Probing models of minimal swimming vehicles in vivo with microalgal phototaxis.

David Colliaux¹, Lia Giraud², Claude Yéprémian³, Pierre Bessière¹ and Jacques Droulez¹

¹ISIR, UMR7222 CNRS/Paris-Sorbonne University, Paris
²SACRe Ph.D candidate, PSL Research University, EnsadLab and LCLCP-UMR 7574, Paris
³CCE, UMR 7245 CNRS/Musée National d’Histoire Naturelle, Paris
david.colliaux@isir.upmc.fr

Abstract

We divert an experimental device from its artistic purpose to test the properties of minimal sensorimotor loops resulting in phototactic behaviour. The study of microalgae like Euglena or Chlamydomonas is coupled with a modeling effort to characterize the swimming behaviour.

The microalgae Chlamydomonas Reinhardtii has been proven to be a useful model organism for photosynthesis or cilia physiology. Based on recent studies of its swimming behaviour from Goldstein (2015), experimental measurement of phototaxis and mathematical model for the dynamics of the cell density, we propose that it also provides a framework to study sensorimotor loops. The ability of Chlamydomonas to move toward or to escape from a source is a minimal biological example of vehicule behaviour as in Braitenberg (1986).

Figure 1: Phototactic behaviour: Left Picture of the Petri dish after 20 minutes illumination by a centered disk of light. Middle Time course of the cell density as reflected by the pixel intensity depending on the distance from the center. Right Cell density as a function of the radius (± std) at various times marked on the time course.

Macroscopic measures of phototaxis.

The illumination of a culture of Chlamydomonas in a Petri dish generates changes in the density of cells. In the example of figure 1, the moderate light stimulation at the center (5mm disk) results in accumulation of the cell at the lightened area. With the time lapse record of the Petri dish (12fps), it is possible to characterize the dynamics of phototaxis and to track the spatial profile of cell density as reflected by the pixel intensity (not that the decrease in cell density outside of the lightened spot is barely visible).

Microscopic mechanisms and cell density dynamics.

Intracellular fluctuations modulated by the light intensity generate reorientations of the helical swimming trajectory of the cell by desynchronization of the 2 flagella at random times with a higher rate when the cell is far from the light source. The microscopic components and simulations snapshots of the resulting biased random walk are illustrated on figure 2.

Figure 2: Up-left Flagella configurations for synchronized (red) and desynchronized state (blue). Up-middle Simulation of stochastic coupled oscillators (Adler model similar to Goldstein (2015)). Up-right Sample trajectory of an algae moving to the light source (yellow spot), combining run and tumble trajectory and helical motion. Bottom Density of a population initialized with Gaussian distribution moving toward a light source.

Interacting with a microalgae population is thus a way to characterize its sensorimotor loop.

References
