Bio-inspired Min-Nets Improve the Performance and Robustness of Deep Networks

Abstract

Min-Nets are inspired by end-stopped cortical cells with units that output the minimum of two learned filters. We insert such min-units into state-of-the art deep networks, such as the popular ResNet and DenseNet, and show that the resulting Min-Nets perform better on the Cifar-10 benchmark. Moreover, we show that Min-Nets are more robust against JPEG compression artifacts. We argue that the minimum operation is the simplest way of implementing an AND operation on pairs of filters, and that such AND operations introduce a bias that is appropriate given the statistics of natural images.

1 Introduction

We present a novel network-architecture that is based on the AND combination of pairs of linear filters. The linear filters in deep networks can be considered as basic measurements of the input signal, each filter capturing signal energy along some relevant direction in feature space. In differential geometry, the basic measurements are the main curvatures. In case of 2-dimensional manifolds, it is known that the structure of the manifold is captured by the Gaussian curvature, which is the product of the main curvatures (do Carmo (1976)). In higher dimensions, the Riemann curvature tensor captures the structure of the manifold and it is based on sums of products of main curvatures (OR combinations of pairwise AND combinations). Inspired by differential geometry, in computer vision, different algorithms have been designed to capture interest points in images, for example, by analysing the invariants and eigenvalues of the Hessian or of the structure tensor (Guiducci (1988); Jähne (1995)). Both the product and the minimum of the eigenvalues have been used for the detection of interest points (Shi & Tomasi (1994)).

In related work on FP-nets (Anonymous (2021)) the AND operation has been implemented by using explicit multiplications. FP-nets have been shown to improve the performance of state-of-the art networks. Moreover, FP-units are hyper-selective (for more information on hyper-selectivity, see (Paiton et al. (2020)) and (Vilankar & Field (2017))) and thus more robust against compression artifacts and adversarial attacks (Anonymous (2021)). As an alternative to the computationally more intensive multiplications, the log-nets introduced in Grüning et al. (2020) are more efficient by using convolutions in log-space. However, the main feature of both the FP-nets and the log-nets is that the networks learn appropriate filter pairs to be AND-combined.

FP-nets and the here proposed Min-Nets are inspired by what is known about biological vision since the seminal work of Hubel and Wiesel (Hubel & Wiesel (1965)). They discovered oriented neurons in primary visual cortex V1, but also end-stopped cells in V1 and V2. End-stopped cells extract features such as corners and line ends, provide an efficient representation of the visual input, and can be modelled as AND combinations of linear, oriented filters (Zetzsche & Barth (1990)). Motion

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selective neurons have also been modelled by using AND combinations of linear spatio-temporal filters based on the Riemann tensor (Barth & Watson (2000)).

The question of why end-stopped neurons and AND combinations of linear filters are useful for vision can be answered based on the statistics of natural images. A first useful bias is due to the fact that 0D-features, i.e., local image patches of uniform intensity or color, are both redundant and frequent in natural images. Therefore, a representation of images in terms of edges is efficient, it reduces the entropy of the representation. 1D-features such as straight edges and lines, however, are also redundant and more frequent in natural images than 2D-features, such as curved edges and corners. Therefore, a representation provided by end-stopped units is more efficient than one provided by oriented filters. Details on the above summarized statistics, and on why AND combinations are needed to exploit them, can be found in Zetzsche et al. (1993).

However, we do not assume that real neurons would compute ideal multiplications and strict minimum operations, but that they may approximate such operations in some way and thus generate AND combinations of filters instead of just using point-wise non-linearities (see also Paiton et al. (2020) regarding the limits of point-wise non-linearities). Here, we present the novel Min-Net architecture that implements the minimum operation as the simplest kind of AND operation on pairs of learned filters. Moreover, minimum operations are faster than multiplications and make training easier due to more conservative gradients.

2 Methods

Min-Nets are CNNs containing a certain number of Min-Blocks that process an input Tensor $\mathbf{T}_0$ and, via a sequence of different layers, transform them to a tensor $\mathbf{T}_{out}$. The block structure resembles the inverted residual block of the well-known MobileNet-V2 (Sandler et al. (2018)) architecture, with the important extension that it contains two filter operation that are combined by a minimum operation. In short, the block consists of (i) a convolution layer with kernel size one, batch normalization and ReLU, increasing the number of input feature maps, (ii) two depth-wise separable (DWS) convolutions each learning one filter per feature map with instance normalization and ReLU, the outputs of which are element-wise combined by the minimum function, (iii) a second 1×1-convolution with batch normalization and ReLU, recombining the outputs of (ii) to the desired number of feature maps and, finally (iv) a residual connection. The next subsection gives a more detailed description.

2.1 Min-blocks

First, qd_{out} feature maps are computed as weighted sums of the d feature maps of $\mathbf{T}_0 \in \mathbb{R}^{h \times w \times d}$. q is an expansion factor and d_{out} the desired number of output feature maps. Thus, a convolution layer with kernel size one, and subsequent ReLU, computes the (i, j)-th pixel of the m-th feature map as:

$$\mathbf{T}_1[i, j, m] = ReLU(\sum_{n=1}^{d_{in}} w_m^n \mathbf{T}_0[i, j, n]); m = 1, ..., qd_{out}. \tag{1}$$

Note that $\mathbf{T}_1$ is subsequently normalized via batch normalization. Next, two DWS convolutions are applied: for each feature map $\mathbf{T}_1^m$ a filter-pair $\mathbf{v_m}$ and $\mathbf{g_m}$ is learned. For each pixel (i, j), the filter operation computes the scalar product of the filter vectors and the vectorized feature map patch $\mathbf{x}_m \in \mathbb{R}^{k^2}$ with (i, j) being the pixel-coordinates of the center pixel. Subsequently, instance normalization (Ulyanov et al. (2016)) is applied with μ_{v_m} and σ_{v_m} being the mean and standard deviation of the feature map $\mathbf{T}_1^m$ filtered with $\mathbf{v}_m$. Again, a ReLU is applied afterwards. Using the min-function, we combine these two intermediate outputs to $\mathbf{T}_2 \in \mathbb{R}^{\frac{h}{s} \times \frac{w}{s} \times qd_{out}}$, s being the stride of the DWS-convolution that allows for subsampling. The min-unit, as the main building block of the proposed network, is defined as:

$$\mathbf{T}_2[i, j, m] = \min \left[\frac{ReLU(\mathbf{x_m}^T \mathbf{v_m} - \mu_{v_m})}{\sigma_{v_m}}, \frac{ReLU(\mathbf{g_m}^T \mathbf{x_m} - \mu_{g_m})}{\sigma_{g_m}} \right]. \tag{2}$$

Note that such a min-unit, or min-neuron, will have a significant output only if both filters $\mathbf{v_m}$ and $\mathbf{g_m}$ are activated.

A second linear recombination with ReLU and batch normalization (see Equation 1) creates the tensor $\mathbf{T}_3 \in \mathbb{R}^{\frac{h}{s} \times \frac{w}{s} \times d_{out}}$. Finally, a residual connection adds the original input to $\mathbf{T}_3$:

$$\mathbf{T}_{out} = \mathbf{T}_0 + \mathbf{T}_3. \tag{3}$$

Some additional computations need to be applied if the dimensions of $\mathbf{T}_0$ and $\mathbf{T}_3$ do not match. See the Appendix for details.

2.2 Transforming state-of-the-art CNNs to Min-Nets

In our experiments, we evaluate how the addition of Min-blocks changes the performance of state-of-the-art CNNs. Networks such as the DenseNet (Huang et al. (2017)) and the ResNet (He et al. (2016)) have a similar overall structure: after an initial convolution layer, the networks consists of several *stacks* that are larger structures containing a number of *blocks*. Analogously, a block contains a number of *layers*, for example, convolutions, batch normalization, and non-linearities. After the last stack, global average pooling is applied with a subsequent linear layer and softmax to compute the class probabilities. Stacks are separated by a downsampling layer (strided convolution or a max-pooling layer), except for the first stack after the initial convolution. When applied to smaller datasets, e.g., Cifar, both the DenseNet and ResNet consist of three stacks, containing N blocks each, with the input heights and widths 32×32, 16×16, and 8×8. Thus, only the second and third stack employ downsampling. We use a simple design rule to enrich these architectures with blocks that directly compute pairwise AND-combinations: *Each first block of a stack is substituted by a Min-block.* Note that this approach was derived empirically. In preceding experiments, other combinations of Min-blocks and convolutional blocks were tested but yielded somewhat inferior results. We chose a ResNet implementation that uses pyramid blocks (Han et al. (2017)) since it performs better than the original ResNet and is currently often used for different applications. Here, the sequence of layers consists of batch normalization, 3×3 convolution, batch normalization, ReLU, 3×3 convolution, and batch normalization. The sequence output is added to the original input of the block. As a second reference network, we use the DenseNet-BC. In this architecture, each so-called bottleneck block consists of batch normalization, ReLU, and a 1×1 convolution layer, followed by a second batch normalization and ReLU and a 3×3 convolution layer.

2.3 Hyper-selectivity

CNNs employ linear neurons with points-wise non-linearities, i.e., a ReLU that is applied to each pixel independently. Thus, the direction of maximal activation, i.e., the optimal stimulus, $\mathbf{x}^*$ points in the same direction as the neuron's weight vector $\mathbf{w}$. Any deviation $\mathbf{o}$ orthogonal to the optimal stimulus does not alter the neuron's output: $ReLU(\mathbf{w}^T(\mathbf{x}^* + \mathbf{o})) = ReLU(\mathbf{w}^T\mathbf{x}^*)$. In contrast, a neuron $f(\mathbf{x})$ is hyper-selective, if there exist orthogonal perturbations, that reduce the output:

$$\text{f is hyper-selective} \Leftrightarrow \exists \mathbf{o} : f(\mathbf{x}^* + \mathbf{o}) < f(\mathbf{x}^*); \mathbf{x}^{*T}\mathbf{o} = 0 \tag{4}$$

For a min-neuron (see Equation 2), the optimal stimulus is the bisector of the angle γ between the filter vectors $\mathbf{v}$ and $\mathbf{g}$. Any perturbation within the plane spanned by $\mathbf{v}$ and $\mathbf{g}$ that is orthogonal to the optimal stimulus reduces the neuron's output, because one of the scalar products is smaller than it would be without the perturbation, e.g., $\mathbf{v}^T(\mathbf{x}^* + \mathbf{o}) < \mathbf{v}^T\mathbf{x}^*$. Hyper-selective neurons are harder to activate by signals that differ from the optimal stimulus. Thus, unwanted perturbations, such as those due to adversarial examples (Szegedy et al. (2013); Goodfellow et al. (2014)) or compression artifacts, have a smaller impact on the neuron's – and consequently, the whole network's – output.

3 Experiments

We hypothesize that Min-Nets introduce an useful inductive bias to a CNN architecture: the minimum of a learned filter-pair, a min-neuron, explicitly models end-stopped neurons and leads to efficient representations, which are adapted to the statistics of natural images, thus leading to better generalization. Furthermore, unlike traditional model neurons, min-neurons are hyper-selective, a property that should make them more robust, e.g., to compression artifacts. We've run two experiments to investigate these conjectures.

3.1 Classification performance on Cifar-10

We compared models with different depths created from two reference network architectures: the ResNet and the DenseNet. For each model, we created a Min-Net version using our design rule. We compared models with different depths, defined by the number of blocks per stack. For the ResNets, we created models with $N \in \{3, 5, 7, 9\}$ blocks. We trained DenseNets with $N \in \{3, 9, 16\}$ blocks and a growth-rate $k = 12$, corresponding to networks ($L = 22, k = 12$), ($L = 58, k = 12$), and ($L = 100, k = 12$) in the DenseNet paper's naming convention. For all models, we set the expansion factor $q = 2$ and we trained and tested the models on Cifar-10 (Krizhevsky et al. (2021)) with a standard procedure for data augmentation (see Appendix). Each ResNet was trained for 200 epochs with a learning rate of 0.1, a weight decay of 0.0001, and using SGD with a momentum of 0.9. The batch size was 128. After 100 and 150 epochs, the learning rate was divided by 10. Each net was trained for five random seeds, altering the batch order and random initialization. We trained the DenseNets for 300 epochs, where the initial learning rate of 0.1 was divided by ten after 150 and 225 epochs. Instead of 128, a batch size of 64 was used. In addition, we used the Nesterov momentum. We trained each network with three different random seeds. All other parameters were equal to the ResNet experiments. Note that we did not employ an early stopping strategy, but rather report the final test results after 200 or 300 epochs, respectively.

3.2 Robustness to compression artifacts

Since Min-Nets have neurons that are hyper-selective, on can expect the networks to be more robust against perturbations. To evaluate robustness, in a second experiment, each model trained in the first experiment was tested on JPEG-compressed versions of the Cifar-10 test set $\mathcal{X}_{test}$. We created nine sets $\mathcal{S}_Q = \{JPEG(\mathbf{I}, Q) : \mathbf{I} \in \mathcal{X}_{test}\}$ with quality $Q \in \{90, 80, ..., 10\}$, $JPEG(\mathbf{I}, Q)$ being the compression function for an input image $\mathbf{I}$. For $Q = 100$, the original image is returned (no compression); $Q = 1$ would yield maximal compression with images that are barely recognizable (see Figure 4 in the Appendix for examples). As robustness metric, we report the percentage of changed predictions (POCP), i.e., we compared the model's predictions ($f(\mathbf{I})$) with full quality to the predictions on $\mathcal{S}_Q$ and computed the number of changed predictions divided by the number of images (see Eq. 5 in the Appendix). Using this metric, we avoid offsets introduced by models with lower test errors. We used the JPEG algorithm from the OpenCV (Bradski (2000)) library.

4 Results

The Cifar-10 test errors of each model are shown in Figure 1. Note that, in all configurations, the Min-Net has a lower mean test error than the corresponding baseline networks while using fewer parameters.

Next, we analyse the robustness of the networks. Figure 2 shows the POCP (Equation 5) for the quality levels $Q = 90, 80, 70, 60$. Compared to the ResNet and DenseNet, the Min-Nets are less likely to change their output when presented with compressed images. However, even the more robust Min-Nets remain sensitive to compression artifacts given that 8% of the predictions change with a slightly altered test set (such as $\mathcal{S}_{90}$).

5 Discussion

We have presented a novel network architecture and have demonstrated its competitive performance. We have designed experiments with state-of-the-art and popular deep networks and showed that we could improve their performance by substituting original blocks in the network architecture with Min-blocks that implement a minimum operation on pairs of feature maps. Note that by using a simple design rule, any traditional network can easily be transformed into an Min-Net that will most likely perform better. Also note that we did not tune hyperparameters specific to the Min-Nets but used the hyperparameters of the original networks; additional tuning may thus lead to even better performance of the Min-Nets.

We belief that a bias that is appropriate for natural images leads to the improvements that we have obtained. As argued in the Introduction, this bias allows the network to learn more efficient representations based on model neurons that are end-stopped.

(a) ResNet

(b) DenseNet

Figure 1: Cifar-10 test error results. Black dashed lines show the baseline results – solid blue lines the Min-Net results. Each diamond denotes the mean error of a model with a specific number of blocks. The error bars indicate the standard deviation of each model. The colored areas show the distance between the minimum- and maximum values. The x-axis shows the number of parameters, increasing with the number of blocks. The y-axis is the test error after 200 and 300 epochs for the ResNets (a) and DenseNets (b), respectively.

(a) ResNet

(b) DenseNet

Figure 2: POCP depending on JPEG quality: the x-axis shows the quality parameter Q for the JPEG compression algorithm (which can vary from 100 to 1). The y-axis denotes, in relative terms, how many predictions were different from the original predictions (with $Q = 100$) when using a more compressed test set.

175 The pairwise minimum operations that we introduce allow for AND rather than OR combinations
176 of features and make the resulting neurons more selective than linear filters with only point-wise
177 non-linearities. The demonstrated increased robustness of the Min-Nets is most likely due to the fact
178 that Min-units are hyperselective. It has been argued before that hyperselectivity might be the key to
179 greater robustness (Paiton et al. (2020)).

180 In previous work, similar results have been obtained with Log-nets and FP-nets where logarithms and
181 feature products have been used instead of the minimum. This shows that the key to the improvements
182 demonstrated here is mainly the AND combination of filters pairs and less the way in which the
183 AND is implemented. Nevertheless, we are looking forward to more general and even more effective
184 network architectures that may emerge based on the principle of using the minimum activation in
185 different feature maps.

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A Appendix

A.1 Residual connections

If a stride of two is used ($s = 2$), average pooling with a kernel size of two and stride of two is applied to $\mathbf{T}_0$. If d is smaller than d_{out}, $\mathbf{T}_0$ is padded with $(d_{out} - d)$ all-zero feature maps. If d is larger than d_{out}, a linear recombination without ReLU and batch normalization computes a reduced version of $\mathbf{T}_0$ with d_{out} feature maps.

A.2 Data augmentation

During training, the images were flipped horizontally with a 50% chance. Furthermore, they were padded with four pixels on each side and randomly cropped using a 32×32 window. We normalized each channel of an input image by subtracting the channel's mean pixel and dividing by the standard deviation, all derived from the training set.

A.3 Percentage of changed predictions

We computed the POCP depending on Q like this:

$$\text{POCP}(f, Q) = \frac{1}{|\mathcal{X}_{C10}|} \sum_{\mathbf{I} \in \mathcal{X}_{C10}} \mathbb{1}(f(\mathbf{I}) \neq f(JPEG(\mathbf{I}, Q))); \tag{5}$$

$\mathbb{1}(S)$ returns a 1 if S is true, as 0 otherwise.

A.4 Technical details for training

All experiments were conducted with Pytorch (BSD license) (Paszke et al. (2019)) version "1.9.0+cu102", on a standard computer running on Linux using Nvidia RTX 2080 GPUs with CUDA version 11.2. Training a DenseNet ($L = 100, k = 12$) took roughly 21 hours, training a ResNet ($N = 9$) 3 hours. The code creating the ResNet was adapted from Idelbayev (2020) (BSD 2-Clause "Simplified" License) and from Han et al. (2017)code[1]. We adapted the DenseNet code[2] from Pleiss et al. (2017) (MIT License). OpenCV uses the Apache 2 license.

A.5 Additional results: Densenet

Table 1 shows additional results for the DenseNet models on the Cifar-10 classification task. When regarding minimal errors over all epochs, i.e., the best result with early stopping, we obtained similar results for the DenseNet ($L = 100, k = 12$) as reported in the original paper (4.51%): the minimum error reached by the baseline DenseNet was 4.56% and 4.36% for the Min-Net.

A.6 Additional results: JPEG compression

Figure 3 shows the Cifar-10 test errors depending on the Q value. Note that these plots only provide the results for $Q = 100, 90, ..., 60$, and only for the largest models of each experiment (ResNet: $N = 9$, DenseNet: $k = 12, L = 100$). The results for $Q = 100, 90, ..., 10$ and for all models are given in the Tables 2,3, 4, and 5. Table 2 shows the test error values for the DenseNet experiment and Table 3 shows the POCP. The test error and POCP for the ResNet experiments are given in the Tables 4 and 5, respectively. An example image compressed with different Q-values is shown in Figure 4.

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[1] https://github.com/dyhan0920/PyramidNet-PyTorch
[2] https://github.com/gpleiss/efficient_densenet_pytorch

Model	k	# Parameters	L	After 300 epochs				Min. over all epochs			
				mean	std	min	max	mean	std	min	max
Min-Net	12	751786	100	4.55	0.14	4.39	4.64	4.51	0.13	4.36	4.59
DenseNet	12	769162	100	4.79	0.06	4.74	4.86	4.62	0.06	4.56	4.66
Min-Net	12	298564	58	5.67	0.07	5.62	5.75	5.51	0.07	5.46	5.59
DenseNet	12	314470	58	5.90	0.30	5.72	6.25	5.65	0.14	5.51	5.78
Min-Net	12	57040	22	9.22	0.17	9.03	9.33	8.78	0.10	8.72	8.89
DenseNet	12	71686	22	9.76	0.19	9.57	9.94	9.39	0.13	9.27	9.52

Table 1: Classification results for the DenseNet experiment.

Model	L	k	Q=100%	90%	80%	70%	60%	50%	40%	30%	20%	10%
DenseNet	22	12	9.8	15.4	20.0	24.0	27.6	30.8	34.6	39.5	47.8	64.6
DenseNet	58	12	5.9	10.9	15.7	20.0	24.3	27.3	31.3	36.4	45.9	63.0
DenseNet	100	12	4.8	9.9	14.6	19.1	22.8	25.9	30.1	35.2	44.5	62.6
Min-Net	22	12	9.2	14.9	19.5	23.2	26.4	29.5	32.5	37.5	44.9	60.3
Min-Net	58	12	5.7	10.4	15.0	19.0	22.6	25.4	28.6	34.0	43.1	62.5
Min-Net	100	12	4.6	8.8	13.6	17.2	20.9	23.8	27.6	33.1	42.5	61.4

Table 2: DenseNet: Mean test error on Cifar-10 for JPEG-compressed test sets $\mathcal{S}_Q$

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Model	L	k	Q=90%	80%	70%	60%	50%	40%	30%	20%	10%
DenseNet	22	12	12.1	17.6	21.9	25.8	29.3	33.4	38.3	46.8	64.2
DenseNet	58	12	9.2	14.7	19.3	23.5	26.4	30.5	35.7	45.3	62.7
DenseNet	100	12	8.1	13.5	18.2	21.9	25.1	29.3	34.8	44.1	62.6
Min-DenseNet	22	12	11.7	16.9	21.4	24.8	28.0	31.2	36.3	43.9	60.0
Min-DenseNet	58	12	8.3	13.7	17.8	21.6	24.6	27.9	33.5	42.5	62.4
Min-DenseNet	100	12	7.3	12.4	16.3	20.1	23.2	27.1	32.6	42.1	61.4

Table 3: DenseNet: Mean number of changed predictions on Cifar-10 for JPEG-compressed test sets $\mathcal{S}_Q$

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Model	N	100%	90%	80%	70%	60%	50%	40%	30%	20%	10%
Min-Net	3	8.0	12.5	16.7	20.2	23.5	26.2	29.3	34.1	42.5	59.1
Min-Net	5	6.9	11.3	15.1	18.7	22.0	24.9	27.9	33.4	42.3	59.2
Min-Net	7	6.2	10.6	14.6	17.9	21.5	24.5	27.7	32.8	42.2	59.9
Min-Net	9	6.0	10.1	14.4	18.0	21.4	24.2	27.4	32.7	41.7	58.8
ResNet	3	8.3	13.2	17.4	21.0	24.5	27.6	31.1	36.0	44.1	59.8
ResNet	5	7.2	11.8	16.3	20.0	23.6	26.6	30.0	35.4	44.0	59.6
ResNet	7	6.8	11.4	15.9	19.2	22.9	26.3	29.7	35.0	43.7	60.1
ResNet	9	6.3	10.9	15.3	19.0	22.4	25.6	29.2	34.5	43.4	59.1

Table 4: ResNet: Mean test error on Cifar-10 for JPEG-compressed test sets $\mathcal{S}_Q$

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(a) ResNet

(b) DenseNet

Figure 3: Cifar-10 test error depending on the compression quality.

Model	N	90%	80%	70%	60%	50%	40%	30%	20%	10%
Min-Net	3	9.5	14.5	18.4	21.8	24.7	28.0	33.1	41.8	58.8
Min-Net	5	8.5	13.2	17.1	20.6	23.7	26.8	32.5	41.6	58.8
Min-Net	7	8.1	12.8	16.7	20.3	23.3	26.6	32.0	41.4	59.7
Min-Net	9	7.8	12.6	16.6	20.2	23.0	26.3	31.7	40.9	58.5
ResNet	3	10.1	15.1	19.3	22.9	26.2	29.9	34.8	43.3	59.3
ResNet	5	9.4	14.4	18.6	22.3	25.5	29.1	34.5	43.2	59.3
ResNet	7	8.9	14.0	17.9	21.8	25.1	28.8	34.2	43.1	59.8
ResNet	9	8.5	13.6	17.6	21.1	24.5	28.2	33.6	42.7	58.7

Table 5: ResNet: Mean number of changed predictions on Cifar-10 for JPEG-compressed test sets $\mathcal{S}_Q$

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Figure 4: JPEG-compression example for different Q values.