International Journal of Current Trends in Engineering & Technology
ISSN: 2395-3152
Volume: 02, Issue: 05 (SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER, 2016)

A Review of Histogram Equalization for Contrast Enhancement Technique

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Abstract— Images are an essential factor of today's life. Images are captured through many devices such as cameras, mobile phones, scanners etc. The quality of images is degraded due to many reasons. The reasons may include weather conditions, motion of objects or less capacity of device. To improve these images for human viewing or to for further analysis, it is necessary to improve the quality of images. Image contrast enhancement is one of the methods to improve image quality. There are number of contrast enhancement techniques. Images having low contrast are usually captured in dark or bright environments. So preprocessing of such images becomes necessary to make the images suitable for other image processing applications. Image enhancement is a common problem. The histogram equalization (HE) technique is widely used for this purpose because it is simple and effective. However, it produces undesirable visual artifacts in the output image because the mean brightness of the image is changed. This paper presents a review of different techniques that can be used for contrast enhancement. The ultimate aim of these techniques is to preserve the input mean brightness so that the image looks natural in appearance. This paper provides overview of basic concepts and various techniques of contrast enhancement. This paper mainly focuses on histogram modification based contrast enhancement techniques.

Keywords*:* Image enhancement, contrast enhancement, histogram equalization.

I. INTRODUCTION

Contrast enhancement is an important area in image processing for both human and computer vision. It is widely used for medical image processing and as a preprocessing step in speech recognition, texture synthesis, and many other image/video processing applications. There are several reasons for an image/video to have poor contrast: the poor quality of the used imaging device, lack of expertise of the operator, and the adverse external conditions at the time of acquisition. These effects result in under-utilization of the offered dynamic range. As a result, such images and videos may not reveal all the details in the captured scene, and may have a washed-out and unnatural look. Contrast enhancement targets to eliminate these problems, thereby to obtain a more visually pleasing or informative image or both. Different methods have already been developed for this purpose. The contrast is the difference in visual properties that distinguish an object from other object and from the background. In other words it is the difference between the darker and the lighter pixels of image. If the difference is large the image will have high contrast otherwise the image will have low contrast. The contrast enhancement increases the total contrast of an image by making light colors lighter and dark colors darker at the same time. This is done by setting all color components below a particular lower bound to zero and all color components above a particular upper bound to the maximum intensity value 255. Color components between the upper and the lower bounds are set to a linear ramp of values between 0 and 255. As the upper value must be greater than the lower bound so the lower bound must range from 0 to 254 and upper bound must range from 1 to 255 [2]. Enhanced image can also be described as if a curtain of fog has been removed from the image. An example of contrast enhancement is shown in figure 1.

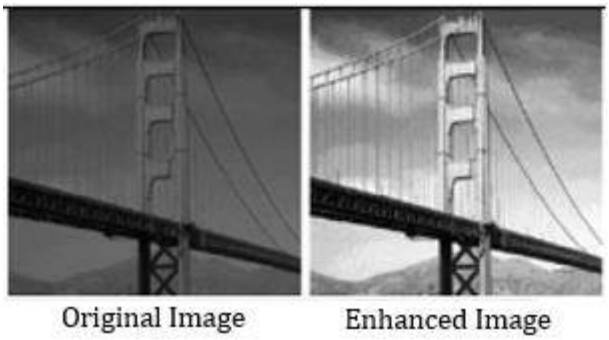


Figure 1: Image Enhancement [3]

The enhancement methods can be divided in two categories:

1. Spatial domain methods
2. Frequency domain methods

In spatial domain technique we directly deal with the image pixels. The pixel values are modified to achieve desired enhancement. Point processing methods and histogram equalization techniques are spatial domain methods [2]. The paper focuses on histogram equalization based techniques.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditional Histogram Equalization method may change the original brightness and can deteriorate visual quality of image. To solve these problems Y.T. Kim proposed Brightness preserving Bi-Histogram Equalization method (BBHE) that equalizes two sub histograms produced by histogram separation techniques and calculates mean intensity as threshold [4]. Another technique Dualistic Sub Image Histogram Equalization (DSIHE) uses median as threshold to separate histograms instead of mean [5]. The Minimum Mean Brightness Error Bi-Histogram Equalization (MMBEBHE) has the feature of minimizing the difference between input and output image's mean. MMBEBHE can preserve brightness better than BBHE and DSIHE. MMBEBHE, but it has limitation of high computational complexity. Thus a generalization of BBHE referred to as Recursive Mean-Separate Histogram Equalization (RMSHE) was introduced. RMSHE was featured with scalable brightness preservation [6]. The Brightness Preserving Histogram Equalization with Maximum Entropy (BPHEME) method maximizes the entropy by the variation approach under the constraints that the mean brightness remains fixed [7]. The Recursive Sub Image Histogram Equalization (RSIHE) technique extends DSIHE by recursively separating histogram and multi-equalizations to solve above problems [8]. But the problems were not effectively solved in spite of its recursive nature and scalable brightness preservation techniques. Another histogram separation technique Recursively Separated and Weighted Histogram Equalization (RSWHE) uses a weighting function to smooth each sub histogram and to effectively solve the mean-shift problem [9]. Renjie He, Sheng Luo, Zhanrong Jing and Yangyu Fan developed a method in which the weighted average of histogram equalization and exponential transformation are combined and the level of the contrast improvement is adjustable by changing the weighting coefficients. The algorithm achieved adjustable contrast enhancement for color images and also decreased the effect of rising intensity on colors of image [1]. Shih-Chia Huang, Fan-Chieh Cheng and Yi-Sheng Chiu proposed a hybrid HM (histogram modification) method Adaptive Gamma Correction with Weighting Distribution (AGCWD) by combining TGC (Transform based gamma correction) and THE (Traditional histogram equalization) methods. This paper presented an automatic transformation technique that improved the brightness of dimmed images via the gamma correction and probability distribution of grey levels. For enhancement of videos, the technique used temporal information regarding the differences between each frame to reduce computational complexity [3].

III. HISTOGRAM ENHANCEMENT

Histogram is a statistical expression of an image which reflects the statistical situation of different gray levels. Gray histogram of an image is a one dimensional discrete function, which is as: $h(k) = n_k$ in which n_k is the number of pixels with the gray level value of k in image X (i, j). Let X= {X (i, j)} denote a given image composed of L discrete levels denoted as $\{X_0, X_1 \ldots X_{L-1}\}$, where X (i, j) represents an intensity of the image at the spatial location (i, j) and $X(i, j) \in \{X_0, X_1 \ldots\ldots X_{L-1}\}$. For a given image X, the probability density function (PDF) can be obtained according to equation (1) as:

$$P(X_k) = n^k / n \qquad (2)$$

Where X_k denotes the kth gray level of X (i, j) and n is the total number of pixels in the image. Therefore, the Cumulative distribution function (CDF) can be obtained on the basis of PDF as:

$$C(X_k) = (X_L - X_0)/c(x) \qquad (3)$$

Histogram equalization is a scheme that maps the input image into the entire dynamic range, (X_0, X_{L-1}), by using CDF as a transform function. The transform function f(x) based on CDF is as:

$$f(x) = X_0 + (X_{L-1} - X_0)\, c(x),$$

Theoretically the gray-scale or the probability density function of an image will produce a perfectly equalized histogram through such a mapping mechanism. However the gray-scale and the probability density function may not be exactly uniform in practical applications because of the discrete nature of the pixel intensities. As a result, pixels with a high probability of gray level may be over enhanced and pixels with a lower probability of gray level may be lack of enhancement or even be removed. Therefore, HE always enhances the background of an image excessively and decreases the saturation of the small area with most interesting features [1].

IV. CONTRAST ENHANCEMENT TECHNIQUES

A. Brightness Preserving Bi- Histogram Equalization

In the Brightness preserving Bi-Histogram Equalization (BBHE), two separate histograms from the same image are formed and then equalized independently, where the first one is the histogram of intensities that are less than the mean intensity and the second one is the histogram of intensities that are greater than the mean intensity [4]. BBHE reduces the mean brightness variation but it cannot solve enhancement problem effectively as it can result in unnatural enhancement in some cases and suffers from over enhancement and under enhancement effects. Effect of BBHE is shown in fig 2.

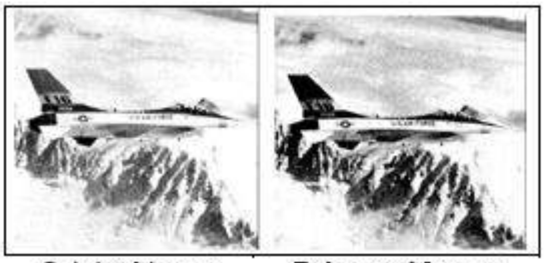


Figure 2: Effect of BBHE [4]

B. Dualistic Sub Image Histogram Equalization

In Dualistic Sub image Histogram Equalization (DSIHE), two separate histograms are created according to the median gray intensity instead of the mean intensity [5]. Although DSIHE can maintain the brightness and entropy better, but both DSIHE and BBHE cannot adjust the level of enhancement and are not robust to noise. Consequently, several problems will emerge like spikes in the histogram. Effect of DSIHE is shown in fig 3.

C. Minimum Mean Brightness Error Bi-Histogram Equalization

Minimum mean brightness error bi-histogram equalization (MMBEBHE) had the feature of minimizing the difference between input and output image's mean. In this method histogram is separated into two based upon threshold level which would result in minimum AMBE (Absolute Mean Brightness Error). Some integer based computation is performed to calculate AMBE [6]. MMBEBHE is better than BBHE and DSIHE in terms of preserving brightness but MMBEBHE has limitation of high computational complexity. Effect of MMBEBHE is shown in fig 4.

Figure 3: Effect of DSIHE [5]

D. Recursive Mean-Separate Histogram Equalization

The Recursive Mean Separation Histogram Equalization (RMSHE) method recursively separates input histogram based on mean brightness level. Then histogram equalization is performed separately on each sub histogram. Result of RMSHE is shown in fig 5. Then enhanced image is obtained by combining all sub histograms and mapping that into output image. The mean intensity of the output image will converge to the average brightness of the original image when the iteration increases [6]. Thus significant enhancement is performed when recursion level is high.

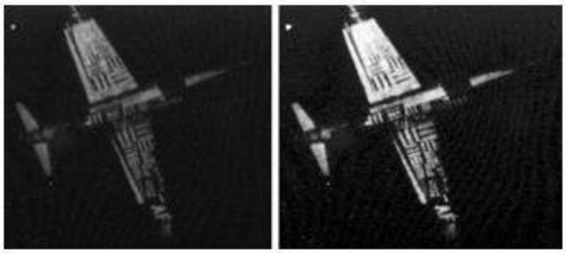


Figure 4: Effect of MMBEBHE [6]

E. Recursive Sub Image Histogram Equalization

Recursive sub image histogram equalization (RSIHE) that yielded better enhancement results for grayscale images as compared to some of conventional HE methods such as bi-histogram equalization and recursive mean separate histogram equalization. RSIHE recursively separates a histogram based on its median instead of mean as in RMSHE [8]. Result of RSHE is shown in fig 6.

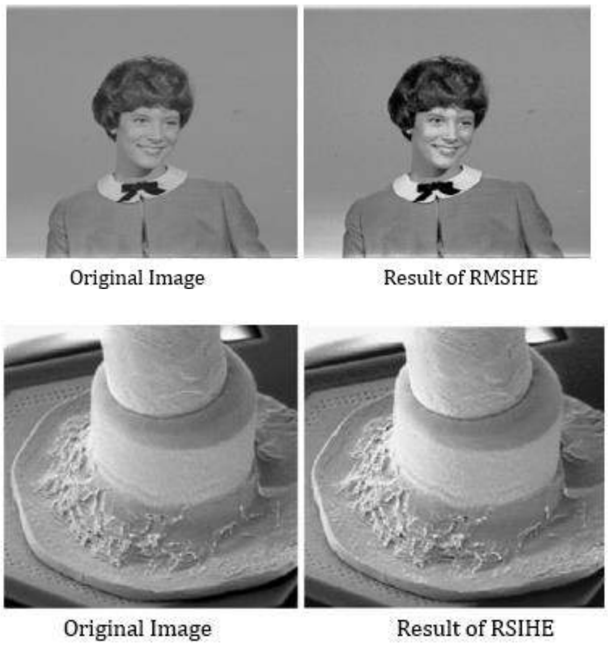


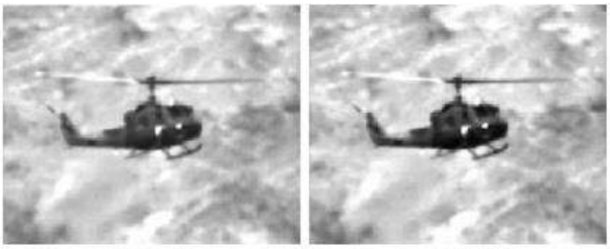
Figure 6: Effect of RSIHE [8]

F. Recursively Separated & Weighted Histogram Equalization

The recursively separated and weighted histogram equalization (RSWHE) preserves the image brightness and enhance the image contrast by first splitting an input histogram into two or more sub histograms recursively based on the mean or median of the image. Then the sub histograms are modified through a weighting process based on a normalized power law function. Lastly, sub

International Journal of Current Trends in Engineering & Technology
ISSN: 2395-3152
Volume: 02, Issue: 05 (SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER, 2016)

weighted histograms are equalized independently [9]. Effect of RSWHE on an image is shown in fig 7.



Original Image Result of RSWHE

Figure 7: Effect of RSWHE [9]

TABLE I: Comparison of Contrast Enhancement Techniques

Enhancement Technique	Advantage	Disadvantage
BBHE	Solves mean shift problem of traditional histogram equalization technique to some extent	Contrast enhancement done is not Much Effective. Unnatural Enhancement can occur.
DSIHE	Preserves mean better than BBHE in some cases.	Enhancement achieved is not satisfactory.
MMBEBHE	Maximum brightness preservation.	Computational complexity is high.
RMSHE	Better enhancement as number of recursion level increases.	Enhancement is not satisfactory at low recursion levels.
RSIHE	Good contrast enhancement effect.	Time consumption is high because of multi equalizations.
RSWHE	Weighting function used smoothest each Sub histogram.	Time consumption is high due to recursion.
AGCWD	Enhancement is better because of combination of gamma correction and weighting distribution.	Mean brightness is not preserved.

Original Image Result of AGCWD

Figure 8: Effect of AGCWD [3]

G. Adaptive Gamma Correction with Weighting Distribution

The technique Adaptive gamma correction using weighting distribution (AGCWD) modifies histograms and enhances contrast in digital images. This is a hybrid HM (histogram modification) which combines TGC (Transform based gamma correction) and THE (Traditional histogram equalization) methods. In this method cumulative distribution function (CDF) is utilized directly and normalized gamma function is applied to modify the transformation curve [3]. Effect of AGCWD is shown in fig 8. The comparison of various techniques of contrast enhancement is shown in Table.

V. CONCLUSION

Histogram based contrast enhancement techniques are most popular because of easy and fast implementation. In this paper various techniques BBHE, DSIHE, MMBEBHE, RMSHE, RSIHE, RSWHE and AGCWD are discussed. The selection of technique highly depends on application, but a comparison is shown according to which if computational complexity does not matter then MMBEBHE is best to use. Recursion based techniques can be used in case enhancement is more significant than time complexity. AGCWD is most recent and effective technique and has less computational and time complexity. It is a combination of gamma correction and histogram equalization, which are modified to effectively use in this technique.

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