.

Let h_o and \bar{h}_g be the mean of all values of homogeneity obtained from the original ratio image I_o and from the result of randomly permuting all its values I_g , respectively. We use $\delta h = |h_o - \bar{h}_g|/h_o$, the absolute value of the relative variation of h_o as a measure of the departure from the null hypothesis: the larger this variation is, the greater the amount of structure relies on the ratio image. Here \bar{h}_g is the average over $p \geq 1$ samples of I_g .

¹⁸⁸ Note that δh provides an objective measure for ranking despeckled results regarding solely the
¹⁸⁹ remaining geometrical content within the related ratio images.

The proposed estimator combines the measures of the remaining structure and of deviations from the statistical properties of the ratio image:

$$\mathcal{M} = r_{\widehat{\text{ENI}}, \widehat{\mu}} + \delta h. \quad (3)$$

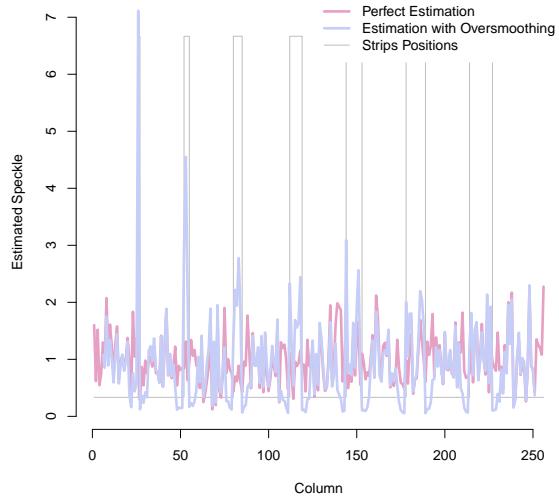


Figure 7. Estimated speckle: ideal and oversmoothing filters.

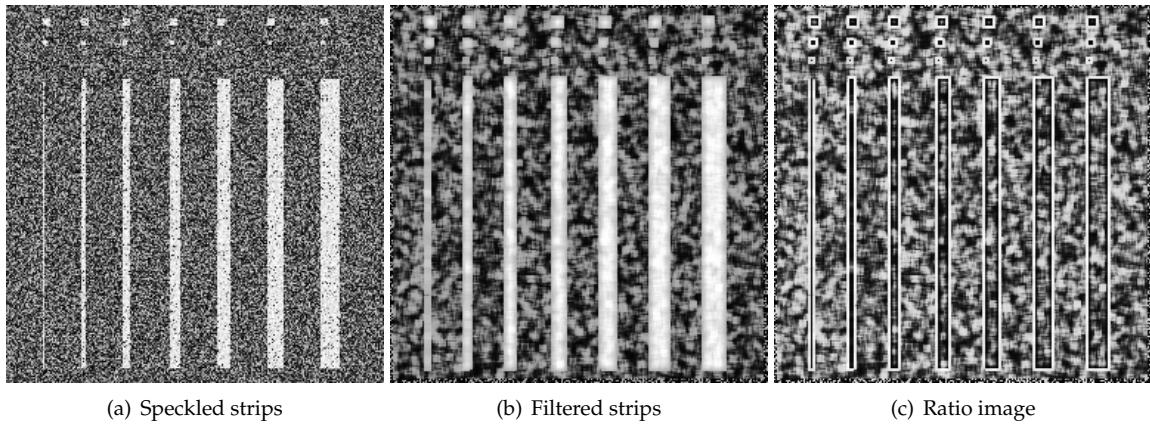


Figure 8. Speckled strips, result of applying a 5×5 BoxCar filter, ratio image.

The perfect despeckling filter will produce $\mathcal{M} = 0$, and the larger \mathcal{M} is, the further the filter is from the ideal.

In the following, we will show that the proposed measure of quality is expressive and able to translate into a single value a number of measures of quality, both objective and subjective.

194 4. Experimental Setup

195 In this section we present the results of using the new metric for evaluating the quality of
 196 widely-used despeckling filters. We employ both simulated data and images from operational SAR
 197 systems, and we conclude with an application of our metric for filter optimization.

198 We used the following filters: E-Lee (Enhanced Lee [14]), SRAD (Speckle Reducing Anisotropic
 199 Diffusion [9]), PPB (Probabilistic Patch Based [15]), and FANS (Fast Adaptive Nonlocal SAR [16]).
 200 All of them provide good results and may be considered state-of-the art despeckling filters. E-Lee
 201 filter is an improved version of the classical adaptive Lee filter [2]. SRAD belongs to the category
 202 of PDE-based (Partial Differential Equations) filters, while the other two belong to the category of
 203 nonlocal means filters.

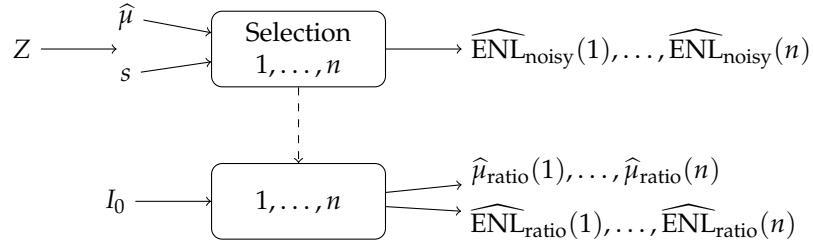


Figure 9. Selection of mean and ENL values for the first-order measure.

The filters were tuned to the recommended designs provided by their authors. The E-Lee filter uses a 9×9 search window, and all the other parameters are as in [14]. The diffusion time for SRAD is $T = 300$, and the other parameters are as recommended in [9]. The PPB filter uses 7×7 patches and 21×21 search windows, and 25 iterations. The FANS filter uses 8×8 blocks, and 39×39 pixels search area; the remaining parameters are set as specified in [16]. The E-Lee and the SRAD filters are our own implementation. The source codes of PPB and FANS are available at [17] and [18], respectively.

For all the experiments, the co-occurrence matrices were computed after quantizing the observations to eight values, $p = 100$ independent samples were obtained for each image, and the tolerance and window size for eq. (1) were set to 0.05 and $w = 25$, respectively.

We will show that usual measures of quality are unable to provide enough evidence for the choice of a filter and, oftentimes, these quantities are conflicting in both simulated data and images from a SAR sensor. We will also see that our proposed measure is able to provide a sensible score of filter performance, and to guide in the choice of optimal parameters.

4.1. Simulation Results

Fig. 10(a) shows the phantom with which we simulated images. This phantom has both large flat areas, linear edges between them and small pointwise-like details of 2×4 and 4×4 pixels. Fig. 10(b) shows the result of injecting single-look speckle to this phantom.

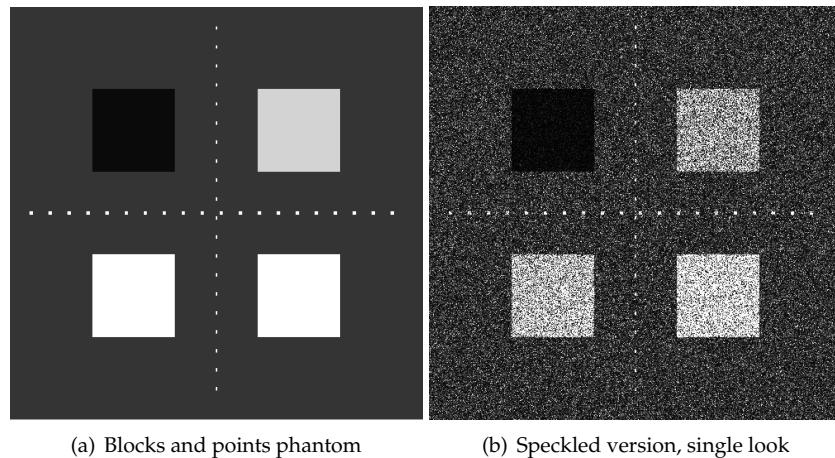


Figure 10. Blocks and points phantom, and 500×500 pixels simulated single-look intensity image.

The data shown in Fig. 10 allows measuring the ability of speckle filters at reducing noise (it presents large textureless areas), and at preserving small details [14,19]. The background intensity is 10, while that of the four squares is: 2 (top left), 40 (top right), 60 (bottom left), and 80 (bottom right). There are two sets of bright scatterers (intensity 240): twenty of size 4×4 along the horizontal

225 direction, and twenty of size 4×2 along the vertical. The simulated data are obtained by multiplying
226 these values by iid exponential deviates with unitary mean.

227 Fig. 11 shows the results of applying the four filters on the simulated image, and their ratio
228 images (first and second column respectively).

229 The four filters perform well since they preserve edges and bright scatterers, and also make
230 textureless areas smoother. The ratio images reveal that the SRAD, and the E-Lee filters seem to
231 be the least effective in terms of remaining structure as the squares edges are still visible (more for
232 the SRAD filter). This remaining geometric content seems minimum for the PPB and FANS filter,
233 although a careful observation reveals structures in all ratio images. See details in Fig. 12.

234 It is expected that this subjective assessment be confirmed by the quantitative results provided
235 by our proposal.

236 An objective assessment can be performed with respect to the ground reference. To that aim, we
237 computed the Mean Structural Similarity Index MSSIM [20], the Peak Signal-to-Noise Ratio PSNR,
238 and the measure of correlation between edges β [21].

239 MSSIM measures the similarity between the simulated and the despeckled images with local
240 statistics (mean, variance and covariance between the unfiltered and despeckled pixel values) [20,22].
241 This measure is bounded in $(-1, 1)$, and a good similarity produces values close to 1. The β estimator
242 is useful for assessing edge preservation. It evaluates the correlation between edges in the ground
243 reference and the denoised images; edges are detected by either the Laplacian or the Canny filter. This
244 parameter ranges between 0 and 1, and the bigger it is, the better the filter is; ideal edge preservation
245 yields $\beta = 1$. High PSNR indicates a well-filtered image.

246 The mean, variance and ENL are also computed within the four squares and the background.
247 Good despeckling must preserve the mean value while significantly reducing the variance in these
248 textureless areas increasing, thus, ENL.

249 Table 1 presents the measures of quality as estimated in the simulated image ROIs (four squares
250 and background), and also in the complete image. From this table, E-Lee and SRAD performances
251 are comparable and quite acceptable. The PPB filter is superior to them in terms of ENL and edge
252 preservation (β). However, FANS obtains most of the best scores (mainly for variance reduction and
253 ENL). MSSIM and β are also better (for instance, $\beta = 0.55$ for FANS and $\beta = 0.22$ for the E-Lee filter).
254 The zoom in Fig. 12 corroborates this numerical assessment.

255 Table 1 also shows the values for ENL and the estimated μ within the background of the ratio
256 image. All are close to the ideal ($ENL \approx 1$, $\mu \approx 1$), although the best results are for E-Lee ($ENL =$
257 0.9958 and $\mu = 1.0015$).

258 Table 2 shows that the proposed measure provides significantly different values for each filter.
259 According to \mathcal{M} , FANS is the best filter, followed by PPB and then by E-Lee and SRAD. The results
260 are consistent with both the quantitative and qualitative visual assessment of the filtered images and
261 their ratio. Note that PPB is the one with least geometric content within the ratio image ($\delta h = 0.0044$),
262 but its performance with respect to ENL μ preservation is not as good as FANS, resulting in a lower
263 score. The opposite behavior is observed in SRAD, as much residual content is visible in the ratio
264 image it produces and obtains the highest (worst) \mathcal{M} score.

265 4.2. Results for Actual SAR Images

266 We show the benefits of our proposal on two SAR images obtained by the AIRSAR sensor in HH
267 polarization, three looks in intensity format; cf. Fig. 13.

268 Fig. 13(a) shows a subregion of 500×500 pixels from the image of Flevoland, Netherlands.
269 It corresponds to a flat area made up of reclaimed land used for agriculture and forestry. The
270 image contains numerous crop types grown in large rectangular fields which are very appropriate
271 to evaluate mean and variance values. There are also bright scatterers which allow to evaluate the
272 filters ability at preserving them. Fig. 14 shows the filtered images in the first column, and their ratio
273 images in the second.

Table 1. Quantitative evaluation of filters on the simulated SAR image (best values in boldface).

Simulated SAR data		True	Simulated	SRAD	E-Lee	PPB	FANS
Background	μ	10	9.93	9.94	9.91	9.95	10.11
	s	10	9.99	0.96	0.92	0.73	0.53
	ENL	1	0.98	105.86	115.13	183.25	361.30
Top left square	μ	2	1.96	1.97	1.96	1.97	2.00
	s	2	1.93	0.19	0.19	0.13	0.09
	ENL	1	1.03	101.80	106.17	208.35	481.21
Top right square	μ	40	40.07	39.98	39.85	40.02	40.70
	s	40	39.83	4.41	4.24	3.14	2.36
	ENL	1	1.01	82.09	88.10	161.48	296.84
Bottom left square	μ	60	59.92	60.12	59.93	60.51	61.17
	s	60	60.00	6.76	5.78	4.44	3.19
	ENL	1	0.99	78.88	107.49	184.94	365.60
Bottom right square	μ	80	79.32	79.35	78.99	79.48	81.25
	s	80	78.89	8.76	7.63	5.60	4.04
	ENL	1	1.01	81.88	106.99	180.90	404.14
Whole image	PSNR	—	73.87	80.30	78.72	80.12	80.09
	MSSIM	—	0.38	0.95	0.95	0.95	0.98
	β	—	0.11	0.17	0.22	0.41	0.55
Ratio image	\widehat{ENL}_{ratio}	1	0.9911	1.0393	0.9958	1.0777	0.9858
	$\widehat{\mu}_{ratio}$	1	1.0045	0.9905	1.0015	0.9594	0.9894

Table 2. Quantitative evaluation of ratio images for the simulated data (best value in boldface), computed on $n = 131$ automatically detected homogeneous areas.

Filter	h_o	$\overline{h_g}$	δh	$r_{\widehat{ENL}, \widehat{\mu}}$	\mathcal{M}
SRAD	0.7034	0.7055	0.2953	0.0463	0.3416
E-Lee	0.7625	0.7638	0.1705	0.0283	0.1988
PPB	0.9950	0.9949	0.0044	0.0788	0.0832
FANS	0.7917	0.7921	0.0474	0.0193	0.0667

As expected, the filters perform well in terms of variance reduction and edge and bright scatterers preservation. FANS (bottom) provides the best visual result, outperforming the other filters: homogeneous areas are notably more homogeneous. SRAD blurs a little the image. Edge preservation is better for PPB and FANS too (much better for the latter) as it can be appreciated in the images shown in Fig. 15.

FANS is also the best with respect to structural content in the ratio image, and SRAD is the one leaving most structure within it. However, as for the simulated image, minute geometrical content still remains after applying FANS, and also PPB.

Table 3 presents the mean, standard deviation and ENL values estimated in the boxed regions identified in Fig. 13 (left). SRAD is the best with respect to the mean preservation in both regions, although all filters obtain competitive values. The best variance reduction and ENL values are obtained with FANS, notably in ROI-2.

The analysis of the ratio images (see Table 4) is not conclusive: no filter gets the best values for all estimators. Notice that PPB produced a poor result for ENL for the ROI-2 (4.0554 instead of 3). FANS results are, in average, the best. However, all results are acceptable with small differences and, based on the solely analysis of these estimations within the ratio images one can hardly decide if a filter performs better than the others.

Table 3. Quantitative assessment of Flevoland filtered data in selected ROIs (best values in boldface).

Filter	ROI-1			ROI-2		
	$\hat{\mu}$	s	ENL	$\hat{\mu}$	s	ENL
Original	0.0049	0.0031	2.5646	0.0203	0.0110	3.3896
SRAD	0.0049	4.0790e-004	142.0009	0.0206	0.0013	262.4166
E-Lee	0.0048	3.6365e-004	172.4356	0.0207	0.0013	261.6375
PPB	0.0047	4.1816e-004	128.6319	0.0208	0.0012	312.0406
FANS	0.0048	3.6026e-004	174.9937	0.0213	0.0007	731.6842

Table 4. Quantitative assessment of ratio images for Flevoland filtered data in selected ROIs (best values in boldface).

Filter	ROI-1		ROI-2	
	$\hat{\mu}$	ENL	$\hat{\mu}$	ENL
SRAD	0.9955	2.8976	0.9846	3.4338
E-Lee	1.0134	2.8349	0.9790	3.4036
PPB	0.9946	3.3963	0.9554	4.0554
FANS	1.0083	2.9912	0.9455	3.6626

In agreement with the visual inspection, FANS has the best \mathcal{M} score (see Table 5). Once again, SRAD obtains the worst score. It is interesting to point out that, although the best preservation of ENL and μ within the ratio image is provided by E-Lee ($r_{\widehat{\text{ENL}}, \hat{\mu}} = 0.1344$), its final \mathcal{M} score is heavily penalized by $\delta h = 3.1471$ which accounts for the remaining structural content.

Table 5. Quantitative evaluation of ratio images for Flevoland data (best value in boldface), computed on $n = 8$ automatically detected homogeneous areas.

Filter	h_o	\bar{h}_g	δh	$r_{\widehat{\text{ENL}}, \hat{\mu}}$	\mathcal{M}
SRAD	0.7121	0.6822	4.2157	0.1542	4.3699
E-Lee	0.5757	0.5576	3.1471	0.1344	3.2815
PPB	0.7600	0.7480	1.5740	0.3809	1.9549
FANS	0.6742	0.6655	1.2896	0.2364	1.5260

In the following, we present the results for the other AIRSAR image.

Fig. 13(b) shows a subregion of 500×500 pixels from the three-look intensity AIRSAR, HH polarization, over the San Francisco Bay. This image contains mostly urban areas and sea, parks and hills covered by vegetation. There are few textureless areas except for the ocean.

Fig. 16 presents the results obtained with SRAD, E-Lee, PPB and FANS (top to bottom, left). The corresponding ratio images are also shown (second column).

SRAD clearly overfiltered and, consequently much structure is found within its ratio image. Notice that we have applied the filter parameters recommended in [9] that provided acceptable results for the simulated case and for the previous actual case (Flevoland), but, obviously, for this SAR data another more suitable set is required. E-Lee preserves well the bright scatterers but some parts of the image seem also overfiltered (the forest and some building blocks) and consequently, much geometric content is visible in its ratio image. Results for PPB are also acceptable but there are some artifacts similar to the ones left by wavelet filters, eg. the staircase effect.

Once again, FANS provides the best visual result (left bottom) and its ratio image resembles pure speckle, as seen in the bottom right image.

Fig. 17 shows a detail of those results. Notice that PPB and FANS results are visually acceptable but artifacts, as mentioned above, appear in the former. Notice also that bright scatterers (and features in general) are better preserved by FANS.

Table 6 presents the mean, standard deviation and ENL estimated in the boxed regions identified in Fig. 13(b). As with the Flevoland data, no conclusive results stem from those values. Similar conclusion is reached for the estimators measured on the ratio images shown in Table 7.

Table 6. Quantitative assessment of San Francisco bay filtered data in selected ROIs (best values in boldface).

Filter	ROI-1			ROI-2		
	$\hat{\mu}$	s	ENL	$\hat{\mu}$	s	ENL
Original	5.1677e-004	2.9004e-004	3.17452	0.0446	0.0259	2.9705
SRAD	5.0424e-004	6.1216e-005	67.8471	0.0412	0.0043	91.5709
E-Lee	5.0654e-004	4.4108e-005	131.8877	0.0398	0.0041	94.5895
PPB	5.0774e-004	2.9293e-005	300.4486	0.0445	0.0075	34.9723
FANS	5.1798e-004	4.1361e-005	156.8399	0.0457	0.0106	18.5460

Table 7. Quantitative assessment of ratio images for San Francisco bay filtered data in selected ROIs (best values in boldface).

Filter	ROI-1		ROI-2	
	$\hat{\mu}$	ENL	$\hat{\mu}$	ENL
SRAD	1.0211	3.6169	1.0706	3.2761
E-Lee	1.0156	3.5284	1.1069	3.2833
PPB	0.9989	3.8460	0.9689	4.3534
FANS	0.9897	3.5729	0.9897	3.5729

Table 8 presents the proposed \mathcal{M} metric. Again, FANS obtains the best score as expected from the visual inspection of the ratio images. Although the best result for ENL value and μ preservation is for the SRAD filter, due to the large amount of residual structure within its related ratio image, δh is high enough to rank it to the last position among all despeckling filters discussed in this work.

Table 8. Quantitative evaluation of ratio images for San Francisco bay data (best value in boldface), computed on $n = 16$ automatically detected homogeneous areas.

Filter	h_o	$\bar{h_g}$	δh	$r_{\widehat{\text{ENL}}, \hat{\mu}}$	\mathcal{M}
SRAD	0.5643	0.5368	4.8726	0.2216	5.0942
E-Lee	0.5813	0.5586	3.9035	0.3262	4.2297
PPB	0.7449	0.7419	0.4065	0.5395	0.9460
FANS	0.7138	0.7141	0.0510	0.4231	0.4741

The above results for actual SAR data support the use of our proposed \mathcal{M} metric.

4.3. Using \mathcal{M} estimator to design a filter

Next we show the use of \mathcal{M} in fine-tuning the parameters of a despeckling filter on actual data. We use FANS due to its already attested performance, and the Niigata Pi-SAR data as the image to be despeckled.

Fig. 18 (left) shows a subimage (300×300 pixels), in intensity format, one look and HH polarization. The resolution of this image is $3\text{ m} \times 3\text{ m}$. The selected includes urban and forest patches.

As indicated in [16] FANS requires more than ten control parameters, although the authors also mentioned that “*All parameters have been set once and for all, obtaining always satisfactory results in the experiments, so the user can forget about them and keep the default values*”.

However, we show that some improvement can be achieved by a basic optimization strategy. We selected three control parameters: S (size of rows and columns of neighborhood blocks), P_{FA} (false alarm probability related to wavelet thresholding for the classification process), and W (wavelet transform used in the 2D spatial domain). The default values for these parameters are $S = 16$, $P_{FA} = 10^{-3}$ and, the Daubechies-4 wavelet for the choice of W . These control parameters are extensively discussed in [16], and they seem to have a strong impact on the filter performance.

The filter was optimized by exhaustive search: $S \in [4, 20]$ with steps $h_S = 1$, $P_{FA} \in [0.001, 0.01]$ with steps $h_P = 0.001$, and wavelet transforms from the ones suggested in the author’s Matlab implementation: Meyer, DCT (discrete cosine transform), Haar, Daubechies-2, Daubechies-3, Daubechies-4, biorthogonal-1.3, and biorthogonal-1.5.

The optimal values found were $S = 4$, $P_{FA} = 0.0041$ and the Haar wavelet transform. With these, eighteen 15×15 homogeneous areas were detected.

The despeckled result by FANS with default parameters is shown in Fig. 18 (middle) and the result by using the optimized parameters is shown in the same figure (right). As seen, some artifacts have been notably reduced and homogeneous areas, which seem more uniform with the optimized filter. The ratio images are depicted in Fig. 19. A visual inspection suggests that there remains less geometrical structure within the ratio image by filtering with the optimized parameters.

Table 9 presents the mean, standard deviation and ENL estimated in the boxed region identified in Fig. 18 (left). Best results for the three estimators are for the optimized FANS filter.

Table 9. Quantitative assessment of San Francisco bay filtered data in selected ROIs (best values in boldface).

Filter	$\hat{\mu}$	s	ENL
Original	0.0283	0.0261	1.1757
FANS (default parameters)	0.0302	0.0106	8.1171
FANS (optimized parameters)	0.0295	0.0083	12.6325

Similar conclusion is reached for the estimators measured on the ratio images shown in Table 10.

Table 10. Quantitative evaluation of ratio images for Niigata data (best values in boldface), computed on $n = 18$ automatically detected homogeneous areas.

Filter	$\hat{\mu}$	ENL
FANS (default parameters)	0.8627	2.2270
FANS (optimized parameters)	0.9006	1.8745

The proposed \mathcal{M} metric is presented in Table 11.

Table 11. Quantitative evaluation of ratio images for Niigata data (best value in boldface), computed on $n = 18$ automatically detected homogeneous areas.

Filter	δh	$r_{\widehat{\text{ENL}}, \hat{\mu}}$	\mathcal{M}
FANS (default parameters)	0.2089	0.4833	0.3461
FANS (optimized parameters)	0.0650	0.3794	0.1889

From these results, it is clear that \mathcal{M} can be applied to design a despeckling filter working on actual data without the need of ground references.

354 5. Conclusions

355 We proposed a new image-quality index, \mathcal{M} , to objectively evaluate despeckling filters. The
356 proposal operates only in the ratio image and requires no reference. The evaluation relies on
357 measuring deviations from the ideal statistical properties of the ratio image and their residual
358 structural contents. The last component is computed by comparing a textural measure in the ratio
359 image with random permutations of the data.

360 We have shown the expressiveness and adequacy of \mathcal{M} using both simulated data and SAR
361 images, and we verified that it is consistent with widely used image-quality indices as well as
362 with the visual inspection of both filtered and ratio images. It has been also shown that the
363 proposed unassisted image quality index can also be embedded into the design of despeckling filters.
364 Additionally, the computational cost related to the proposed estimator is comparable to state-of-the
365 art indexes.

366 The proposal is valid as long as the multiplicative model holds and provided that at least one
367 (even small) region can be detected as textureless. The user is required to input an estimate of the
368 number of looks.

369 **Supplementary Materials:** The code and data for reproducing the results here reported are available here <http://www.de.ufpe.br/~raydonal/ReproducibleResearch/UNASSISTED/UNASSISTED-QUANTITATIVE.html>.
370 Computational platform and running times are informed in the Appendix.

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374 **Author Contributions:** All authors contributed equally to this manuscript.

375 **Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest. The founding sponsors had no role in the design
376 of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript, and in the
377 decision to publish the results.

378 Appendix

379 The Matlab [23] language was used to simulate and analyze the data. Haralick's textural features
380 were also computed by the available libraries in Matlab. The computational cost for the 500×500
381 synthetic data shown in this work (see Fig. 10) with the parameters setting as mentioned in Section 4,
382 is around 20 s in an Intel Core i7 Q740 1.73 GHz machine.

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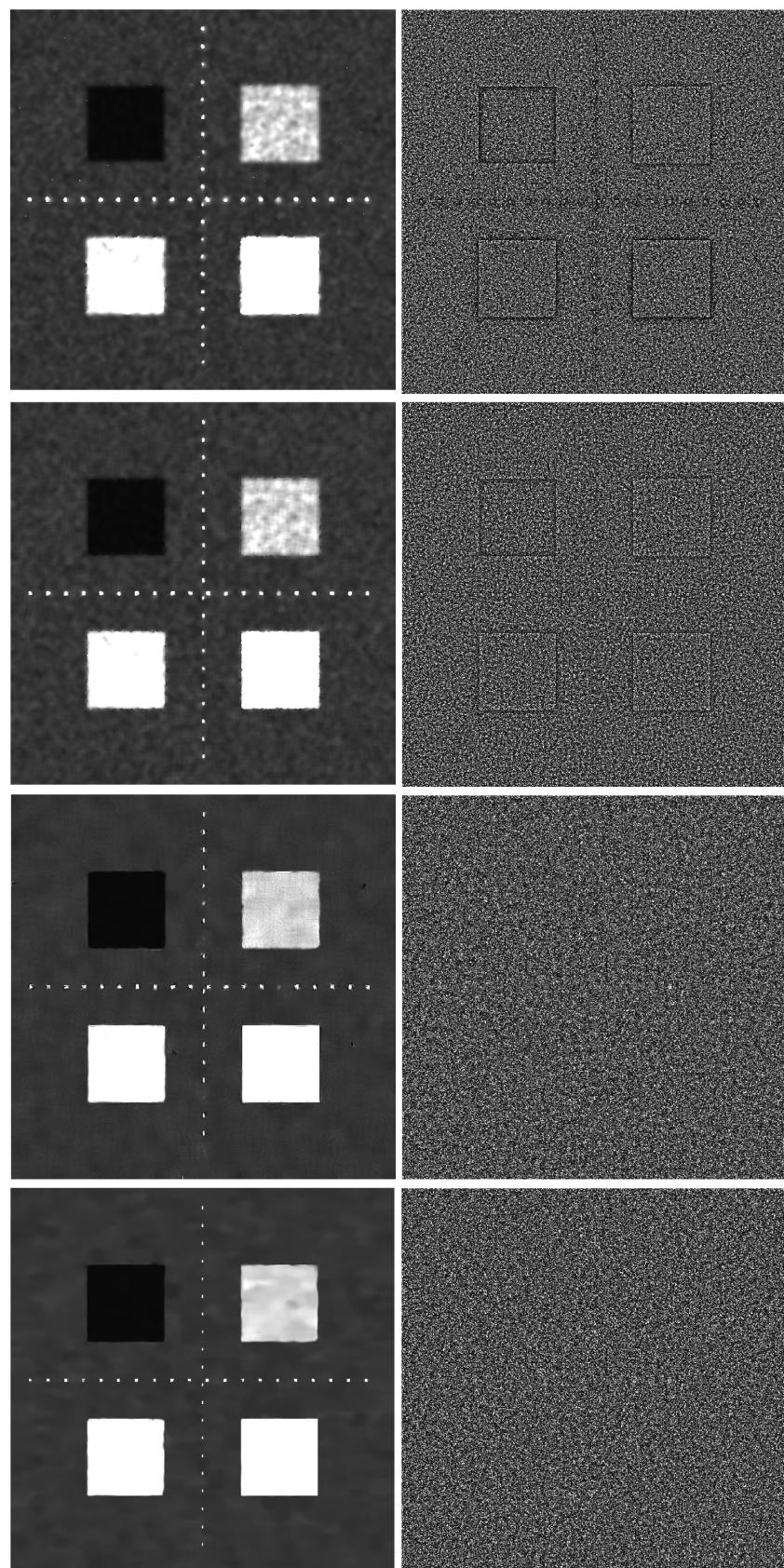


Figure 11. Results for the simulated single-look intensity data. Top to bottom, (left) results of applying the SRAD, the E-Lee, the PPB and the FANS filters. Top to bottom (right), their ratio images.

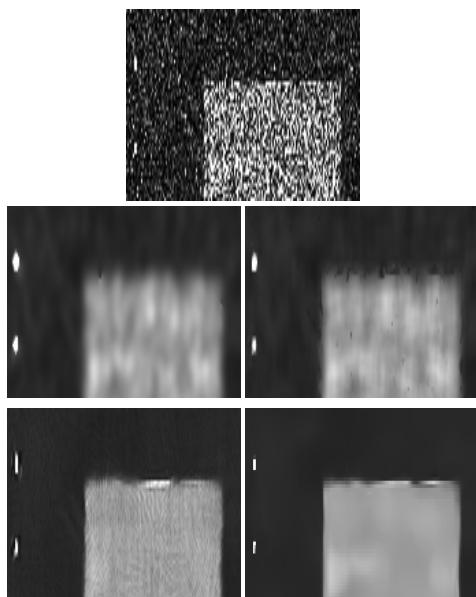


Figure 12. Zoom of the results for synthetic data: (top) Noisy image, (first row, left) SRAD filter, (first row, right) E-Lee filter, (second row, left) PPB filter and, (second row, right) FANS filter.

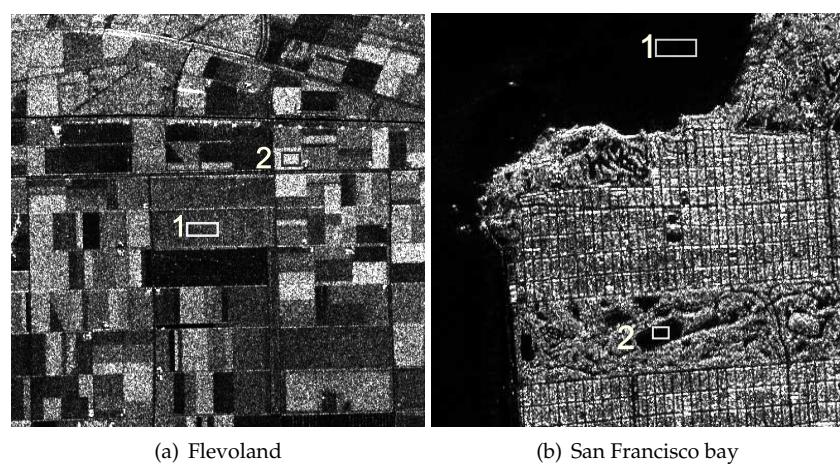


Figure 13. Intensity AIRSAR images, HH polarization, three looks

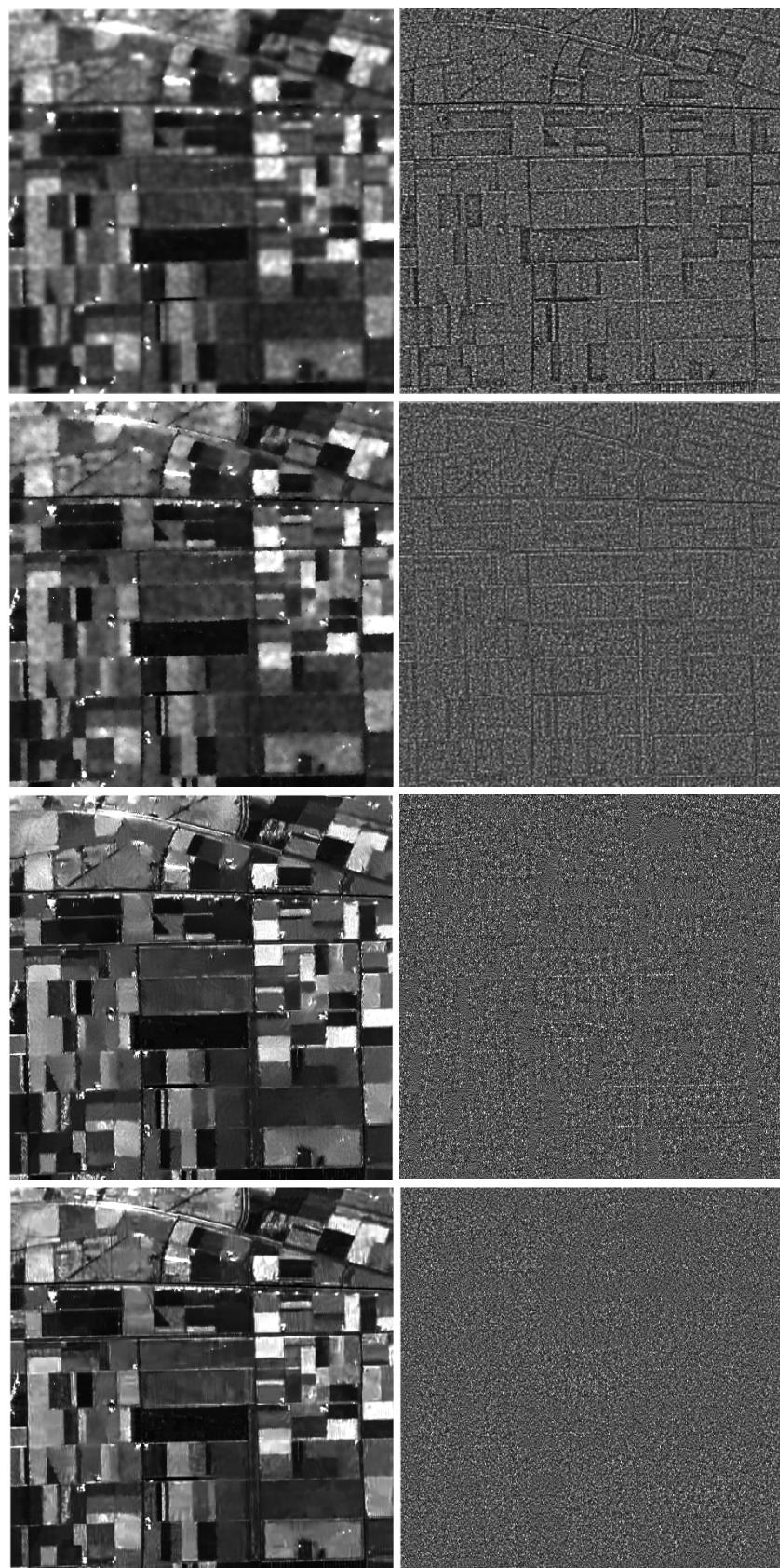


Figure 14. Results for the actual data (San Francisco). Top to bottom, (left) results of applying SRAD, E-Lee, PPB and FANS filters. Top to bottom (right), their ratio images.

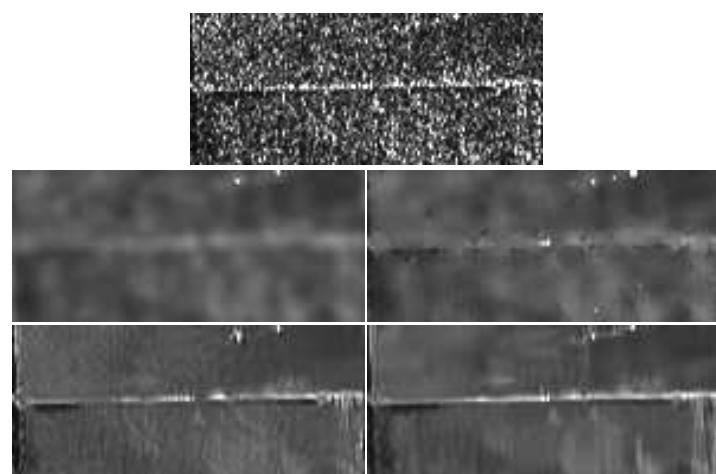


Figure 15. Zoom of the results for Flevoland image: (top) Noisy image, (first row, left) SRAD filter, (first row, right) E-Lee filter, (second row, left) PPB filter and, (second row, right) FANS filter.

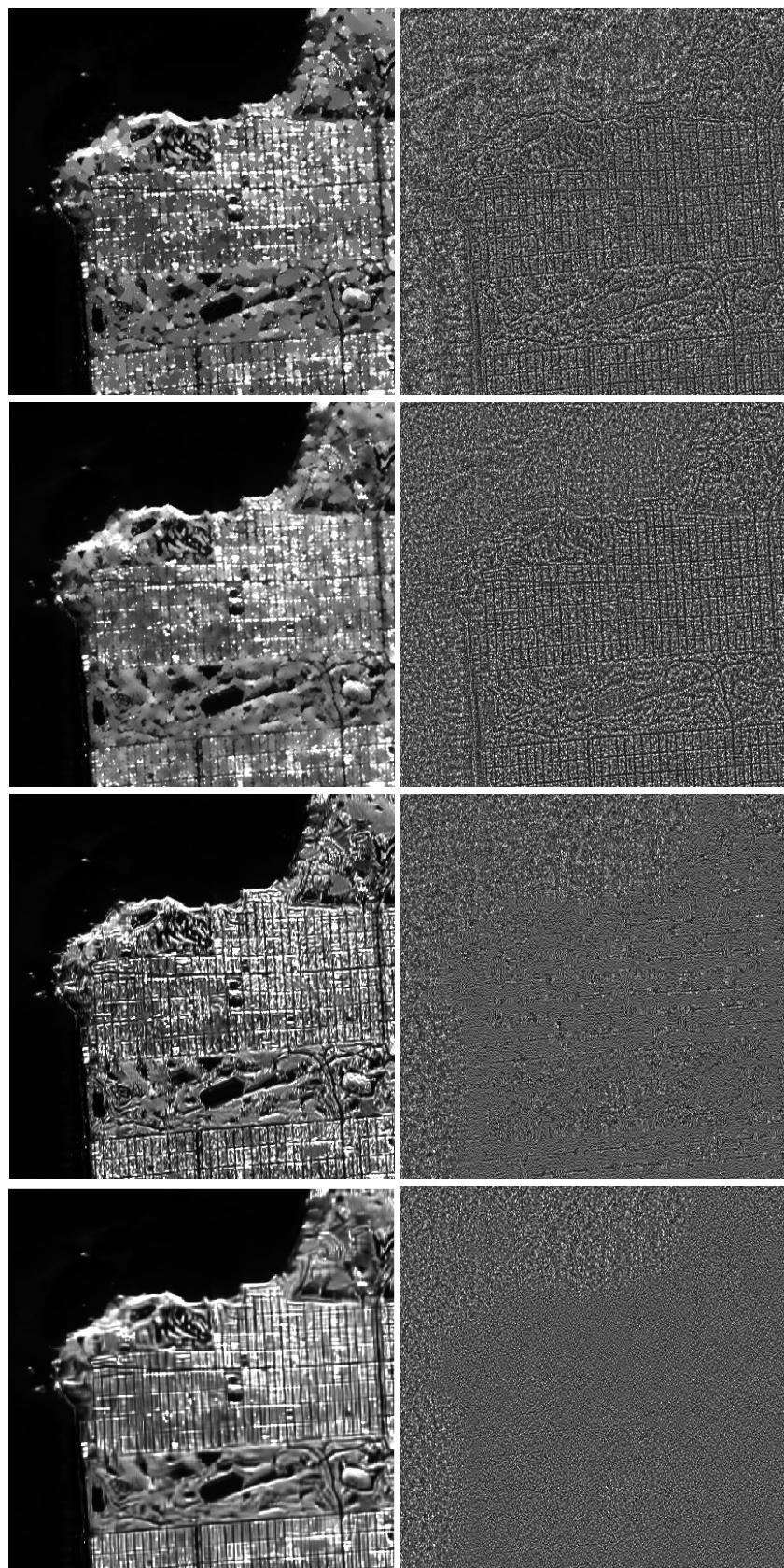


Figure 16. Result for the San Francisco bay image. Top to bottom, (left) results of applying SRAD, E-Lee, PPB and FANS. Top to bottom (right), their ratio images.

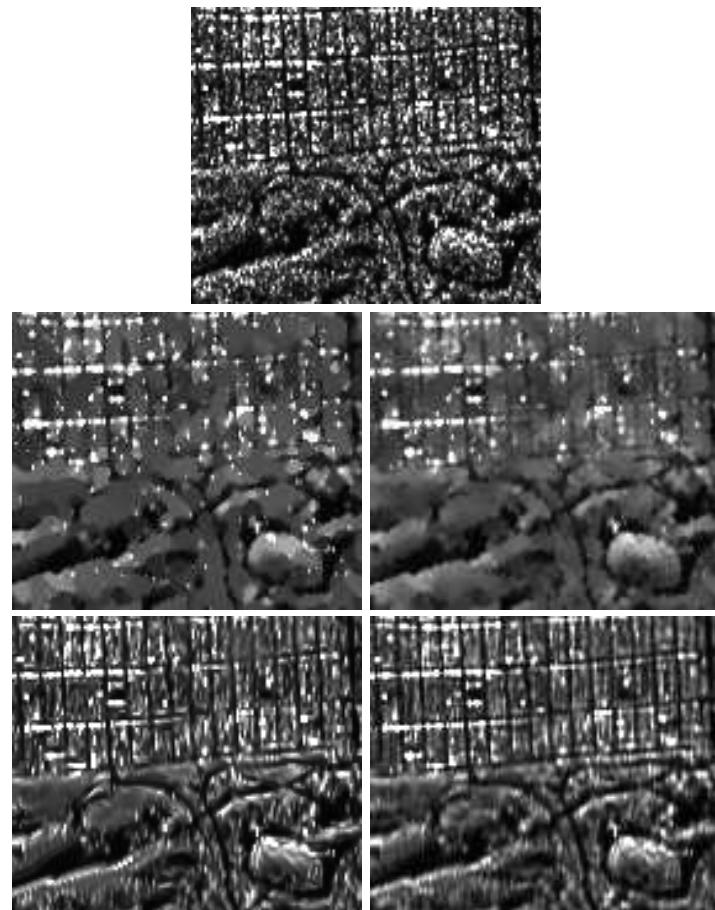


Figure 17. Zoom of the results for San Francisco image: (top) Noisy image, (first row, left) SRAD filter, (first row, right) E-Lee filter, (second row, left) PPB filter and, (second row, right) FANS filter.



Figure 18. Intensity Pi-SAR, HH one look Niigata image (left). Results of applying FANS filters with default parameters (middle) and with optimized parameters (right).

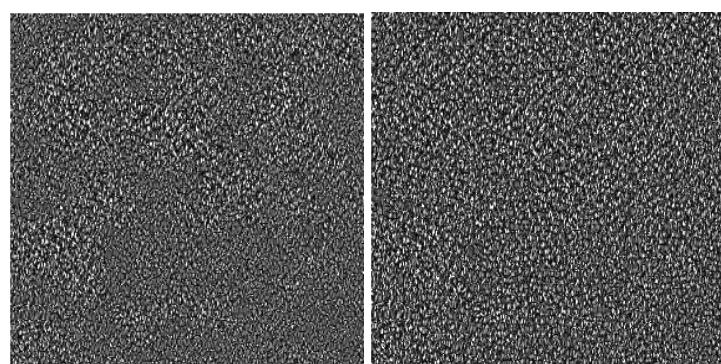


Figure 19. Ratio images for Niigata data (left: FANS with default parameters and with optimized parameters (right)).