



EPFL

WORKSHOP SMLM DATA ANALYSIS

Characterizing Molecular Diffusion by Image-Based Single-Particle Tracking

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Center for Imaging

EPFL, Lausanne, Switzerland

**Single Molecule Localization Microscopy
Symposium — SMLMS 2025**

Bonn, Germany
August 2025

EPFL

WORKSHOP SMLM DATA ANALYSIS

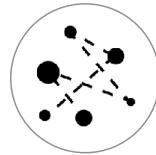
Characterizing Molecular Diffusion by Image-Based Single-Particle Tracking



SMLM WORKFLOW
Data Analysis



IMAGE ANALYSIS
Particle Tracking



BIOPHYSICS
Diffusion Models



ALGORITHMS
Estimating Diffusion

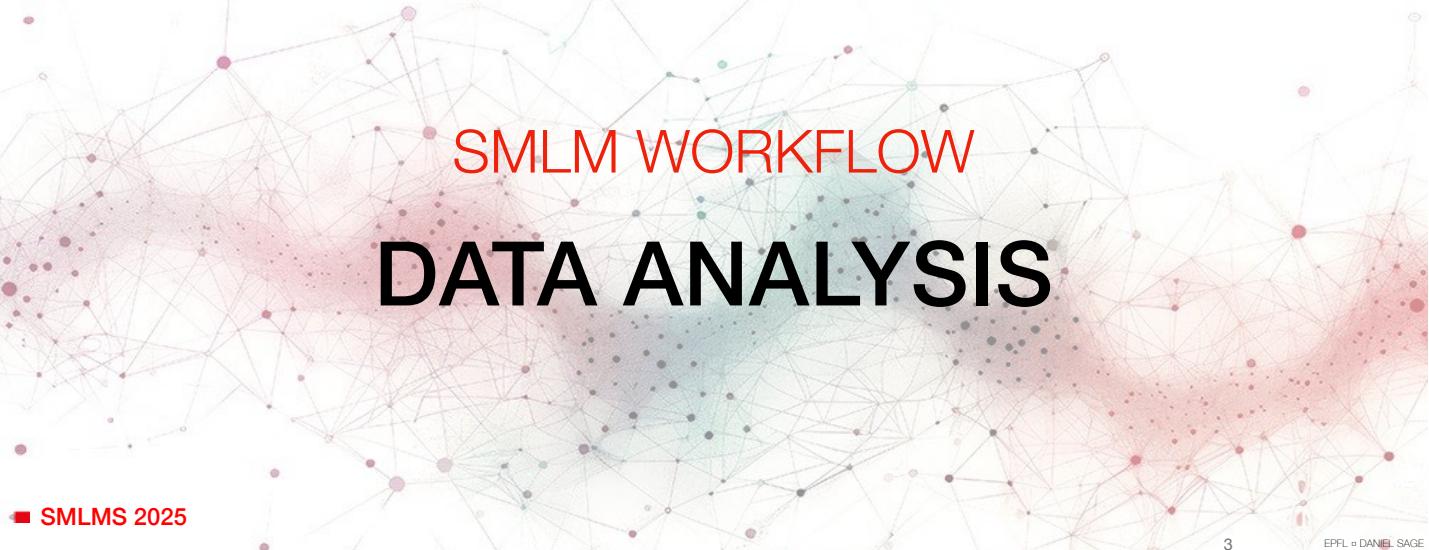
<https://go.epfl.ch/workshop-smlms>

<https://github.com/dasv74/workshop-tracking-diffusion-single-molecule>

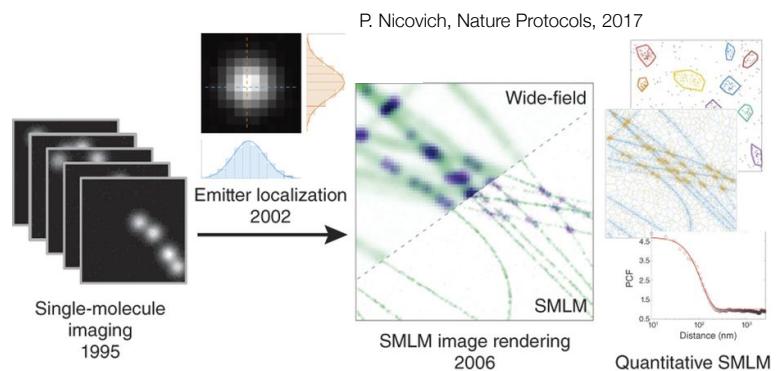
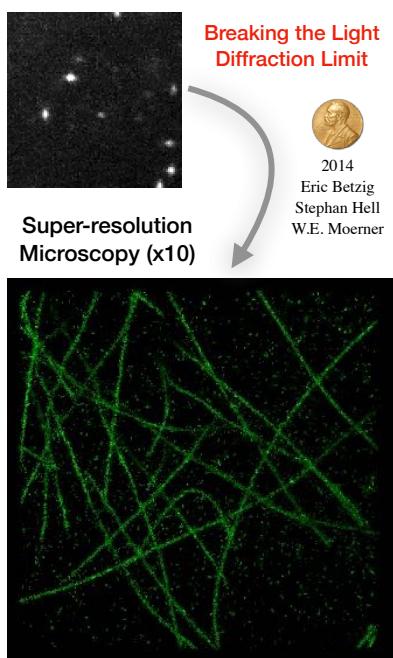
Characterizing Molecular Diffusion by Image-Based Single-Particle Tracking

SMLM WORKFLOW

DATA ANALYSIS

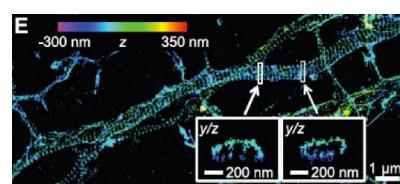


👁️ SMLM as a Quantitative Bioanalytical Tool



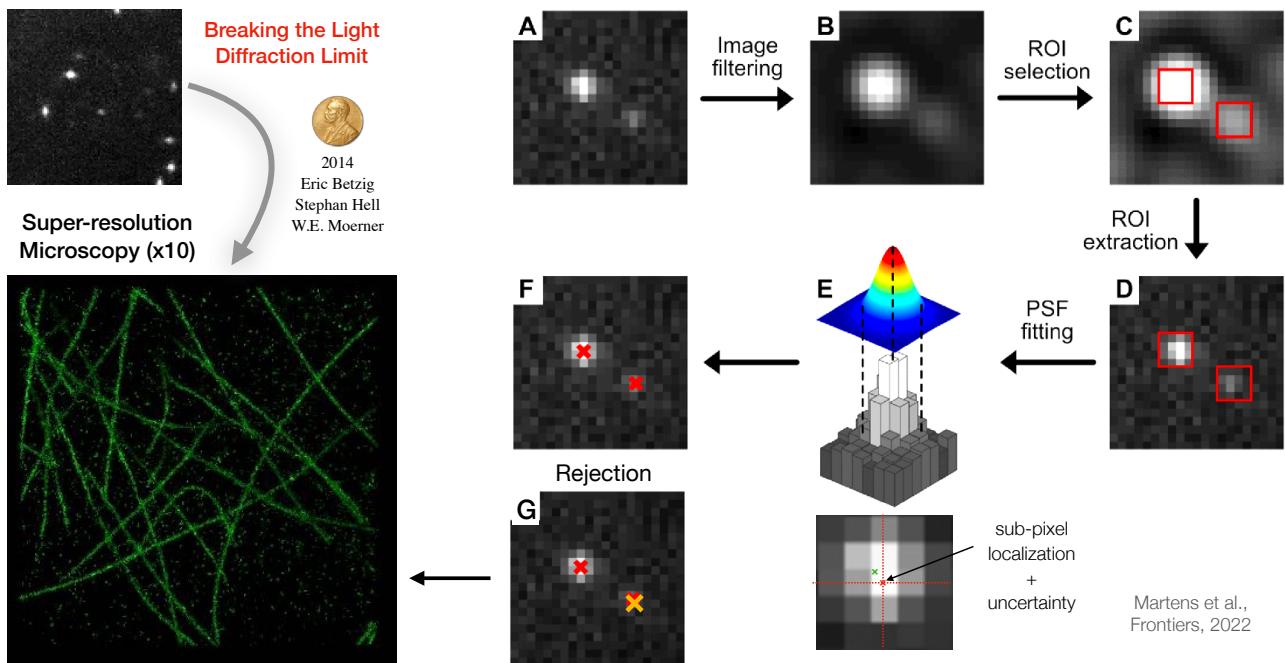
What can we quantify?

- Counting: molecules
- Pattern: Spatial arrangement
- Interaction: Dynamics of proteins



Discovery of the periodic cytoskeletal structure in axons [Xu, Science 2012]

👁️ SMLM Image Analysis



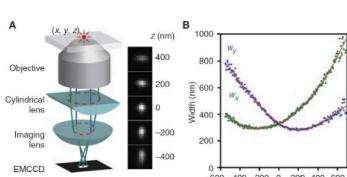
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WORKSHOP SMLMS 2025 CHARACTERIZING MOLECULAR DIFFUSION BY IMAGE-BASED SINGLE-PARTICLE TRACKING

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👁️ 3D SMLM

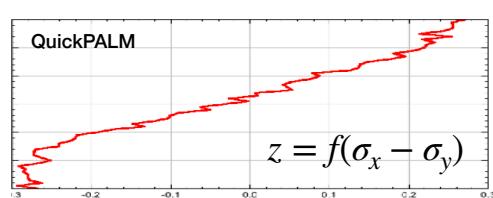
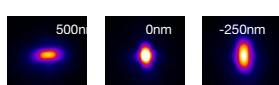
3D can be performed by putting a cylindrical lens into the imaging path to create astigmatism
Huang 2008



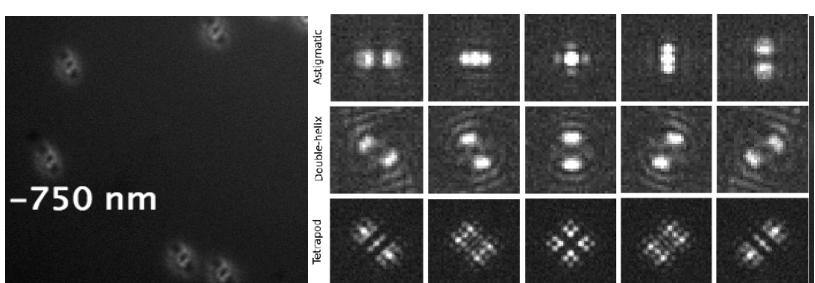
Calibration

PSF dependence on z using immobilized nanobead z -scan

$$z = f(\alpha_1, \alpha_2, \dots)$$



Acquisition in 2D, Stacking all the 2D-PSF, 3D PSF signature gives Z:

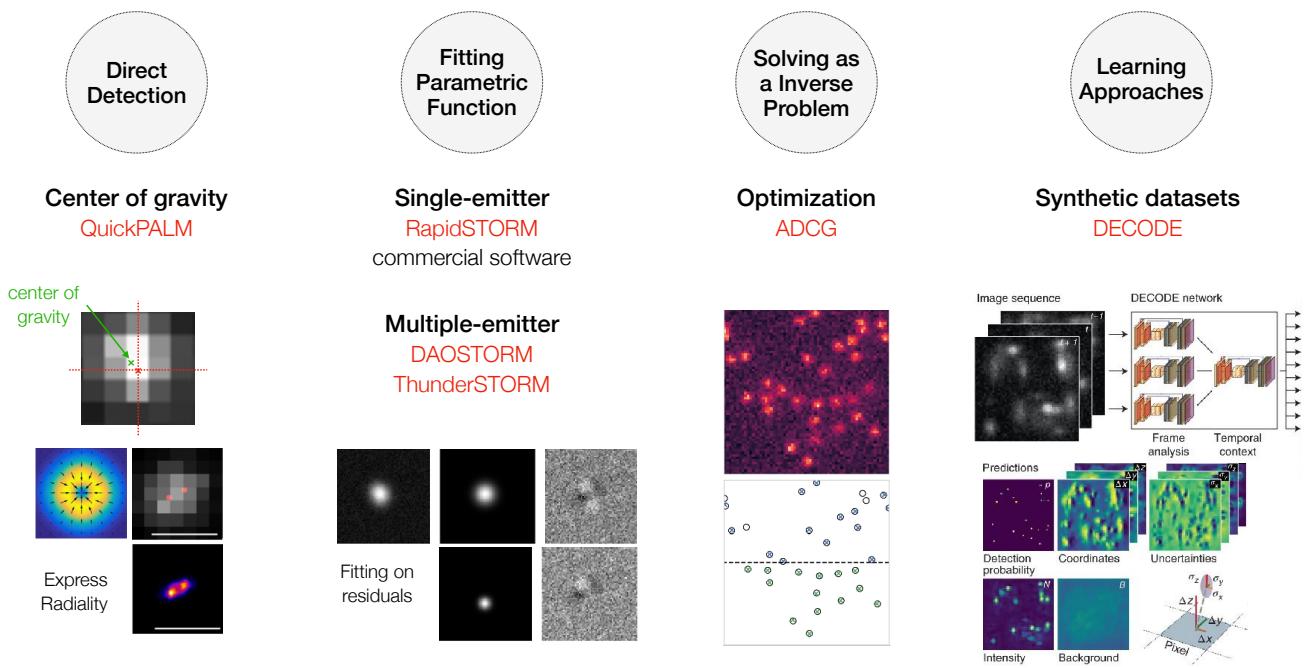


Astrid Magenau 2014 and Bassam Hajj 2018

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👁 Localisation Methods



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WORKSHOP SMLMS 2025 CHARACTERIZING MOLECULAR DIFFUSION BY IMAGE-BASED SINGLE-PARTICLE TRACKING

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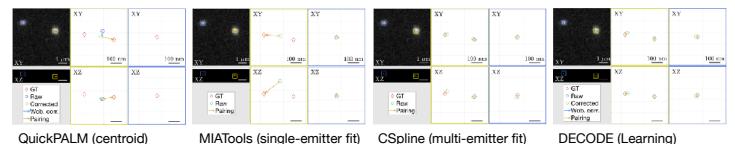
👁 Benchmarking SMLM Software

<http://srn.epfl.ch/>

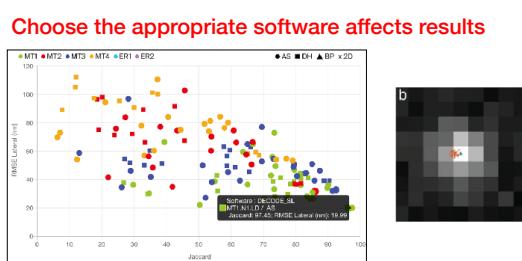
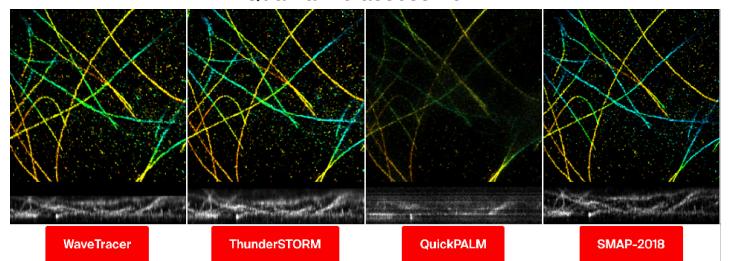
Realistic Simulation	More 30 than participants	Multiple criteria																																																												
	<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Software</th> <th>PSF</th> <th>Platform</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr><td>3D-DAOSTORM</td><td>Gaussian</td><td>Python / C</td></tr> <tr><td>3D-STORM</td><td>Gaussian</td><td>Java framework</td></tr> <tr><td>3D-WTM</td><td>Gaussian</td><td>Stand-alone</td></tr> <tr><td>Coplano</td><td>Learned</td><td>Python / C</td></tr> <tr><td>DECODE</td><td>Encode</td><td>Python</td></tr> <tr><td>Localizer</td><td>Gaussian</td><td>igor</td></tr> <tr><td>MIATool</td><td>Bessel</td><td>Java</td></tr> <tr><td>mbePALM</td><td>Gaussian</td><td>Matlab</td></tr> <tr><td>pSMLM-3D</td><td>Gaussian</td><td>ImageJ</td></tr> <tr><td>QC-STORM</td><td>Gaussian</td><td>ImageJ</td></tr> <tr><td>QuickPALM</td><td>Gaussian</td><td>ImageJ</td></tr> <tr><td>RainSTORM</td><td>Gaussian</td><td>Matlab</td></tr> <tr><td>RapidSTORM</td><td>Gaussian</td><td>Stand-alone</td></tr> <tr><td>SMAP</td><td>Learned</td><td>Matlab</td></tr> <tr><td>SMolPho</td><td>Gaussian</td><td>Python / C</td></tr> <tr><td>ThunderSTORM</td><td>Gaussian</td><td>ImageJ</td></tr> <tr><td>TVSTORM</td><td>Gaussian</td><td>Matlab</td></tr> <tr><td>WaveTracer</td><td>Gaussian</td><td>Matlab</td></tr> <tr><td>ZOLA-3D</td><td>Zernike</td><td>ImageJ</td></tr> </tbody> </table>	Software	PSF	Platform	3D-DAOSTORM	Gaussian	Python / C	3D-STORM	Gaussian	Java framework	3D-WTM	Gaussian	Stand-alone	Coplano	Learned	Python / C	DECODE	Encode	Python	Localizer	Gaussian	igor	MIATool	Bessel	Java	mbePALM	Gaussian	Matlab	pSMLM-3D	Gaussian	ImageJ	QC-STORM	Gaussian	ImageJ	QuickPALM	Gaussian	ImageJ	RainSTORM	Gaussian	Matlab	RapidSTORM	Gaussian	Stand-alone	SMAP	Learned	Matlab	SMolPho	Gaussian	Python / C	ThunderSTORM	Gaussian	ImageJ	TVSTORM	Gaussian	Matlab	WaveTracer	Gaussian	Matlab	ZOLA-3D	Zernike	ImageJ	Runtime Detect Rate Accuracy # Params GUI PSF model Learning? Accessible HD?
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Sage et al. Quantitative evaluation of software packages for SMLM Nat Meth., 2015.
 Sage et al. Super-resolution fight club: 2D & 3D SMLM software Nat Meth. 2019.
 Li Real-time 3D SMLM using experimental point spread functions Nat Meth., 2018.

Quantitative assessment



Qualitative assessment



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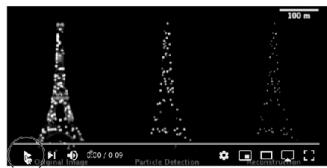
👁️ SMLM Software

QuickPALM

R. Henriques, Nat. Methods, 2010

The historically important tool for rapid reconstruction

- Method: centroid, fastest
- Popular: embedded in Fiji
- 2D and 3D (AS)
- On-line reconstruction



ThunderSTORM

M. Ovesný, Bioinformatics 30, 2014

A comprehensive ImageJ plugin for PALM and STORM data

- Easy-to-use on Fiji
- Extensive collection of methods
- 2D and 3D (AS, BP)
- Post-processing: drift, grouping

ThunderSTORM

a comprehensive ImageJ plugin for PALM and STORM data analysis and super-resolution imaging

[Download ThunderSTORM](#) [Discuss](#) [View on GitHub](#)

PSF fitting

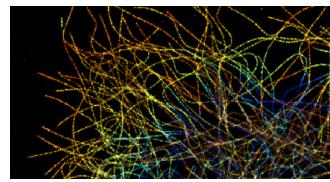
- Single emitter fitting: detection-localisation-rejection
- Multiple emitter fitting: optimal determination of the number of molecules (high-density)

SMAP

J. Ries, Nat. Methods 2018

Super-Resolution Microscopy Analysis Platform

- Matlab based tools
- Extensive set of tools
- 2D and 3D
- Post-processing: drift, grouping

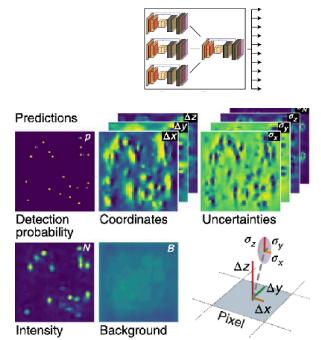


DECODE

A. Spieser, Nat. Methods 2021

Deep Learning Prediction 3D localizations

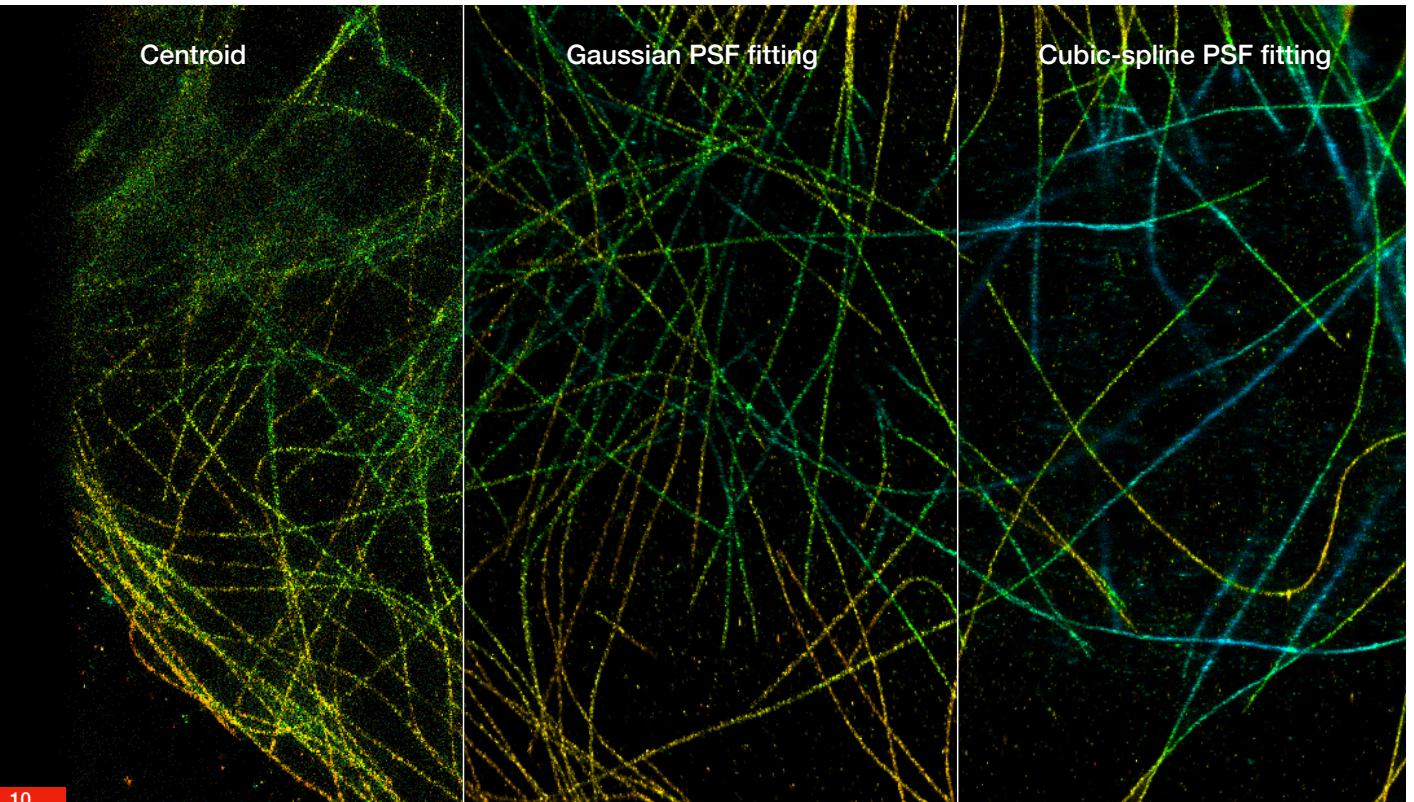
- 2D and 3D. Python-based
- Frame-to-frame and temporal Prediction
- Coordinates, N, uncertainties



Centroid

Gaussian PSF fitting

Cubic-spline PSF fitting



👁 Point Data Rendering

2'000'000 localizations 1.17Gb

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K
1	id	frame	x [nm]	y [nm]	z [nm]	sigm1 [nm]	sigm2 [nm]	intensity [photons]	offset [photons]	bkgnd [photons]	uncertainty_xy [nm]
2	1	1	5740.8344	1761.8302	-73.2513	184.16585	233.31909	658.49107	5.95599	5.88896	24.7608
3	2	2	5651.57515	1768.754	52.98168	214.57157	192.69315	497.43546	8.74395	5.51125	29.31233
4	3	3	5688.13777	1784.34773	80.13173	224.4893	186.72842	776.76044	9.2315	6.25032	21.88203
5	4	4	5749.16986	1777.29827	124.06739	241.4359	179.19385	995.61486	5.54265	8.27917	22.70981
6	5	5	5702.50452	1763.49301	107.69916	234.91776	181.69333	537.04899	8.90223	6.2449	31.20853
7	6	6	5661.68996	1784.76124	97.03721	230.79755	183.51813	409.93424	6.92543	5.7242	36.97788
8	7	7	5671.57136	1784.39598	103.47162	202.71246	1579.1246	5.93793	8.41049	1.60001	1.60001
9	8	8	1763.85682	2371.333	55.08961	215.67918	192.39542	1227.15187	7.91353	7.13094	15.3052
10	9	9	2602.27862	5117.00944	146.06166	250.52983	176.41348	363.39644	8.50348	6.25944	18.31051
11	10	10	5709.28437	1756.24961	153.70116	233.77066	175.60347	859.14402	7.01649	23.20004	

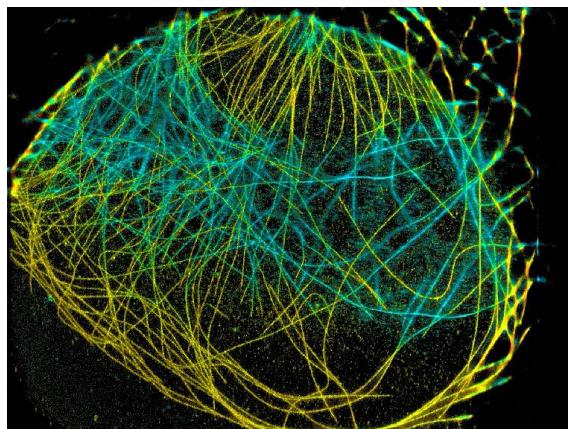
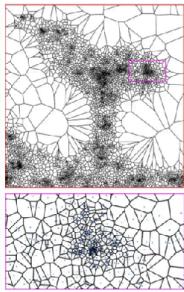
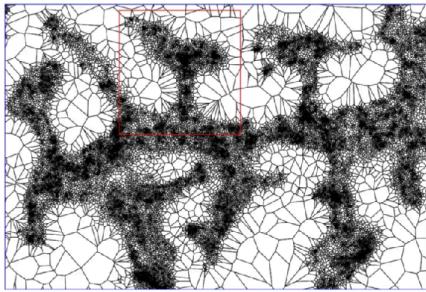
Frame XY or XYZ

Nphotons

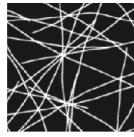
Uncertainty

Colorize Voronoi

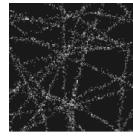
Levet et al., SR-Tesseler, 2015



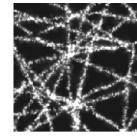
Ground-truth



Histogram binning



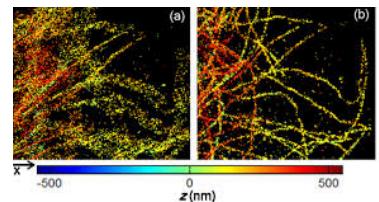
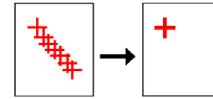
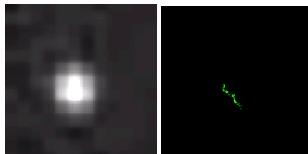
Gaussian rendering



👁 Point Data Processing

Drift Correction

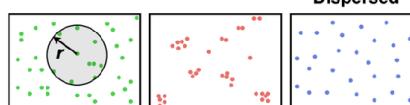
- Tracking fiduciary markers
- Cross-Correlation of batch of localization frame
- Rendering-based registration



Denoising / Rejection

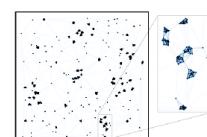
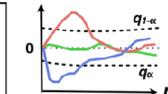
- Statistical distribution
- Rejection based on SNR
- Denoising isolated points

K-Ripley analysis



Dispersed

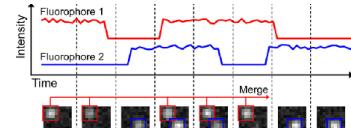
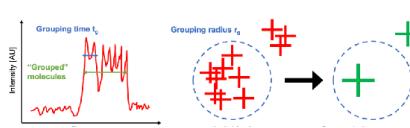
$$\bar{K}(r)$$



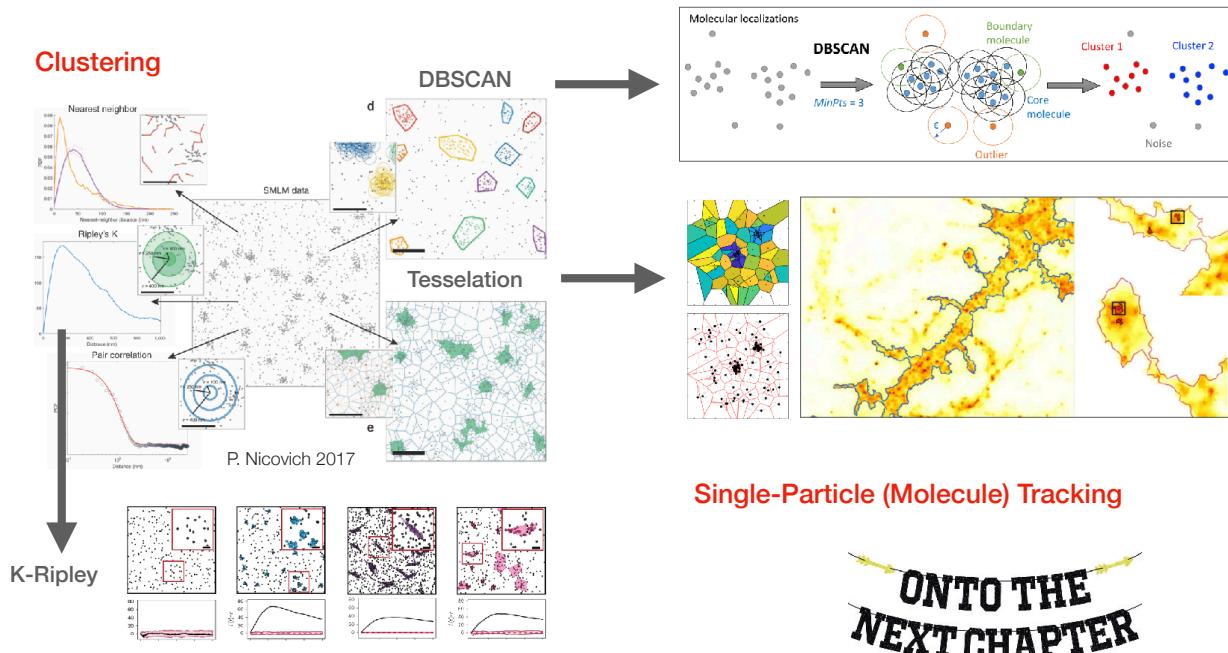
Graph Signal-Processing
[Pourya 2021]

Temporal Grouping

- Merge localizations in single molecule



👁 Point Data Analysis



ONTO THE
NEXT CHAPTER

EPFL

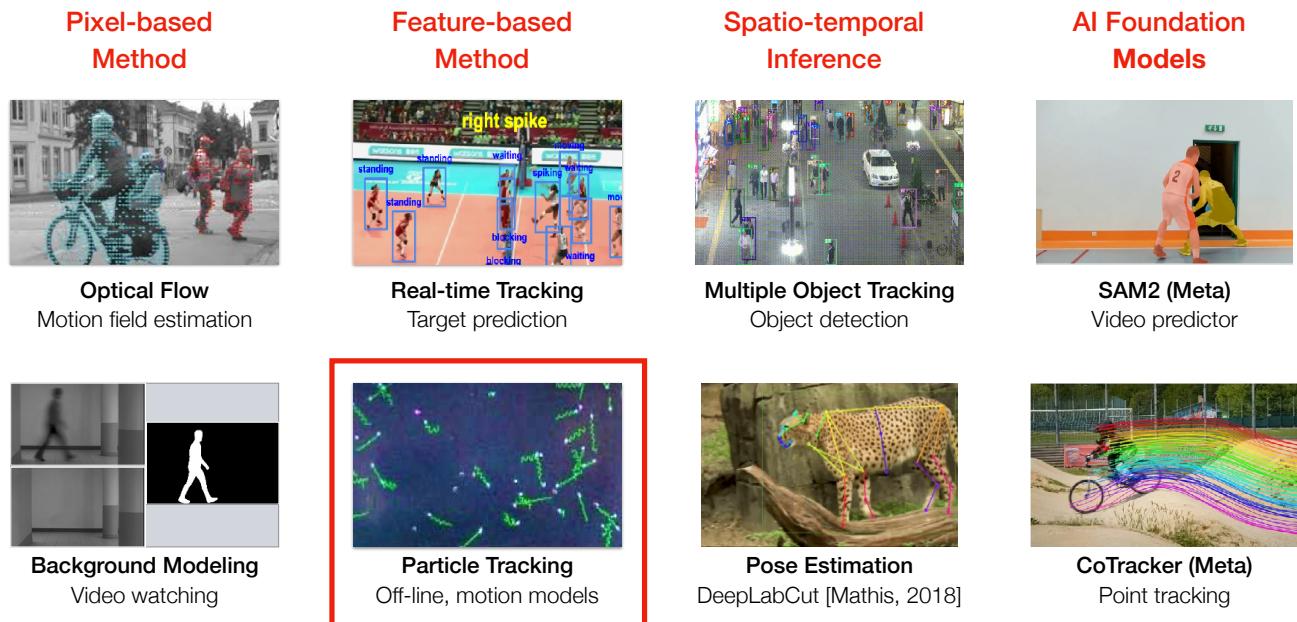
WORKSHOP SMLM DATA ANALYSIS

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IMAGE ANALYSIS

PARTICLE TRACKING

👁 Computer Vision Image-Based Motion Analysis



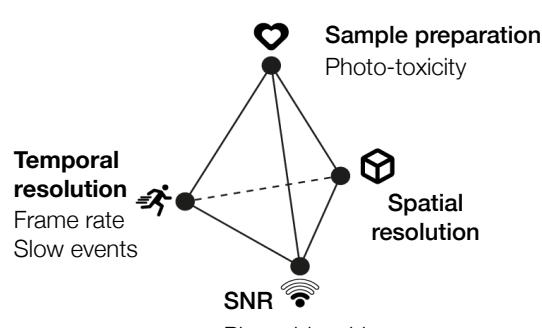
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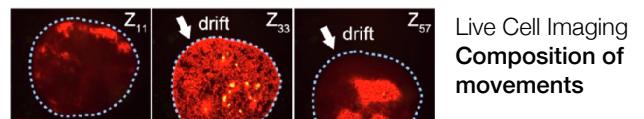
👁 Imaging Image-based Motion Capture

Time-lapse Acquisition

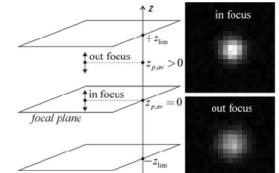
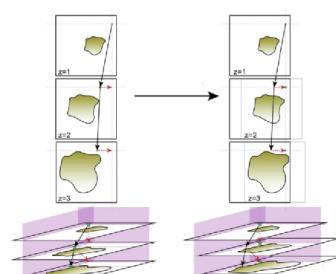


- 30 Hz → 33 ms
- 100 Hz → 10 ms
- 1000 Hz → 0.5 ms

Temporal Perturbation



Drift

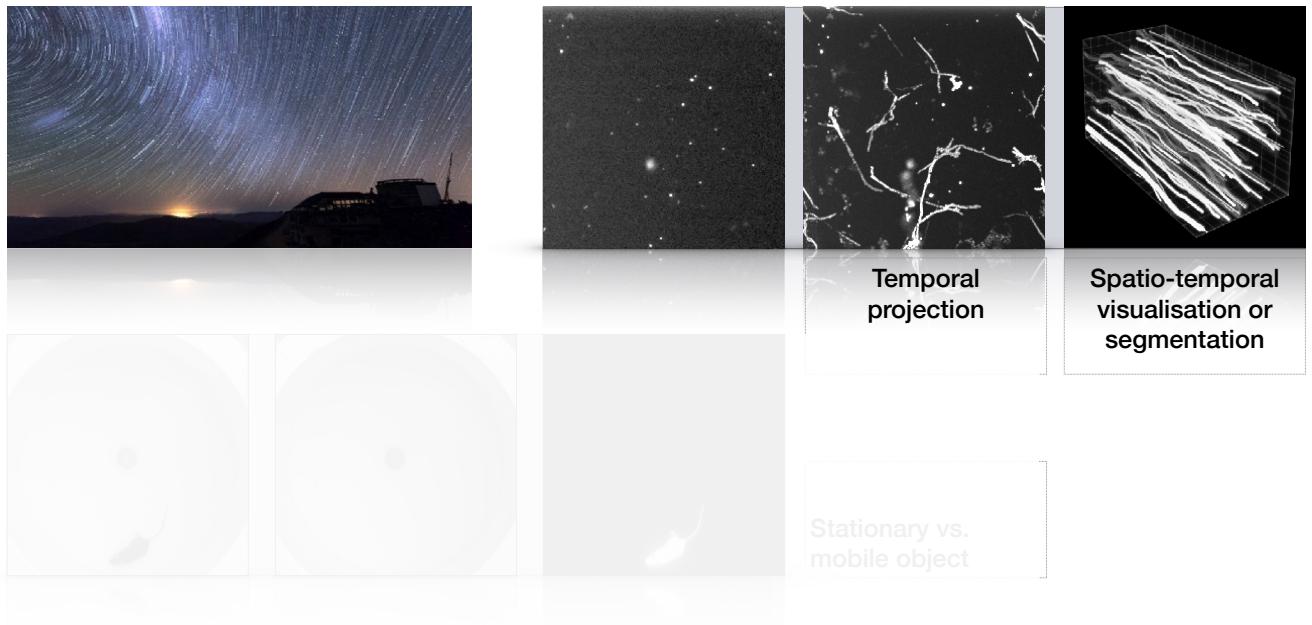


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👁️ Seeing the Motion in Images

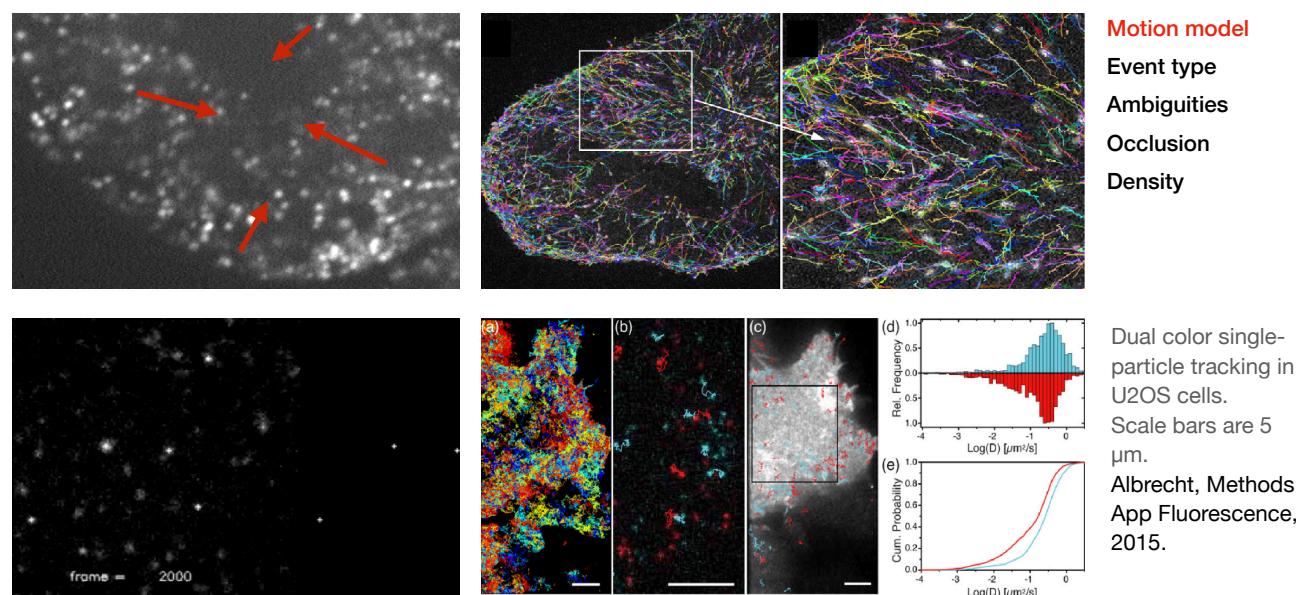


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👁️ Particle Tracking

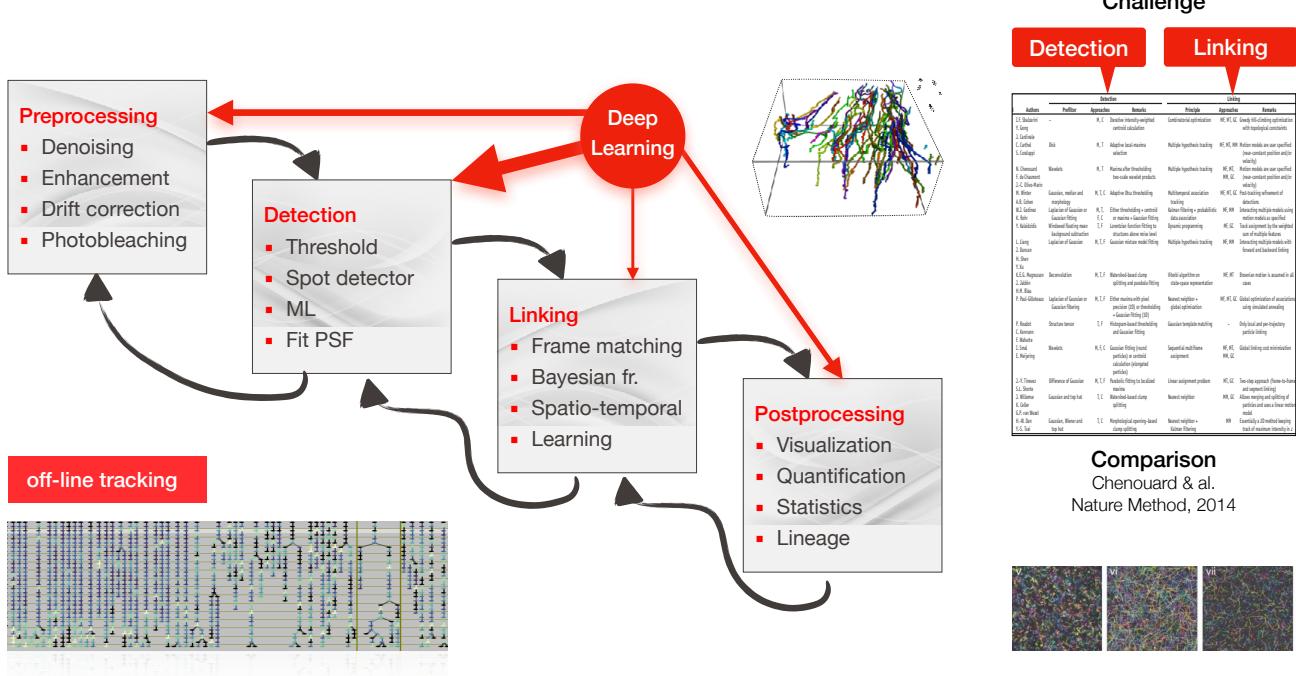


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WORKSHOP SMLMS 2025 CHARACTERIZING MOLECULAR DIFFUSION BY IMAGE-BASED SINGLE-PARTICLE TRACKING

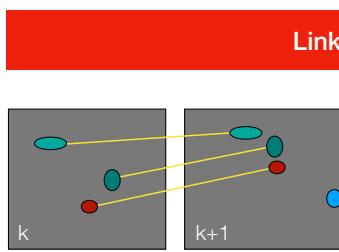
EPFL ◊ DANIEL SAGE

Tracking System



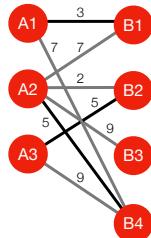
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Tracking-by-Detection



Matching algorithms

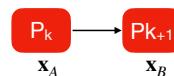
- Simple Nearest-Neighborhood
 - Global Nearest-Neighborhood
 - Greedy
 - Linear assignment problem (LAP)
 - Hungarian Algorithm



Descriptor of particles

- Position, x, y, z
 - Intensity, SNR, uncertainty
 - Morphometric
 - Direction of displacement
 - Speed

$$\mathbf{x} = [x, y, z, A, \mu, c, p, \dots]$$



Cost function

Weighted sum and regularization

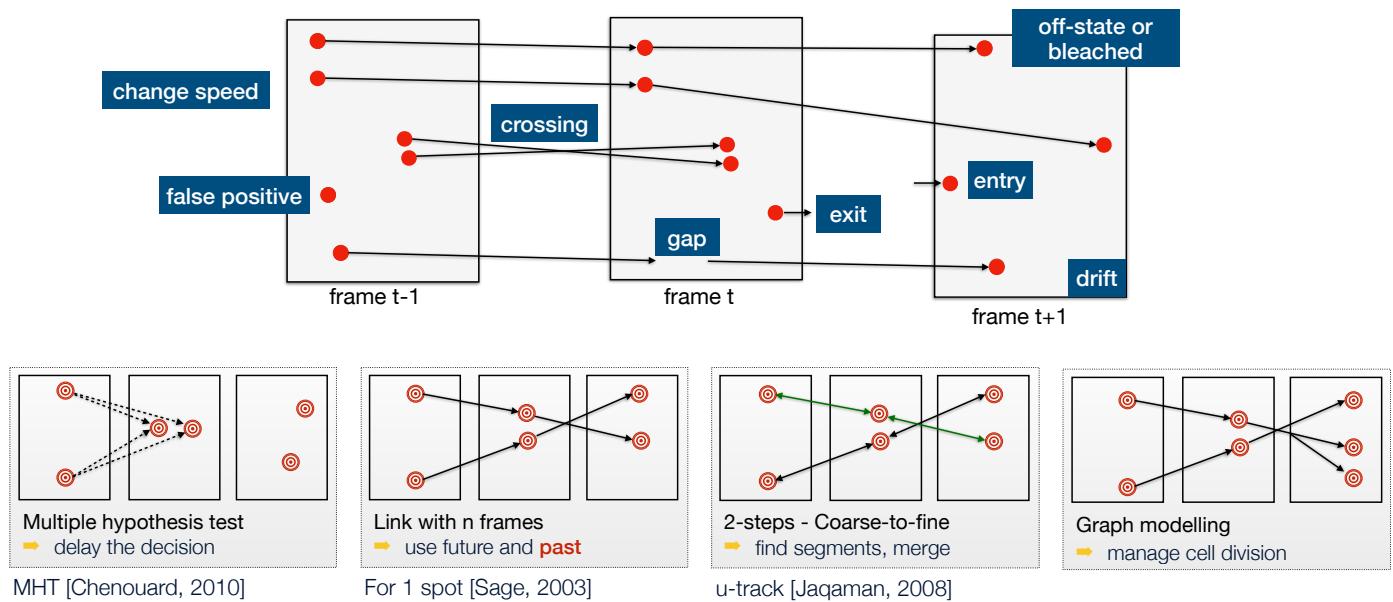
- Hard constraint
 - Soft constraint: e.g. sigmoid
 - Fill the gap: soft threshold

Example of cost function

$$\xi(P_k, P_{k+1}) = \text{dist}(P_k, P_{k+1})$$

$$\xi = (1 - \lambda_\theta) \frac{\text{dist}(\mathbf{x}_A, \mathbf{x}_B)}{S} + \lambda_\theta \frac{|\langle \overrightarrow{\mathbf{px}_A}, \overrightarrow{\mathbf{x}_B} \rangle|}{\|\mathbf{x}_A - \mathbf{x}_B\|}$$

👁 Frame-to-frame Association

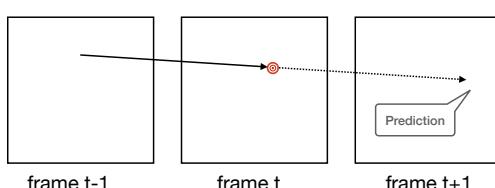


👁 Tracking-by-Prediction

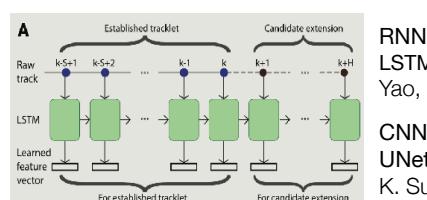
Signal Processing

Kalman Filter

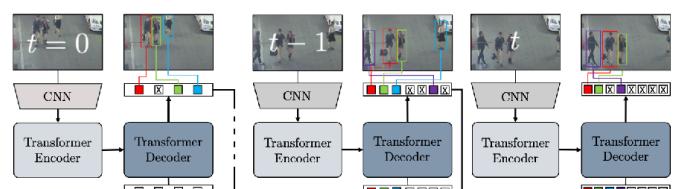
- Prediction of the target from the past
- State vector for the target (position, speed, ...)
- Continuously updated
- Bayesian framework, estimation of the noise



Deep Learning



CNN in space + Attention of Transformer

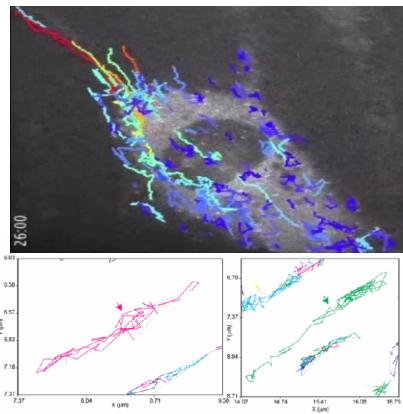


TrackFormer Meinhardt, CVPR, 2022

👁 Tracking-by-Segment

Coarse-to-fine tracking

- Particle linking → segment
- Split/merge segment → trajectory

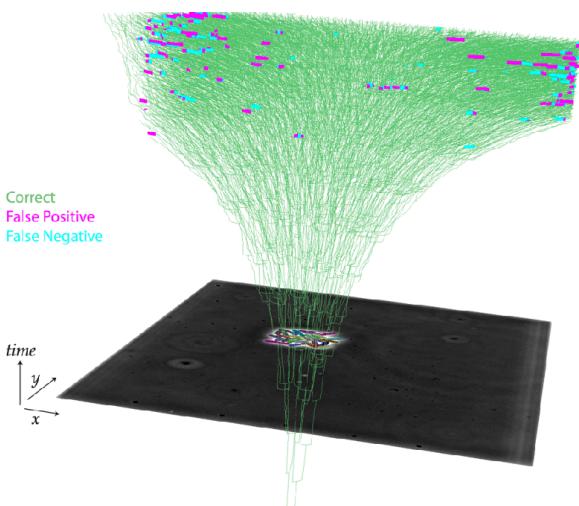
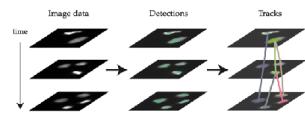


K. Jaqaman et al. Robust single-particle tracking in live-cell time-lapse sequences, *Nat. Methods* 2008

Learning Association

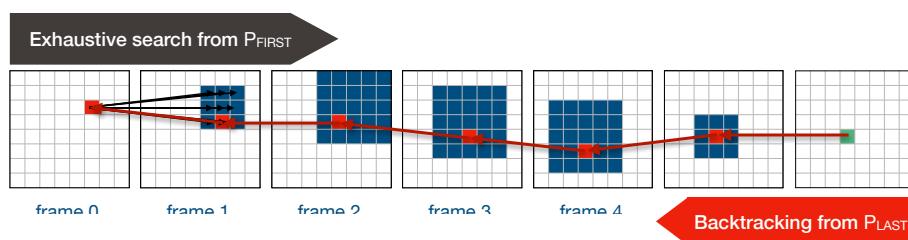
- Simulation of 3 frames
- Various situation

TrackAstra Benjamin Gallusser

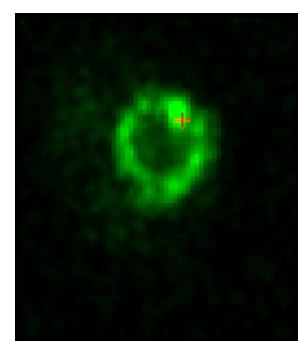


👁 Tracking by Trajectory Reconstruction

Tracking is equivalent to find the **shortest path** problem from point P_{FIRST} to P_{LAST} in **directed acyclic graph (DAG)**



D. Sage et al., Automatic Tracking of Individual Fluorescence Particles, IEEE TIP, 2005.



Dynamic Programming - Viterbi

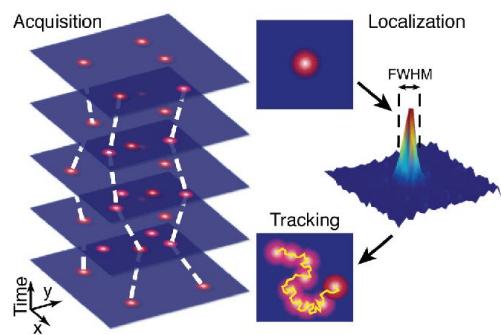
- Optimization on discrete data with a sequence
- Efficient algorithm to find the best path
- Global scope: **past + future**

data term regularization

$$\xi(\mathbf{u}_t, \mathbf{v}_{t+1}) = f(\mathbf{u}_t) + \lambda d(\mathbf{u}_t, \mathbf{v}_{t+1})$$

Example of a cost function from \mathbf{u}_t position to \mathbf{v}_{t+1}

👁 Single Particle Tracking



- **sptPALM** S. Manley et al., High-density mapping of single-molecule trajectories with photoactivated localization microscopy, *Nat. Methods*, 2008.
- **u-Track** K. Jaqaman et al. Robust single-particle tracking in live-cell time-lapse sequences, *Nat. Methods* 2008.
- **MTT** A. Sergé et al., Dynamic multiple-target tracing to probe spatiotemporal cartography of cell membranes, *Nat. Methods* 2008.
- **MAT** M.R. Winter et al., Axonal transport analysis using Multitemporal Association Tracking, *J. Comput. Biology*, 2012.
- **TrackMate** J.-Y. Tinevez et al., TrackMate: An open and extensible platform for single-particle tracking, *Methods*, 2017.
- **Diatrack** P. Vallotton et al., Diatrack particle tracking software: Review of applications and performance evaluation, *Traffic* 18 2017.
- **swift** B. Turkowyd et al., Establishing Live-Cell Single-Molecule Localization Microscopy Imaging and Single-Particle Front. *Microbiol.*, 2020.

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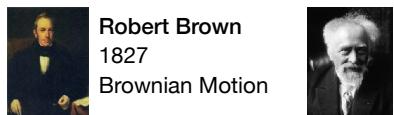
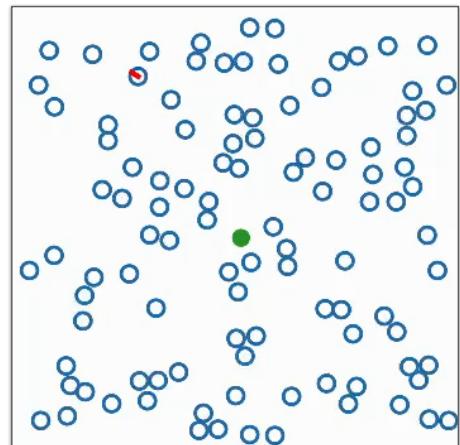
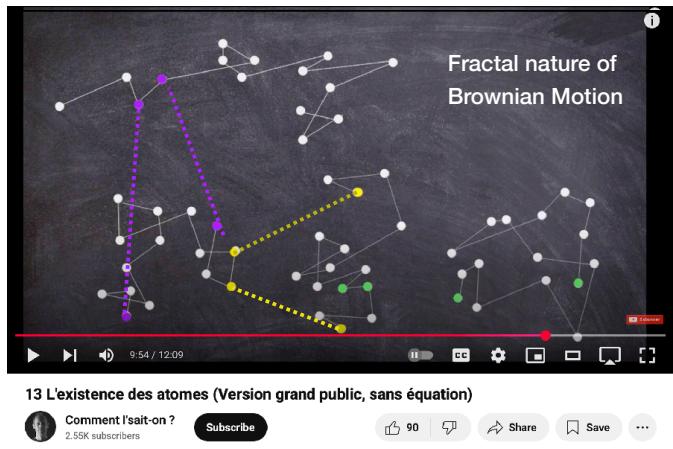
WORKSHOP SMLM DATA ANALYSIS

Characterizing Molecular Diffusion by Image-Based Single-Particle Tracking

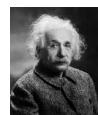
BIOPHYSICS

DIFFUSION MODELS

👁 Brownian Diffusion



Jean Perrin
Nobel Prize 1926
Les atomes



Einstein (1905)
used Brownian motion to provide
evidence for the existence of atoms.

👁 Analysis of Molecular Diffusion

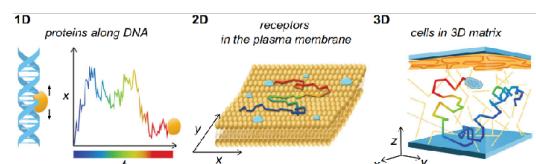
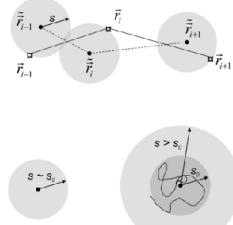
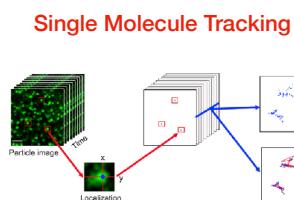
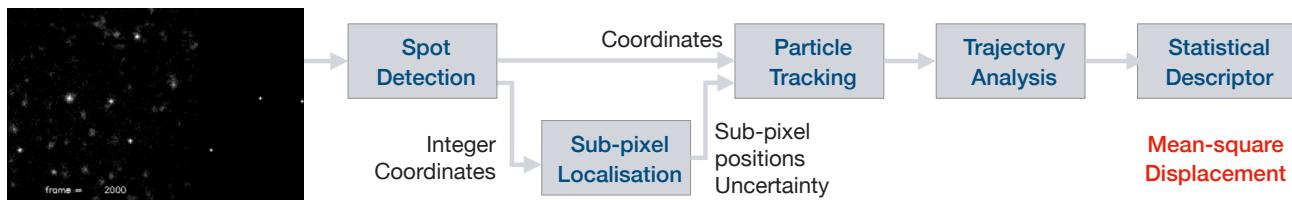


Figure of ANDI, Gorka Muñoz-Gil

Diffusion coefficient in the presence of
localization uncertainty? [Michalet, 2010]

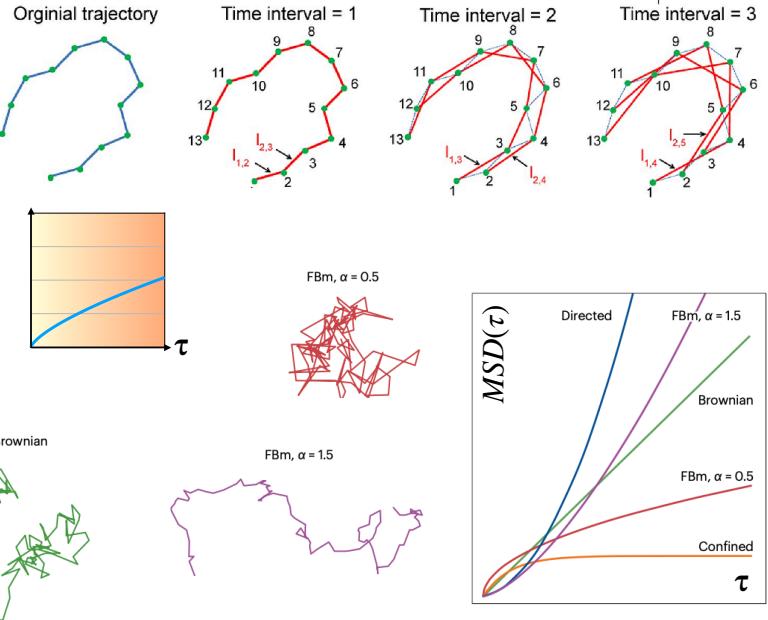
👁 Mean Square Displacement

MSD: The core tools to analyze dynamics

- Deviation of the position to a reference
- Characterization random motion in biology
- Estimation of the spreading solely to diffusion

$$\mathbf{x} = (x, y)$$

$$MSD(\tau) = \frac{1}{N-\tau} \sum_{t=0}^{N-\tau} |\mathbf{x}(t) - \mathbf{x}(t+\tau)|^2$$

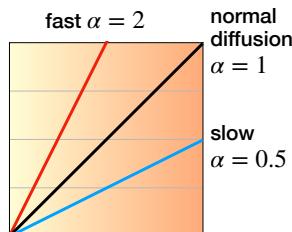


👁 Diffusion Models

Normal Diffusion

$$MSD(\tau) \propto 2^d D \tau$$

- ✓ Trajectory: Brownian motion
- ✓ D constant in space and time
- ✓ Homogeneous medium
- ✓ Memory effect: Memoryless
- ✓ Self-similarity → fractal
- ✓ Ergodicity



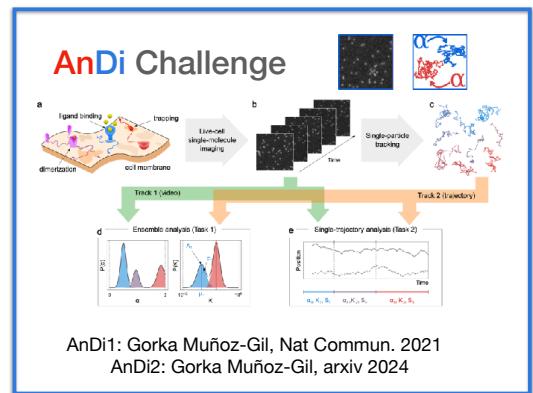
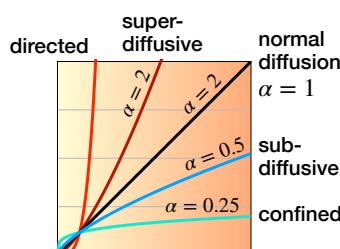
Anomalous Diffusion

$$MSD(\tau) \propto 2^d \tau^\alpha$$

Fractional Brownian motion (fBM)

$$MSD(\tau) \propto 2^d \tau^{2H}$$

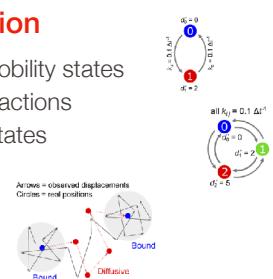
$$\text{Hurst coefficient } H = \frac{\alpha}{2}$$



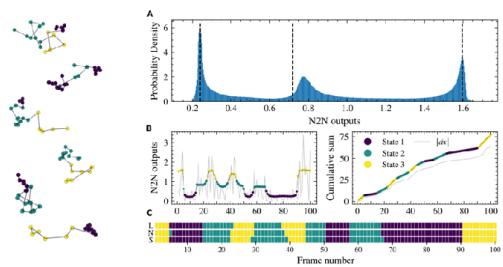
👁 Non-homogenous Diffusion

Time-varying diffusion

- Two-state or multiple mobility states
- Binding–unbinding interactions
- Switching to transient states
- Time-varying diffusivity
- Mechanical stress
- Non-ergodicity

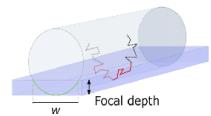
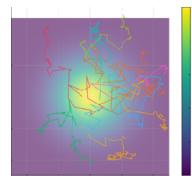


F. Simon, ExTrack, JCB, 2023

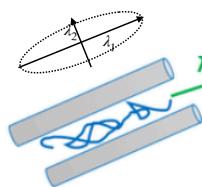


Spatial-varying diffusion

- Non-homogenous medium
- Confined environment
- Axial — z-dependency
- Cytoskeletal barriers
- Trapped trajectory
- Dimerization



Anisotropic diffusion



$$\text{MSD}_{xx}(\tau) \approx 4D_{xx}\tau$$

$$\text{MSD}_{yy}(\tau) \approx 4D_{yy}\tau$$

$$\text{MSD}_{xy}(\tau) \approx 4D_{xy}\tau$$

$$\text{Tensor} = \begin{bmatrix} D_{xx} & D_{xy} \\ D_{xy} & D_{yy} \end{bmatrix}$$

EPFL

WORKSHOP SMLM DATA ANALYSIS

Characterizing Molecular Diffusion by Image-Based Single-Particle Tracking

ALGORITHMS

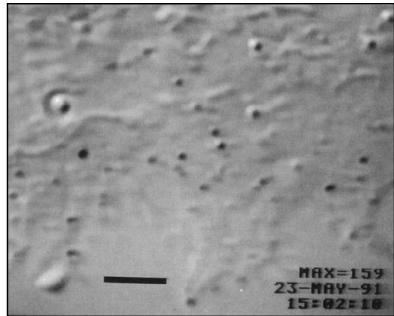
ESTIMATING DIFFUSION

👁 Single-Molecule Tracking

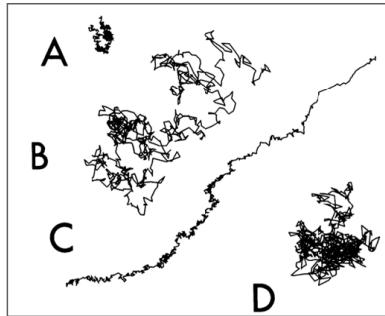
The pioneer: Akihito Kusumi

A Kusumi, Y Sako, M Yamamoto, Confined lateral diffusion of membrane receptors as studied by SPT - Effects of calcium-induced differentiation in cultured epithelial cells, 1993.

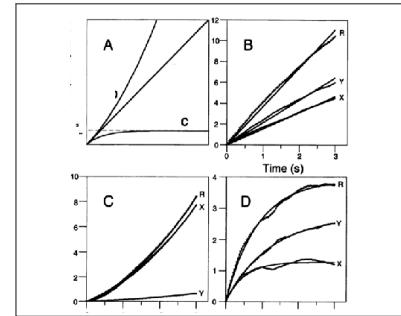
Single Molecule Tracking (SMT) provides unprecedented ability to directly observe molecular behaviors and interactions in living cells [Kusumi, 2024]



A video-enhanced DIC of cultured mouse keratinocyte labeled with gold particles. bar 3 μ m



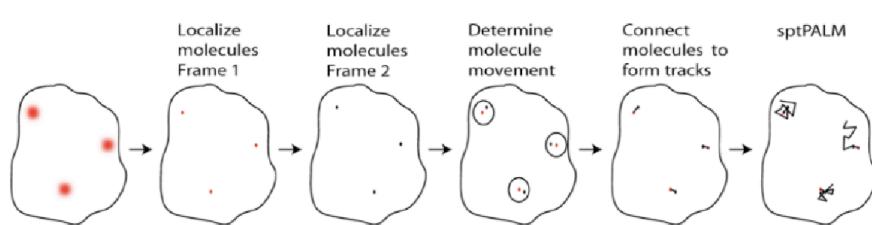
Examples of recorded trajectory, after detection particles and tracking them.



Classification of rancor by analyzing the Mean-Square Displacement (MSD)

👁 Single Particle Tracking in SMLM

sptPALM

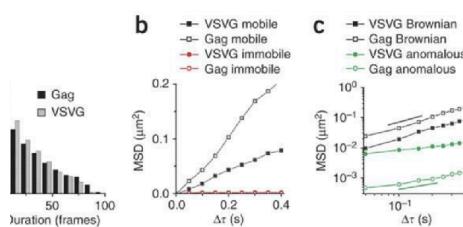
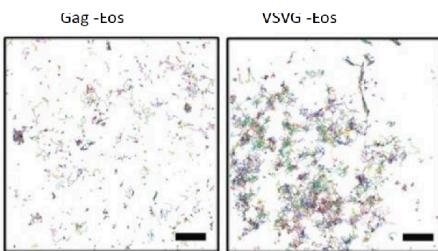


[Manley Nat. Meth. 2008]

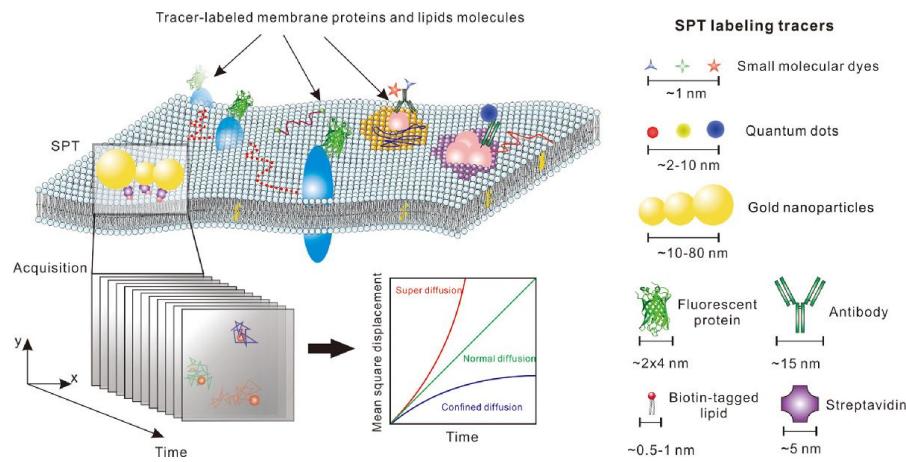
average diffusion coefficient

$$D_m(\text{Gag-Eos}) = 0.11 \pm 0.08 \mu\text{s}^2/\text{s},$$

$$D_m(\text{VSVG-Eos}) = 0.14 \pm 0.11 \text{ m}^2$$



👁️ SPT Is Seeing Always Believing?



Yanqi Yu, Miao Li, Yan Yu. Tracking Single Molecules in Biomembranes, ACS Nano 2019.

Potential limitations and pitfalls

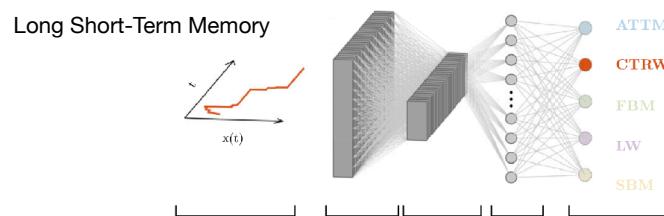
- Optical flow Hydrodynamic is affected by large probes
- Steric effect in crowded environments
- Cross-link artificially reduce diffusion

Probes affect the dynamics

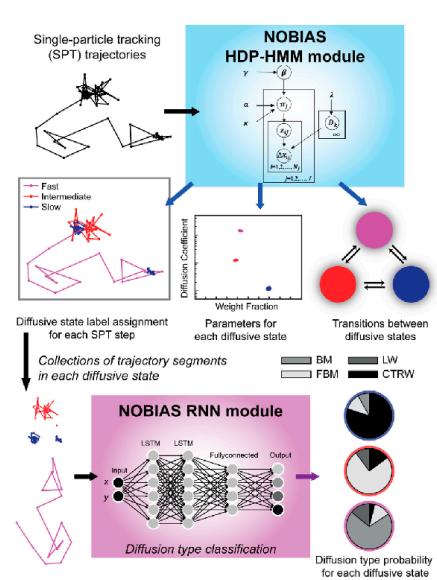
- Molecule-based:** organic fluorescent dyes or fluorescence protein
- Particle-based:** Quantum dots or gold nanoparticles

👁️ Classification of Trajectories

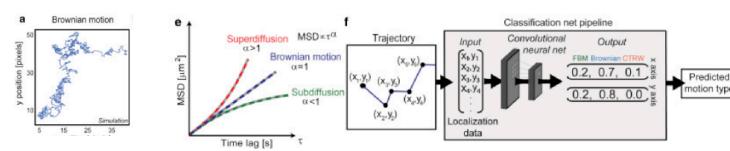
RANDI [Argun, Journal of Physics A, 2021]



NOBIAS [Chen, Frontiers, 2021]



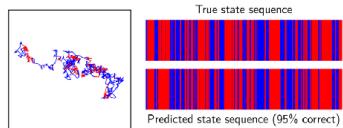
CNN Trajectory [Granik, Biophysical Letter 2019]



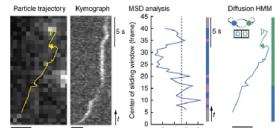
👁️ Multiple Diffusion States

Hidden Markov Models (HMM)

HMM for quantifying dynamic [Das, PLoS 2009]



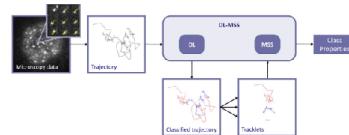
Transient particle transport [Monnier, Nat. Meth. 2015]



Divide-and-conquer

Moment scaling spectrum (MSS)

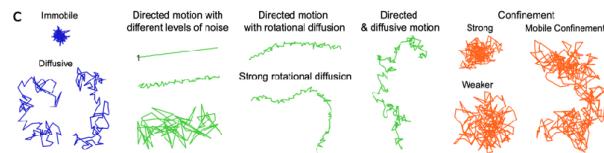
Particle Mobility Analysis Using DL-MSS, [Arts 2019]



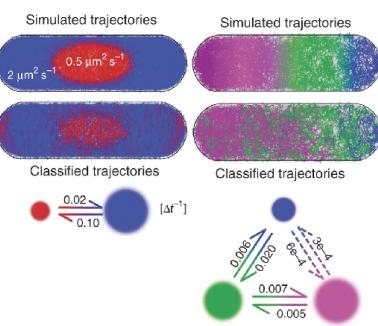
Probabilistic

aTrack [Simon, eLife 2024]

Modeling true variables as hidden variables.
Applies likelihood ratio tests to classify the trajectory



vbSPT
[Persson, Nat. Meth. 2013]
Diffusive states and transition rates



👁️ Trajectory Features

17 descriptive features of Pinholt

[Pinholt PNAS 2021]

Feature name	Description
T0	Time in the slowest diffusion state
T1	Time in the second slowest diffusion state
T2	Time in the third slowest diffusion state
T3	Time in the fastest diffusion state
<tst>	Average residence time in a diffusion state
meanSL	Average step length for the trace
Pval	Quality of a power law fit to the msd curve
alpha	MSD power law scaling coefficient (<1 for subdiffusive and >1 for superdiffusive)
D	Diffusion coefficient
Trappedness	Estimates whether the walker is trapped (>=0.5 for Brownian motion)
meanMSD	Intermediate time spread of the trajectory
Kurtosis	Heavyness of the tail in the distribution of points in the entire trajectory (>=2 for Brownian motion)
Gaussianity	Heavyness of the tails of the distribution for the steps in the trajectory (1 for Brownian motion)
ProbabilityDimension	Space dimension of the trajectory (>=2 for Brownian motion)
Efficiency	Linearity of the trajectory / -7 for Brownian motion)
MSD ratio	MSD power law scaling coefficient (from statistics of trajectory rather than fit, 0 for Brownian motion)
N (track duration)	Bleaching rate or binding affinity to the substrate

60 engineered features DeepTRACE

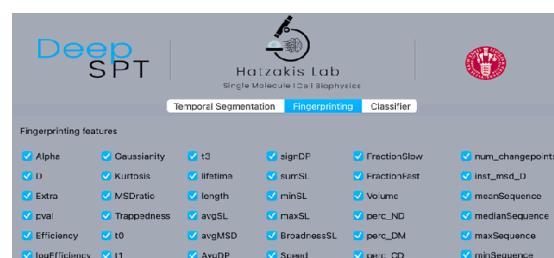
[Kaestel-Hanse, Nat. Meth. 2025]

- Raw features: Localization, photometric, tracking
- Static feature: depend on current localization: Step size, Distance to cell membrane
- Local window features: Smoothed step size, Step angle, Local straightness, Local fractal dimension
- Local trappedness, Local Velocity Autocorrelation
- Delta features: comparison of two local context, dispersion

40 diffusional fingerprinting of DeepSPT

[Pambos, Bioarxiv 2025]

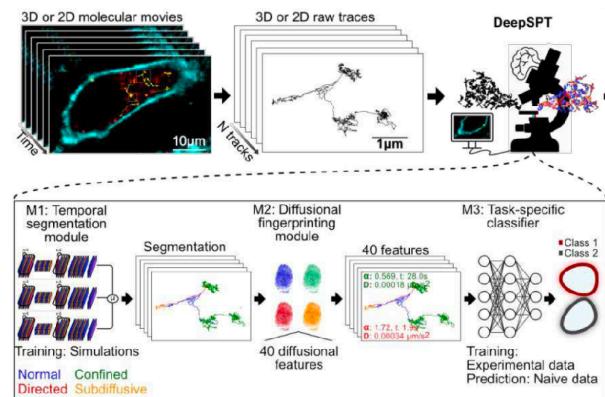
DeepSPT's features expanding on the work of Pinholt



👁️ Learning from Trajectory Features

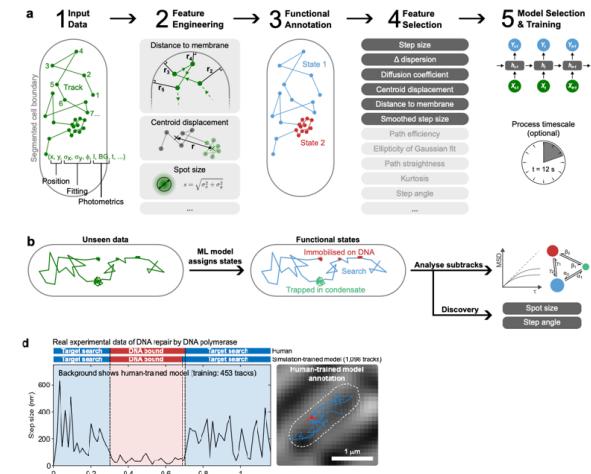
DeepSPT

Deep learning assisted SPT
[Kaestel-Hanze, Nat. Meth. 2025]



DeepTRACE

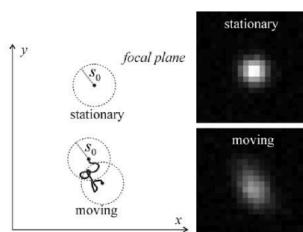
ML for Analysis in Single Molecule Track
[Pambos, Bioarxiv 2025]



👁️ Learning from Pixel Patches

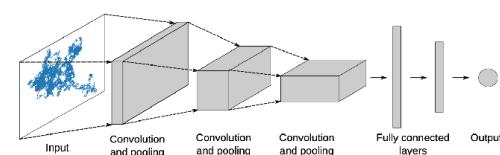
Motion Blur

Influence of movement on the localization precision in SMLM
[Deschout, Biophotonics, 2011]



Learning

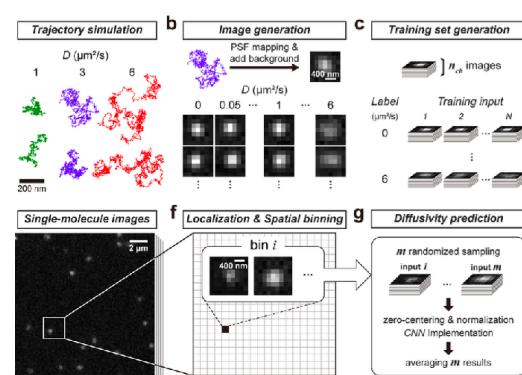
A convolutional neural network (CNN) trained directly on image data from image data



Pix2D

Exploiting the often undesired yet evident motion blur of single-molecule images, recorded under typical SMLM conditions, to extract diffusion coefficient D

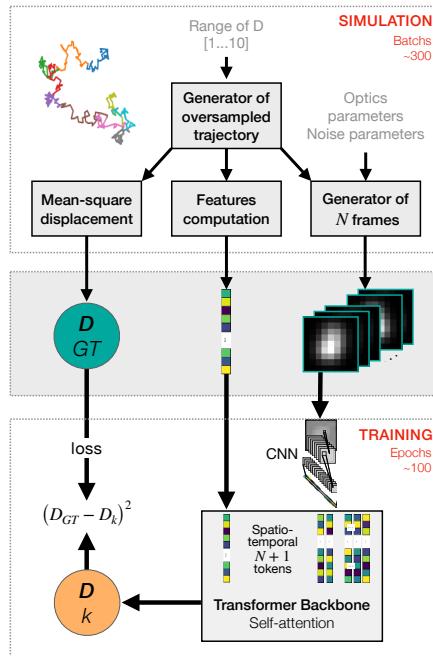
[Park, Communication Biology, 2024]



👁 Motion-Informed Vision Transformer MiViT



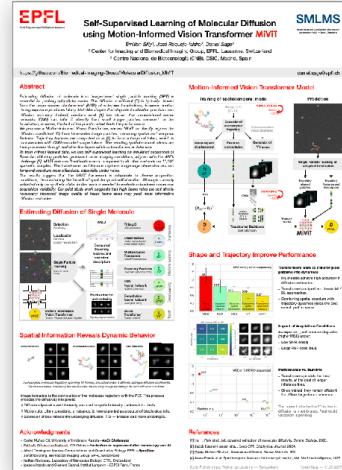
Training of spatiotemporal model



Poster at SMLMS 2025

Self-Supervised Learning of Molecular Diffusion using MiViT

Émilien Silly, José Requejo-Isidro,
Daniel Sage



👁 Acknowledgments

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Emmanuel Soubies
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