Machine learning for identification and counting of Naturally Occurring Asbestos*

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Introduction
Open-pit nickel mining is the main economic activity in New Caledonia. Lateritic Ni-ore deposits formed on weathered ultrabasic rock cover more than a third of the territory. However, among the mineral phases that make up these laterites, some belong to the asbestos family and have the capacity to emit pathogenic fibres. The inhalation of air polluted by such fibres may lead to severe respiratory diseases; asbestos may penetrate deep into the lungs causing at worst malignant mesothelioma.

In order to manage the natural occurrence of these fibres and take the necessary measures for the protection of workers, it is necessary to evaluate and monitor the concentration of asbestos fibres into the environment (e.g., airborne, waterborne). The current monitoring approach adopted by asbestos laboratories relies on counting method using Transmission Electron Microscopy (TEM), according to French regulation (NF X 43-050). Analysts operatively count and measure fibres and elongated mineral particles (EMPi) with on a filter viewed through the microscope device at high magnification. It is worth noting that analytical procedures involving electron microscopies are time-consuming, and show an intrinsic bias related to the subjectivity of operator analysis. These drawbacks explain the need to develop an automatic method for fibre and EMPi detection and quantification.

This paper presents a new method for detecting fibres on filters by using image processing and machine learning methods, discriminating single fibres, particles, juxtaposed objects and fibre bundles, minimizing as much image noise.

Methodology and results

The approach we will present was mainly tested on raw filter images similar to those obtained during air quality monitoring measurements (cf. Figure 1.a).

Figure 1: a) Sample filter, b) Microscopic image
Images are acquired by a conventional optical microscope and correspond to about 1.6µm per pixel. Approach developed follows the complete process presented in Figure 2.

The Pre-processing Step consists of restoring the image by eliminating noise and uniforming image with lighting defects (see Figure 3). To do this, a low-pass filter has been applied to keep only low frequencies. These low frequencies correspond to spatially wide variations in intensity. This operation transforms the original image into an image which represents the background (see Figure 4.a).

A substraction between the original image and the background image will correspond to an almost clean image (see Figure 4.b).
In the pattern detection step, we used the so-called LOG (Laplacien Of Gaussians) method. To avoid the suppression of small fibers during detection, we chose a 50x50 pixels mask which corresponds to the order of fibers size magnitude. Figure 5.a shows the result of the LOG filter application, after a white threshold (s=255). A post-processing, using directional morphology, allowed to eliminate some persistent noise, the final result is shown in Figure 5.b.

![a]![b]

*Figure 5: a) filtered image by LOG, b) Thresholded image*

The last step, before calculating the shape indexes of each fibre, is to separate the juxtaposed fibres. This last post-processing step consists in reconstructing and separating certain juxtaposed shapes. This method will need to be invested and improved in the future.

Finally, shape indices were calculated and made it possible to finalise the sorting of fibres by removing those shapes that do not perfectly correspond to the definitions of a fibre provided by the experts.

This last step does not eliminate all forms considered as non-fibre. An initial labelling (fibre or non-fibre) was carried out on the resulting image (binary) by the experts with the naked eye. Then, we applied a supervised classification method (machine learning) with shape indices as attributes to verify that the predictive model does indeed allow the discrimination between fibres and non-fibres. We obtain an accuracy around 95% of good classified classes. But there is a bias because the database is unbalanced, we have 1247 non-fibers versus 133 fibers. We will therefore have to complete the database in the further work.

**Conclusion**

We have developed a chain for processing and analyzing microscopic images of asbestos fibres for automatic and rapid recognition and counting of these fibres. The aim is to offer a complete process to experts that allows them to free themselves from any subjectivity of interpretation. Moreover, it will allow to build a base of morphologies per asbestos in order to exploit the capabilities of machine learning methods.
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Context and issue

- Open-pit mining operations
- Natural outcrops of hazardous fibres

Protection and prevention of risks for workers

- Monitoring of fibre concentrations in environment
  - Long process
  - Painful to achieve
  - Non-objectivity of experts

Need to develop a (semi-) automatic process for fibre detection and counting by filter image analysis
Methodology

Image acquisition → Pre-processing → Fibre detection

- Image acquisition
- Pre-processing
- Fibre detection
- Calculation and restitution of fibre shapes
- Extraction and separation of juxtaposed fibres
Conclusion

- offering a complete process to experts
- Building a labeled database with fibre or non-fibre classes
- Construction of a predictive model with shape indices and physico-chemistry concentration as attributes
- Developing a tool for expert

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