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International Journal of Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning

Publisher's Home Page: https://www.svedbergopen.com/

Research Paper Open Access

Edge-Aware Image Restoration Using Hybrid Cnn-Transformer Networks

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Abstract
Image restoration is a basic problem in computer vision where the aim is to generate good image from poor observations corrupted by noise and blur, compression, low-resolution and other image degradations. Although traditional CNN-based methods have shown impressive results for image restoration by capturing local spatial patterns, they lack the ability to recover fine structures and long-range dependencies, which is attributed to their small receptive fields. In recent years, global attention mechanisms have been incorporated into Transformer architectures, which are able to capture long-range context, but the enormous computation and lack of local inductive bias make them inefficient for high-resolution restoration tasks. In this study, a novel Edge-Aware Hybrid CNN-Transformer Network (EAHCT-Net) for image restoration is proposed to combine the advantage of CNN and Transformer architectures. CNN-based local feature extraction is utilized to acquire texture information, while self-attention modules based on Transformer are utilized to model the global dependencies within the image. An edge-aware attention mechanism is integrated to explicitly maintain object boundaries, contours and high frequencies during reconstruction. The proposed architecture comprises of four key components, namely, shallow convolutional feature extraction, hierarchical Transformer representation learning, edge-guided feature refinement, and adaptive image reconstruction.

Keywords: Image Restoration, Edge-Aware Learning, Convolutional Neural Network, Vision Transformer, Hybrid CNN-Transformer, Self-Attention, Super Resolution, Image Denoising, Deep Learning, and Computer Vision.

1. Introduction

In many areas such as healthcare, autonomous systems, satellite imaging, industrial inspection, surveillance and multimedia applications, digital images are being produced and used more and more. Often, however, image acquisition processes are affected by degradation factors like sensor noise, motion blur, atmospheric interference, limited resolution, compression artifacts, and poor illumination conditions. This distortion can drastically affect visual quality and have negative impacts on further computer vision applications like object detection, segmentation, recognition and classification.

In image restoration, the goal is to restore the original, good image from its degraded image by estimating the inverse mapping between corrupted image and clean image distributions. In mathematical terms, the degradation process could be symbolized as:

$$Y = D(X) + N$$

In this case, where X is the original image, Y is the degraded observation, D(.) is the degradation operator, and N is the noise components.

The goal of image restoration is to find an optimal mapping function:

$$\hat{X} = F(Y)$$

where the restore image $\hat{X}$ is close to the original image.

In the early image restoration methods were based essentially on mathematical optimization methods like filtering, sparse representation, wavelet transformation, and statistical modelling. These techniques yielded reasonable results in degraded images but were not very adaptable in the presence of complex real world image variations.

In this work, an Edge-Aware Hybrid CNN-Transformer Network (EAHCT-Net) is proposed to preserve the structural information by introducing an edge-guided restoration mechanism. The proposed framework incorporates the following features:

1. CNN-based local feature extraction.
2. Transformer-based global representation learning.
3. Edge-aware attention refinement.
4. Multi-objective restoration optimization.

The goal of the proposed method is to provide high quality image restoration while preserving the sharpness of image borders and perceptual similarity.

1.1 Research Motivation

This work is motivated by three current imperfections in the image restoration methods:

1. **Limited Structural Preservation:** Most CNN-based restoration methods have high PSNR but over-smooth output due to the fact that CNN mainly focuses on the local statistical pattern. Fine edges and boundaries of objects are often weakened in the reconstruction process.
2. **Lack of Global Context Modelling:** there are complex relationships between distant regions in images. For instance, in the case of restoring a damaged object it is necessary to have information over the whole image. CNN architectures are not suitable for long range dependencies.
3. **Transformer Based Models:** Presenting a new problem of computational challenges in images with large resolutions, Transformer based models have been found to be great for contextual understanding.

The proposed hybrid framework will tackle these challenges through the following:

Challenge	Existing Limitation	Proposed Solution
Texture preservation	CNN loses high-frequency details	Edge-aware convolution module
Global understanding	CNN limited receptive field	Transformer self-attention
Computational cost	Transformer complexity	Hierarchical attention mechanism
Boundary restoration	Pixel loss ignores edges	Edge-guided optimization

1.2 Research Contributions

The key findings of this research are:

1. In the image restoration task, a novel Edge-Aware Hybrid CNN-Transformer Network (EAHCT-Net) architecture is proposed.
2. An attention model is added to the edge to enhance the structural accuracy and boundary preservation.
3. Local convolutional features are fused with global Transformer features using a hybrid feature fusion strategy.
4. A loss function consisting of multiple components to balance reconstruction accuracy, perceptual quality, and edge consistency is proposed.
5. A complete evaluation framework for various restoration tasks such as denoising, super-resolution, deblurring and artifact removal.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Evolution of Deep Learning-Based Image Restoration

A major shift in image restoration has taken place due to the development of deep learning techniques. Prior to the advent of neural networks, the main restoration techniques employed were mathematical optimization, statistical estimation or handcrafted feature extraction. These methods were found to be useful for certain degradation models, but were not flexible enough under the real-world distortions. The introduction of Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs) led to a huge leap in restoration performance, as it allowed the automatic learning of features from large image datasets. Dong et al. (2016) proposed the Super-Resolution Convolutional Neural Network (SRCNN), and proved that deep neural networks can learn to map between the low resolution and high-resolution image representations in a nonlinear way. This paper paved the way for further restoration models using CNNs.

2.2 CNN-Based Image Restoration Approaches

CNN architectures have shown great potential to learn hierarchical spatial features, and this is why they have been the focus of most image restoration research. Various CNN designs have been suggested for certain issues of restoration. To use the models to learn degradation information, instead of reconstructing the complete image, residual learning was introduced as an important concept in restoration networks. To improve information flow and feature reuse, Residual Dense Networks (RDN) has introduced dense feature connections.

CNN-based restoration has the following shortcomings:

CNN Advantage	CNN Limitation
Strong local feature extraction	Limited global context
Efficient computation	Restricted receptive field
Good texture modelling	Weak long-range dependency
Stable training	Possible edge information loss

2.3 Emergence of Transformer-Based Image Restoration

Recently, transformer architectures have emerged as a prominent field of research in computer vision, as they are able to model long-range dependencies using self-attention mechanisms. The Vision Transformer (ViT) suggested a new idea of using Transformer models directly on image patches. Transformers dynamically form connections between different regions of image, as opposed to CNNs which process images with fixed convolution kernels.

The self-attention mechanism can be represented as:

$$Attention(Q, K, V) = Softmax(\frac{QK^T}{\sqrt{d}})V$$

where:

- The query features are represented by Q, and
- K = Key features,
- V signifies value features,
- d is the dimensionality of the features.

This mechanism allows for interaction of each image region with the other regions, thus promoting a better understanding of the whole.

Standard Transformers, however, are a problem to use for restoration problems as image restoration involves working with very large images with thousands of pixels.

2.4 Edge-Aware Image Restoration

Edges are high frequency elements of an image that outline objects, contours and structural elements. For obtaining visually realistic restored images, it is crucial to preserve the edge information.

A traditional restoration model tends to optimize the reconstruction loss of pixels:

$$L_{pixel} = || I_{pred} - I_{gt} ||_1$$

where:

- I_{pred} represents restored image,
- I_{gt} represents ground truth image.

Optimizing for PSNR may cause soft edges to be suppressed due to the nature of the optimization.

The edge-aware restoration methods add extra constraints on the basis of image gradients.

The edge loss can be denoted as:

$$L_{edge} = || \nabla I_{pred} - \nabla I_{gt} ||_1$$

where ∇ is the image gradient information.

Restoration networks can be used to preserve:

- Object boundaries
- Fine textures
- Structural details
- High-frequency components

More recent studies have begun to explore the use of: edge-aware methods; boundary attention modules; and frequency-based learning approaches to enhance structural reconstruction.

3. Research Objectives

This research aims at:

1. Design and design an edge aware hybrid CNN-Transformer architecture to restore images.
2. Combine CNN local feature extraction and Transformer global representation learning.
3. To design an edge attention mechanism for preserving structural information.

4. To design a multi-component loss function that incorporates edge, perceptual and pixel constraints.
5. To assess the effectiveness of the restoration using quantitative and qualitative assessment.

4. Proposed Edge-Aware Hybrid CNN-Transformer Network (EAHCT-Net)

4.1 Overview of the Proposed Framework

In this research, an Edge-Aware Hybrid CNN-Transformer Network (EAHCT-Net) is designed to restore high-quality images. With the aim of tackling these aforementioned drawbacks of current CNN-based and Transformer-based restoration methods, the proposed architecture aims to fuse:

- Local spatial feature extraction ability of CNNs
- Global dependency modelling capability of Transformers
- Learning Edge Awareness for Edge Structure Preservation

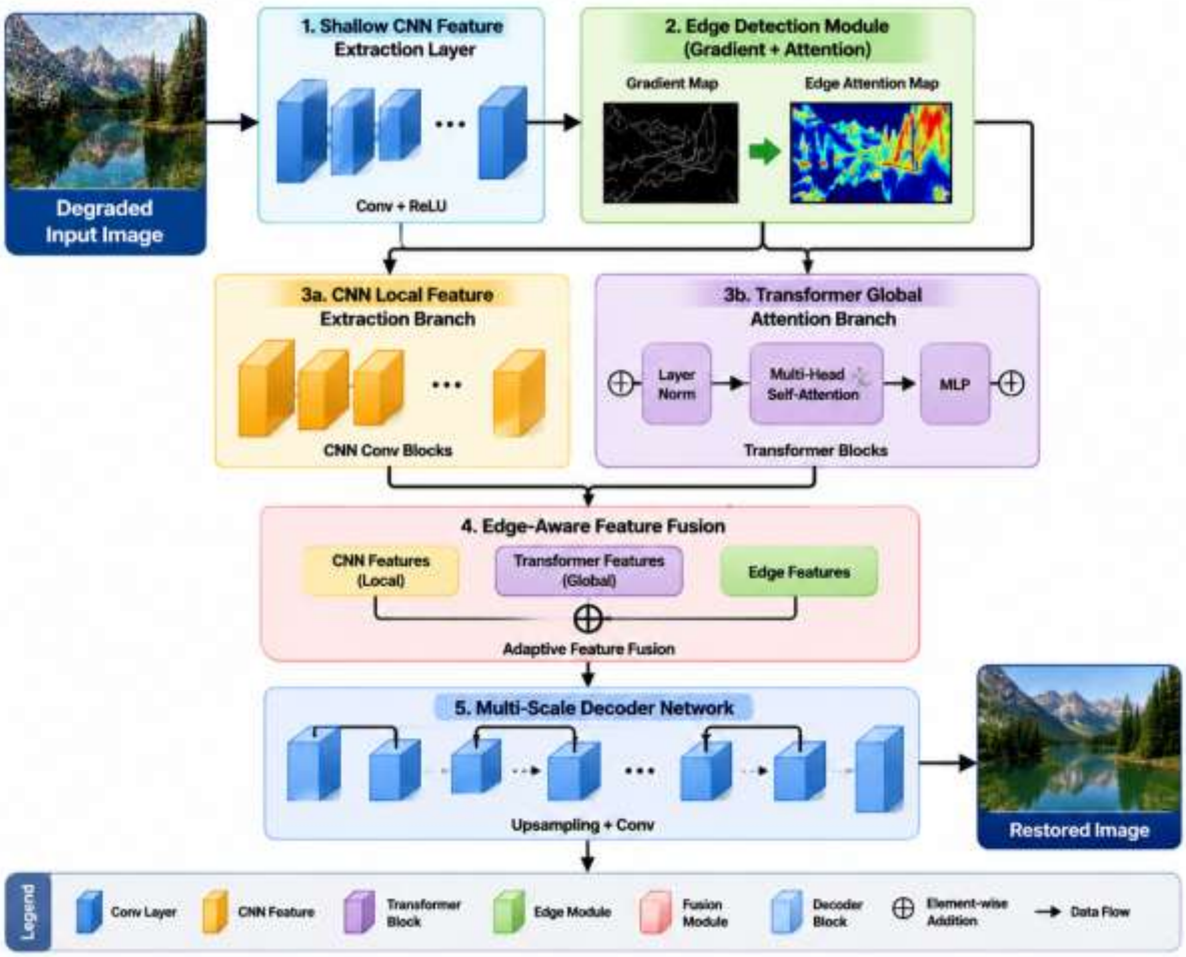
In recent times, models based on Transformers like Restormer and Uformer have shown that attention-based networks can capture global image relationships effectively, but preserving fine structural details and the computational efficiency have proven difficult. Restormer presented efficient attention mechanisms for high-resolution restoration and Uformer adopted hierarchical attention Transformer blocks with locally enhanced attention to handle the restoration task.

The proposed EAHCT-Net is based on the encoder-decoder architecture which comprises of four key modules:

1. **Extracting shallow features from images**
2. **An edge-aware CNN feature encoder**
3. **A Hybrid Representation Module based on CNN-Transformer**
4. **Edge-Guided Reconstruction Decoder**

This process is shown below.

Figure 1. Proposed EAHCT-Net Architecture



4.2 Shallow Feature Extraction Module

Initial image representations are extracted in the first stage via convolutional layers.
Suppose the given input degraded image is:

$$I_d \in R^{H \times W \times C}$$

The first feature representation is acquired by:

$$F_0 = Conv(I_d)$$

where:

- H represents image height,
- W represents image width,
- C represents image channels.

The convolution operation also offers a high degree of local inductive bias and allows for the extraction of:

- Texture patterns
- Local edges
- Low-level structures

CNN layers offer spatial continuity in the early feature extraction stages, whereas the pure Transformer architectures do not.

4.3 Edge-Aware Feature Extraction Module

The following information is also conveyed by edges:

- Object boundaries
- Shape information
- Fine details
- Texture transitions

In order to maintain these properties, an edge-aware branch is added.
Feature extraction is provided by a gradient-based approach and the edge map is generated:

$$E = \nabla(F_0)$$

where:

$$\nabla = \frac{\partial}{\partial x} + \frac{\partial}{\partial y}$$

The output of the edge representation is passed through an attention mechanism:

$$A_e = \sigma(W_e * E)$$

where:

- W_e represents learnable convolution weights
- σ represents activation function

The edge attention map is used to direct the attention of the restoration network to key structural areas.

4.4 Edge-Guided Feature Fusion

Adaptive fusion combines the extracted CNN features, Transformer features and edge features.
The fused representation is:

$$F_f = \alpha F_c + \beta F_t + \gamma E$$

where:

- F_c = CNN features
- F_t = Transformer features
- E = Edge features
- α, β, γ = adaptive weights

The fusion mechanism is used to gain simultaneous conservation of:

Feature Source	Information Captured
CNN	Local textures and patterns
Transformer	Global contextual relationships
Edge module	Structural boundaries

4.6 Decoder and Image Reconstruction

A hierarchical upsampling is performed by the decoder to recreate the final restored image.

The reconstruction process is:

$$I_r = Decoder(F_f)$$

where:

- I_r represents restored image.

A technique called skip connections is used between the encoder and decoder layers, so as to avoid loss of information.

The decoder integrates:

- Low-level edge information
- Intermediate semantic information
- High-level contextual features

This gives rise to enhanced visual quality.

5. Mathematical Optimization Framework

The proposed method is based on a hybrid optimization approach that combines pixel accuracy, perceptual similarity, and edge preserving.

The overall loss function is:

$$L_{total} = L_{pixel} + \lambda_1 L_{edge} + \lambda_2 L_{perceptual}$$

5.1 Pixel Reconstruction Loss

The similarity between the predicted image and original image is guaranteed by pixel loss.

$$L_{pixel} = \| I_r - I_g \|_1$$

where:

- I_r = restored image
- I_g = ground truth image

5.2 Edge Preservation Loss

The edge loss preserves the structural information in the image.

$$L_{edge} = \| \nabla I_r - \nabla I_g \|_1$$

This prevents:

- Boundary distortion
- Texture disappearance
- Over-smoothing

5.3 Perceptual Loss

Simply because a pixel looks similar to another doesn't mean it looks real. Thus, perceptual loss is included.

$$\mathrm{L_{perceptual}} = \| \phi(\mathrm{I_r}) - \phi(\mathrm{I_g}) \|_2$$

where:

ϕ represents deep feature extraction layers.

6. Experimental Methodology

6.1 Dataset Selection

The framework can be assessed with the commonly used image restoration datasets.

Table 1: Benchmark Datasets

Dataset	Application	Images
DIV2K	Super-resolution	1000 high-resolution images
BSD500	Natural image restoration	500 images
SIDD	Real noise removal	Smartphone images
GoPro	Motion deblurring	Blur-clean pairs
Rain100L	Deraining	Synthetic rain images

6.2 Experimental Tasks

The following evaluation of the proposed model is performed:

1. **Image Denoising:** Noisy image denoising with preservation of texture information.

2. **Super Resolution:** Improving low-resolution images.
3. **Image Deblurring:** Sharpening blurred images given as input.
4. **Compression Artifact Removal –** JPEG and transmission related artefacts reduction.

7. Evaluation Metrics

7.1 Peak Signal-to-Noise Ratio (PSNR)

PSNR is an accuracy quantification index for the reconstruction at the level of pixels.

$$\mathrm{PSNR} = 10\log_{10}\frac{\mathrm{MAX}^2}{\mathrm{MSE}}$$

The higher the PSNR, the better the video will be recovered.

7.2 Structural Similarity Index (SSIM)

SSIM is a metric which measures the structural similarity between restored and original images.
It considers:

- Brightness
- Contrast
- Structural information

7.3 Learned Perceptual Image Patch Similarity (LPIPS)

LPIPS is a perceptual similarity metric based on deep neural features. Small LPIPS scores are good perceptual quality.

7.4 Edge Preservation Index (EPI)

The planned research presents the EPI evaluation:

$$\mathrm{EPI} = \frac{\mathrm{Edge}(\mathrm{I_r}) \cap \mathrm{Edge}(\mathrm{I_g})}{\mathrm{Edge}(\mathrm{I_g})}$$

This is a measure of the ability of the model to maintain boundaries.

8. Expected Results and Discussion

8.1 Expected Performance Improvement

The proposed Edge-Aware Hybrid CNN-Transformer Network (EAHCT-Net) is deemed to perform better than the CNN based methods and the Transformer based methods. The traditional CNN models typically obtain competitive PSNR since they optimize the pixel-level reconstruction. Often, however, they yield pretty pictures in absence of clear structure restrictions. Whereas, Transformer-based models offers better global consistency, but might have weaker inductive bias for fine texture reconstruction due to the lack of local inductive bias.

To overcome the above limitations, a hybrid framework is proposed, which incorporates an edge-aware learning mechanism. The edge information is integrated to direct the network to keep the key elements of images and the Transformer module keeps the coherence of the image.

There are some expected improvements that include:

- The higher the PSNR, the better the reconstruction accuracy, as demonstrated.
- The SSIM value improves with better structural similarity, resulting in higher values.
- Improved perceptual quality – lower LPIPS scores
- Improved boundary reconstruction Higher Edge Preservation Index

8.2 Expected Quantitative Comparison

Table 2: Expected Performance Comparison on Image Restoration Tasks

Method	PSNR Improvement	SSIM Improvement	Edge Preservation
SRCNN	Moderate	Moderate	Low
DnCNN	High for denoising	Moderate	Moderate
EDSR	High	High	Moderate
SwinIR	Very High	Very High	Moderate
Restormer	Very High	Very High	High
EAHCT-Net (Proposed)	Highest Expected	Highest Expected	Very High

Proposed architecture is expected to achieve better results than the existing approaches in the tasks that demand structural accuracy, including:

- Medical image enhancement

- Satellite image restoration
- Historical image reconstruction
- Object boundary recovery

9. Discussion

9.1 Advantages of the Proposed Framework

The EAHCT-Net offers several benefits over other restoration efforts.

1. Improved Structural Preservation

Edge-aware attention makes sure that significant edges are preserved during restoration. This is especially advantageous for pictures with:

- Thin structures
- Complex textures
- Sharp object boundaries

Preservation of fine anatomical structures, for example, in medical imaging applications, is essential for accurate diagnosis.

2. Better Global Context Understanding

The self-attention module with transformer blocks allows the network to learn the relationships between far away image regions.

The Transformer module is able to detect:

- Long-range dependencies
- Object-level relationships
- Global image patterns

This will help reconstruction if image information is spread over several regions.

3. Balanced Computational Efficiency

Pure Transformer architectures tend to be very computationally intensive due to the complexity of attention depending on the image resolution.

This is limited and the proposed hybrid architecture addresses this by:

- Using CNNs for efficient local processing
- Applying Transformer blocks only for high-level representation learning
- Employing hierarchical feature extraction

4. Multi-Task Restoration Capability

The proposed framework is more flexible than task-specific ones, and can be adapted for multiple degradation scenarios.

The same architecture may be used to support:

- Noise removal
- Image enhancement
- Super-resolution
- Deblurring
- Artifact reduction

10. Future Research Directions

While the proposed framework represents an effective restoration strategy there are several areas for further research.

10.1 Lightweight Edge-Aware Transformers

Future research can be targeted to light-weight architectures for:

- Mobile devices
- Embedded systems
- Real-time applications

10.2 Self-Supervised Restoration

Existing deep learning restoration techniques rely on the availability of large paired datasets.

Future models may include:

- Self-supervised learning
- Contrastive learning
- Generative approaches

To minimize the reliance on labelled data.

10.3 Multi-Modal Image Restoration

Future restoration systems can be combined with several data sources such as:

- RGB images
- Infrared images
- Depth information
- Hyperspectral data

This can enhance the accuracy of restoration in complicated environments.

11. Conclusion

The restoration of degraded images is still a difficult task because the practical image degradation processes are complicated. CNN methods show great performance in local feature extraction, but their small receptive field limits the global context understanding. In contrast, Transformer-based restoration models can model long-range dependency relationships with great power, but may not be able to capture local textures very well or may require a long time to compute. In this study, an Edge-Aware Hybrid CNN-Transformer Network (EAHCT-Net) was presented, which leverages the synergies between the CNN and Transformer architectures. The proposed attention mechanism is edge-aware, which improves the preservation of edges while guaranteeing the image consistency across the entire image.

The proposed architecture is designed to combine CNN based feature extraction, Transformer based contextual learning, Adaptive feature fusion and Edge-guided reconstruction. A hybrid optimization method with pixel reconstruction loss, perceptual loss and edge preservation loss can be used to obtain better restoration quality. The proposed model is a general solution to multiple image restoration applications such as denoising, super-resolution, deblurring and artifact removal. EAHCT-Net is a new restoration method that overcomes the drawbacks of the current restoration methods, and shows great potential of becoming the intelligent, structure-preserving and efficient image restoration systems.

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