

## Turbulent Fracture Surfaces: A Footprint of Damage Percolation?

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We show that a length scale  $\xi$  can be extracted from the spatial correlations of the “steep cliffs” that appear on a fracture surface. Above  $\xi$ , the slope amplitudes are uncorrelated and the fracture surface is monoaffine. Below  $\xi$ , long-range spatial correlations lead to a multifractal behavior of the surface, reminiscent of turbulent flows. Our results support a unifying conjecture for the geometry of fracture surfaces: for scales larger than  $\xi$ , the surface is the trace left by an elastic line propagating in a random medium, while for scales smaller than  $\xi$ , the highly correlated patterns on the surface result from the merging of interacting damage cavities.

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After thirty years of research, it is now well established that fracture surfaces exhibit robust universal fractal statistical properties, first reported in Ref. [1] and recently reviewed in Ref. [2]. Yet, identifying the physical mechanisms that lead to such fractal structures is still an open problem [3]. The most commonly used approach to characterize the roughness of fractal cracks is to study the scaling of the off-plane height variation  $\delta h$  of the fracture surface with the observation scale  $\delta r$ . The variance of this distribution shows a scaling law  $\langle \delta h^2 \rangle \sim \delta r^{2\zeta}$  where  $\zeta$  is the so-called roughness exponent. For purely brittle failure, the roughness exponent is reported to be  $\zeta \approx 0.45$  [4,5] whereas for materials that undergo damage during failure  $\zeta \approx 0.75$  [6,7]. It has been conjectured that these exponents are the signature of the fracture mechanism above and below the size of the process zone [8]. However, standard methods for extracting roughness exponents are not able to elicit the differences between the fracture mechanisms in the two regimes.

Here, we propose a different approach for characterizing crack roughness statistics by focusing on the local slopes of the fracture surfaces and their spatial correlations. This allows us to identify unambiguously two scaling regimes: above some length scale  $\xi$ , the slope amplitudes are uncorrelated and the fracture surface displays a monoaffine Gaussian behavior with a roughness exponent of  $\zeta \approx 0.45$ . Below  $\xi$ , long-range spatial correlations do appear and lead to a multifractal behavior of the surface. Our findings show that the presence of two distinct regimes of roughness first reported in Refs. [9,10] is a generic feature of fracture surfaces and is reminiscent of the brittle mode of failure that takes place at large scales and of the damage mechanisms present in the tip vicinity. In addition, it reveals the subtle organization of crack roughness at small length scales  $\delta x < \xi$ , reminiscent of the phenomenology of turbulent flows [11,12]. In particular, we relate quantitatively the

multifractal spectrum measured at these length scales to the spatial correlations of the local slopes, and show that the largest slopes organize into a network of lines or “steep cliffs” that exhibit universal statistics. This new approach to the characterisation of fracture surfaces brings insights into the microscopic mechanisms at play during material failure, and in particular into the mechanism of damage percolation taking place at the tip of cracks. It also paves the way to a postmortem measurement of the size of the crack tip damaged zone, as a promising tool to infer material toughness from the statistical analysis of fracture surfaces.

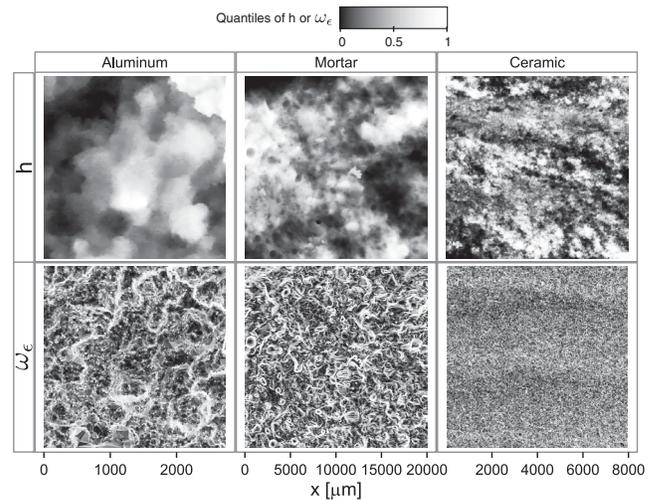


FIG. 1. Maps of  $h$  and  $\omega_\epsilon$  for the three materials studied. Top: the height  $h$  of the measured fracture surface. Bottom: transformation providing the field  $\omega_\epsilon$  of local slopes computed at a scale  $\epsilon$ . In both cases, the quantiles of the distribution are represented by a gray hue, the largest values being represented by the lightest hue.  $\omega_\epsilon$  is computed at the scales  $\epsilon = 3, 50,$  and  $8 \mu\text{m}$  for the aluminum, mortar, and ceramics fracture surfaces, respectively.

For this work, we have selected three sample materials that show a wide range of fracture behavior, namely an aluminum alloy, a mortar, and a sintered glass beads ceramic. The aluminum alloy specimens are aluminum 4 wt% copper broken under uniaxial mode I tension at 620°C, in a semi-solid state [13]. The fracture surfaces are observed with a scanning electron microscope at two tilt angles and the elevation map is produced from a cross-correlation surface reconstruction technique. The mortar fracture surface is obtained by applying four points bending under controlled displacement conditions to a notched beam [9]. The topography of the fracture surfaces is recorded using an optical profilometer. The sintered glass beads ceramic fracture surfaces are obtained with a tapered double cantilever beam broken at a constant opening rate [5]. The roughness of the fractured specimen is measured using a mechanical stylus profilometer. Those fracture surfaces are described by their height field  $h(\mathbf{x})$ , a function of a two-dimensional in-plane vector  $\mathbf{x}$ , that is represented in a gray scale in the top panels of Fig. 1 for each material.

A first natural step in the characterization of the roughness statistics is to compute the distribution of height fluctuations at different scales. For a given increment  $\delta\mathbf{x}$  of the coordinates in the average fracture plane, we note  $p(\delta h|\delta\mathbf{x})$ , the probability distribution of a height increment  $\delta h = h(\mathbf{x}) - h(\mathbf{x} + \delta\mathbf{x})$ , where the sampling of the distribution is done on all admissible coordinates  $\mathbf{x}$ . We also note  $p(\delta h|\delta r)$ , the distribution of  $\delta h$  where the sampling is done on all admissible  $\mathbf{x}$  and  $\delta\mathbf{x}$  such that  $|\delta\mathbf{x}| = \delta r$ . The distribution  $p(\delta h|\delta r)$  at different  $\delta r$  is shown in a semi-logarithmic scale in Fig. 2 for the aluminum, mortar, and ceramic fracture surface. In this semilogarithmic representation, the parabolic shape of the distribution obtained for large values of  $\delta r$  reveals Gaussian statistics. This contrasts with the distributions observed for smaller values of  $\delta r$  that display fat tails. This drastic change in the shape of the distribution demonstrates that a single exponent is insufficient to describe the variations of the roughness properties with the scale of observation. Fat tail statistics also suggest the presence of over-represented large height variations over small in-plane distances that we would like to analyze further.

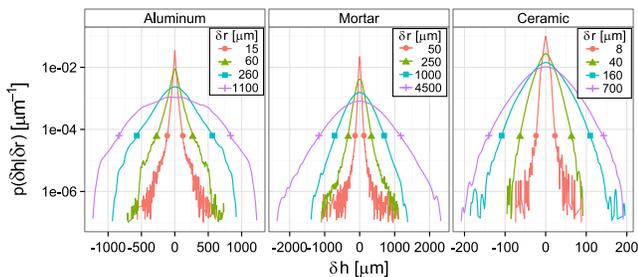


FIG. 2 (color online). Distribution of height fluctuations  $p(\delta h|\delta r)$  at various scales  $\delta r$  for the three samples considered.

To investigate the spatial distribution of these steep “cliffs,” we introduce the quantity  $\omega_\epsilon(\mathbf{x})$  that measures the intensity of the local height variations of the fracture surface on a scale  $\epsilon$ :

$$\omega_\epsilon(\mathbf{x}) = \frac{1}{2} \log \left( \langle \delta h(\mathbf{x}, \delta\mathbf{x})^2 \rangle_{|\delta\mathbf{x}|=\epsilon} \right) - \Omega_\epsilon. \quad (1)$$

$\delta h(\mathbf{x}, \delta\mathbf{x}) = h(\mathbf{x} + \delta\mathbf{x}) - h(\mathbf{x})$  is the local slope of the surface in the direction  $\delta\mathbf{x}$ , and  $\Omega_\epsilon$  is chosen such that the average of  $\omega_\epsilon(\mathbf{x})$  over all  $\mathbf{x}$  is zero. Note that the average of the slopes is done over a circle of radius  $\epsilon$ . This new field  $\omega_\epsilon(\mathbf{x})$  has several interesting properties, like isotropy and robustness to measurement artifacts. The maps of  $\omega_\epsilon$  calculated from the off-plane height maps  $h$  shown in Fig. 1 are represented in the lower panels in the same figure. Strikingly, the largest values of  $\omega_\epsilon$  (lighter gray), corresponding to the steep cliffs that populate the tails of the distribution  $p(\delta h|\delta r)$ , are spatially correlated and form a network of rough lines for the aluminum and the mortar fracture surfaces. For the ceramic fracture surface, smaller patterns are visible.

The visually correlated patterns in Fig. 1 can be quantified by computing the spatial correlations of  $\omega_\epsilon$ , which we further average over all directions [14], i.e.,  $C_\epsilon(\delta r) = \langle \omega_\epsilon(\mathbf{x}) \omega_\epsilon(\mathbf{x} + \delta\mathbf{x}) \rangle_{\mathbf{x}, |\delta\mathbf{x}|=\delta r}$ . This quantity is shown in Fig. 3 as a function of the distance  $\delta r$  for different observation scales  $\epsilon$ ;  $C_\epsilon(\delta r)$  is independent of  $\epsilon$  whenever  $\epsilon \ll \delta r$ . For the three materials considered, we clearly observe two regimes. At small  $\delta r$ ,  $\omega_\epsilon$  shows strong spatial correlations, which decay logarithmically with distance, i.e.,  $C_\epsilon(\delta r) \sim -\lambda \log(\delta r/\xi)$ , and extrapolates to zero for  $\delta r = \xi$ . For larger distances, these correlations are zero within statistical noise. Both  $\lambda$  and  $\xi$  are found to be, to a good approximation, independent of  $\epsilon$  provided  $\epsilon \ll \xi$ . Note that  $\lambda$  is a dimensionless number and its value is empirically found to be quite similar for the three materials at hand:  $0.21 \pm 0.02$  (aluminum),  $0.15 \pm 0.03$  (mortar), and  $0.15 \pm 0.06$  (ceramics). The crossover length  $\xi$  is found to be  $170 \pm 12$ ,  $430 \pm 35$ , and  $50 \pm 9 \mu\text{m}$ , respectively. Note that the ratio of  $\xi$  to the total map size is 0.06, 0.02,

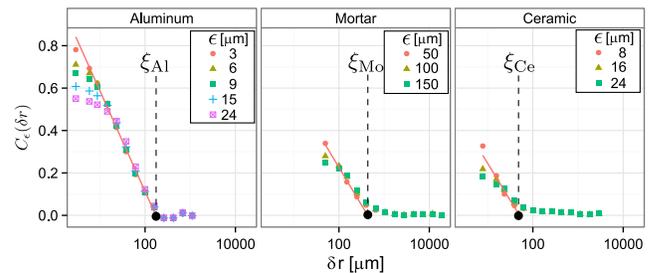


FIG. 3 (color online). Spatial correlations of  $\omega_\epsilon$  for the three materials considered. The correlations are represented for  $\omega_\epsilon$  computed at different scales  $\epsilon$ . The cutoff length  $\xi$  is represented for each case.

and 0.006, respectively. These last values confirm the visual impression conveyed by Fig. 1 where large correlated patterns are observed for aluminum, smaller patterns for mortar, and even smaller ones for ceramics.

In order to characterize further the two regimes, we now compute the multifractal spectrum of the height fluctuations, defined through  $\langle |\delta h(\mathbf{x}, \delta \mathbf{x})|^q \rangle_{\mathbf{x}, |\delta \mathbf{x}| = \delta r} \sim \delta r^{\zeta_q}$  for the two ranges of length scales  $\delta r < \xi$  and  $\delta r > \xi$ . Note that the standard roughness exponent  $\zeta$  corresponds to  $q = 2$ , and  $\zeta \equiv \zeta_2/2$ . For  $\delta r > \xi$ , we observe that  $\zeta_q/q$  is fairly independent of  $q$  with a value around 0.45 (see the rhs of Fig. 4). This corresponds to a monoaffine behavior, i.e. a scaling that preserves the shape of the full distribution  $p(\delta h|\delta r)$  of height fluctuations. This is consistent with the observation of a conserved Gaussian distribution at large scales (see Fig. 2), and is in agreement with previous findings [10,16,17]. The monoaffine behavior is very clear for the mortar and the ceramic fracture surface. For the aluminum fracture surface, some residual variations of  $\zeta_q/q$  with  $q$  are observed; this behavior may be due to the rather limited extension of the large scale regime  $\delta r > \xi$ .

For  $\delta r < \xi$ , on the other hand, we do observe a significant variation of  $\zeta_q/q$  with  $q$ , as reported in former studies [18,19]. This multi-affine behavior can in fact be traced back to the logarithmic decay of the spatial correlations  $C_\epsilon(\delta r)$  of the slopes discussed above. Indeed, assuming that  $\omega_\epsilon$  is a Gaussian field, and that the local slope can be written as  $\delta h(\mathbf{x}, \delta \mathbf{x}) = e^{\omega_\epsilon(\mathbf{x})} s_\epsilon(\mathbf{x})$  with  $|\delta \mathbf{x}| = \epsilon$ , and  $s_\epsilon(\mathbf{x})$  is a long ranged correlated random variable with unit variance and  $\langle s_\epsilon(\mathbf{x}) s_\epsilon(\mathbf{x} + \delta \mathbf{y}) \rangle_{\mathbf{x}, |\delta \mathbf{y}| = \delta r} \sim |\delta r|^{-\gamma}$ , one derives, adapting the calculations of Ref. [20] (see the Supplemental Material [21])

$$\zeta_q = q \left( H - (q-1) \frac{\lambda}{2} \right) \quad \text{with} \quad H \equiv \zeta_1 = \left( 1 - \frac{\gamma}{2} \right), \quad (2)$$

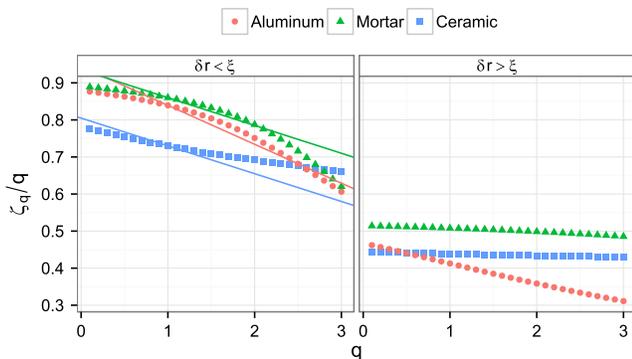


FIG. 4 (color online). Multifractal spectrum of the fracture surfaces. The spectrum is computed both below (left) and above  $\xi$  (right). The spectrum predicted for  $\delta r < \xi$  by the multifractal model of Eq. (2) is represented by a straight line.

where  $\lambda$  is the slope of the logarithmic correlation defined above. As seen in the lhs of Fig. 4, where the predictions of Eq. (2) are represented by straight lines, the slope of the multifractal spectrum is indeed well captured by this simple model. We have measured the exponent  $\gamma$  independently, from the spatial correlations of the signs of the local slopes in a given direction, with good agreement with the direct estimate of  $H$ , in particular for aluminum where the scaling region is large. We therefore claim that fracture surfaces are, on short length scales, bidimensional realizations of multifractal, persistent Brownian motions. Whereas natural realizations of multifractal Brownian motions with  $H \leq 1/2$  have been reported in turbulent flows ( $H \approx 1/3$ ) [11] and in financial time series ( $H \approx 1/2$ ) [20], it is to our knowledge the first time that a multifractal signal with  $H > 1/2$  has been observed. The curvature of the multifractal spectrum seen in Fig. 4 cannot be captured by Eq. (2). This can be traced back to the assumption that  $\omega_\epsilon$  is a Gaussian field. Introducing nontrivial higher order correlations of  $\omega_\epsilon$  that also decay logarithmically would add higher order contributions to  $\zeta_q$ . However, these higher order correlations are difficult to measure and we lack statistics to test the model beyond the second order correlations reported here [22].

To characterize further the spatial organization of the steepest regions and its robustness towards material specificity, we study the geometrical properties of the clusters formed by the largest values of  $\omega_\epsilon$ , i.e. the ridge of the cliffs. The field  $\omega_\epsilon$  is thresholded in order to keep only a fraction  $p_{th}$ . These extreme events organize in a network of disconnected clusters, as suggested by the bottom of Fig. 1 (see also Fig. 1 of the Supplemental Material [21]). The extension  $\ell$  of each cluster can be defined using either its extension along the horizontal or vertical axis, or its radius of gyration  $R_g$ . These three quantities are found to follow the same scaling  $S \sim \ell^D$  with the number of pixels (or area)  $S$  contained by the cluster, suggesting that these clusters have a fractal geometry with dimension  $D \approx 1.70 \pm 0.15$ , again independently of the material considered (see the Supplemental Material [21]). We show in Fig. 5 the distribution of cluster sizes for different values of the

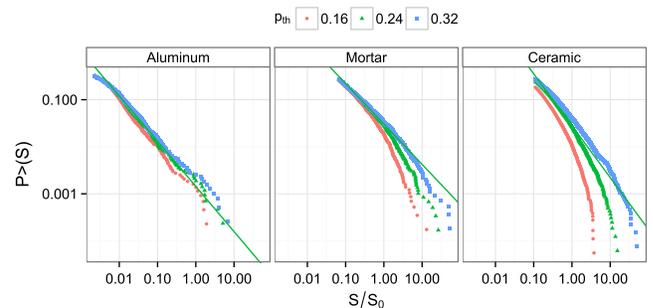


FIG. 5 (color online). Cumulative distribution function  $P_>(S)$  of cluster size for different thresholds  $p_{th}$ . The normalization factor  $S_0$  is the average size of a cluster with a gyration radius equal to  $\xi$ .

TABLE I. Statistical parameters extracted from the fracture surfaces (see text for details).

	$\lambda$	$D$	$\tau$	$\xi$
Aluminum	$0.21 \pm 0.02$	$1.68 \pm 0.10$	$0.96 \pm 0.1$	$170 \pm 12 \mu\text{m}$
Mortar	$0.15 \pm 0.03$	$1.73 \pm 0.08$	$0.86 \pm 0.1$	$430 \pm 35 \mu\text{m}$
Ceramics	$0.15 \pm 0.06$	$1.74 \pm 0.12$	$1.1 \pm 0.2$	$50 \pm 9 \mu\text{m}$

threshold  $p_{\text{th}}$ . For clusters of scales smaller than  $\xi$ , we observe a power law for the cumulative distribution function  $P_{>}(S) \sim S^{-\tau}$  with exponent  $\tau \approx 1.0 \pm 0.2$  for all three materials [23]. This means that not only the roughness exponent  $\zeta$  but at least three other quantities describing the statistics of fracture surfaces are universal in the small  $\delta r$  regime:  $\lambda$ , which describes the spatial correlations of the amplitude of slopes and the multifractal spectrum,  $D$ , which is the fractal dimension of the ridge of the cliffs on the fracture surface, and  $\tau$ , which characterizes the cluster size distribution (see Table I for a comparison of their values from one material to another). This extended universality is important for at least two reasons: (i) it provides additional support for the conjecture that the statistics of fracture surfaces is universal, suggesting a common underlying roughening mechanism, and (ii) it provides important further constraints that must be abided by in any theory attempting to explain the universal value of the roughness exponent  $\zeta \approx 0.75$  [6,7].

What is the physical interpretation of these observations? We believe that the presence of spatially correlated steep cliffs on short length scales  $\delta r < \xi$  is a strong indication that at these scales, fracture proceeds through the nucleation and coalescence of microcracks or damage cavities, as previously conjectured [24–27]. As elaborated in the context an estimate of planar cracks [28,29], the scale  $\xi$  therefore provides the extent  $\ell_{\text{pz}}$  of the fracture process zone [30]. It also reflects the material toughness, since  $K_{\text{Ic}} \approx \sigma_c \sqrt{\ell_{\text{pz}}}$ , where  $\sigma_c$  is the typical failure stress under tension [31]. Our methodology based on the correlation of slopes measured on the fracture surfaces therefore paves the way for a postmortem characterization of material toughness from the statistical analysis of their fragments [32].

Although this is still an open theoretical issue, the percolation of power law distributed microcracks should provide a rationale for the value of the small scale roughness exponent  $\zeta \approx 0.75$ . Discontinuities along the fracture surface are the stigma of these coalescing cavities [33] and this picture should be made compatible with values of the new, universal statistical indicators reported here, namely  $\lambda$ ,  $D$ , and  $\tau$ . Only on large length scales  $\delta r > \xi$  does the notion of a continuous fracture line make sense. Continuum fracture mechanics based models describing crack fronts as an elastic interface driven in a random medium [8,17,26,34–38] predict monoaffine Gaussian fracture surfaces with  $\zeta \approx 0.4$  [8,17], indeed compatible with our findings.

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