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(54) **EXPOSURE SELECTOR FOR HIGH-DYNAMIC RANGE IMAGING AND ASSOCIATED METHOD**

(52) **U.S. CL.**
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(57) **ABSTRACT**

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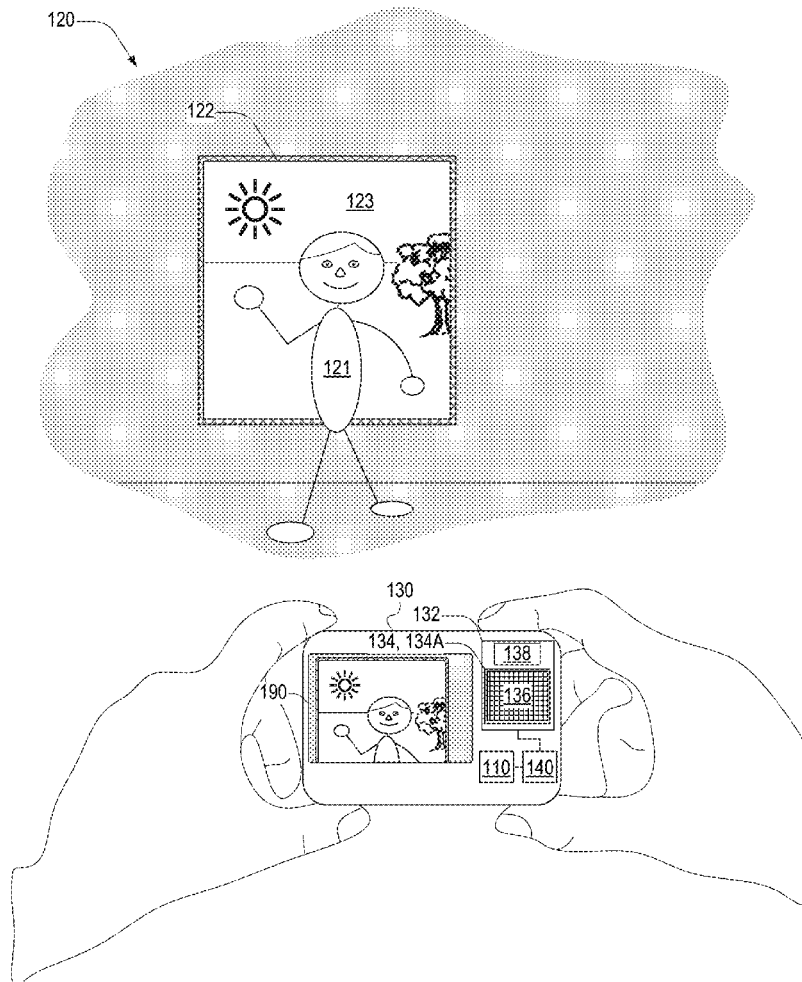
A method for generating an HDR image includes (i) generating, from a plurality of single-exposure images of a scene, having a respective one of a plurality of exposure values, a sharpness map of sharpness values of the single-exposure images, and (ii) generating, from the plurality of single-exposure images, an exposure-value map of composite exposure values of the single-exposure images. The method also includes (iii) determining an optimal exposure value from the sharpness map and the exposure-value map, and (iv) generating the HDR image by combining a reference image of the scene, captured with the optimal exposure value, and at least two of the plurality of single-exposure images. An exposure selector for generating an HDR image, from the plurality of single-exposure images, includes a memory and a microprocessor. The memory stores non-transitory computer-readable instructions and is adapted to store the plurality of single-exposure images. The microprocessor is adapted to execute the aforementioned method.

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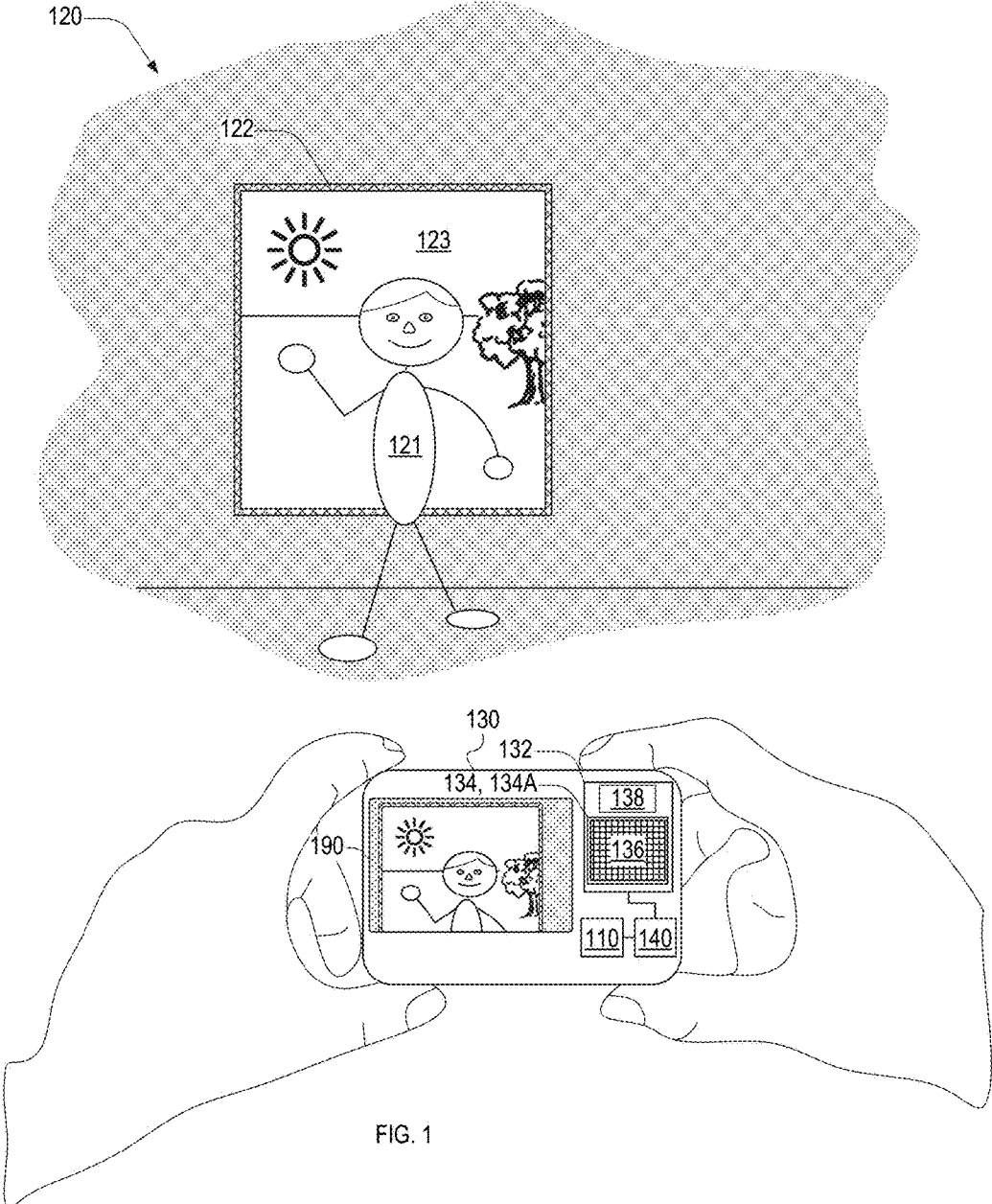


FIG. 1

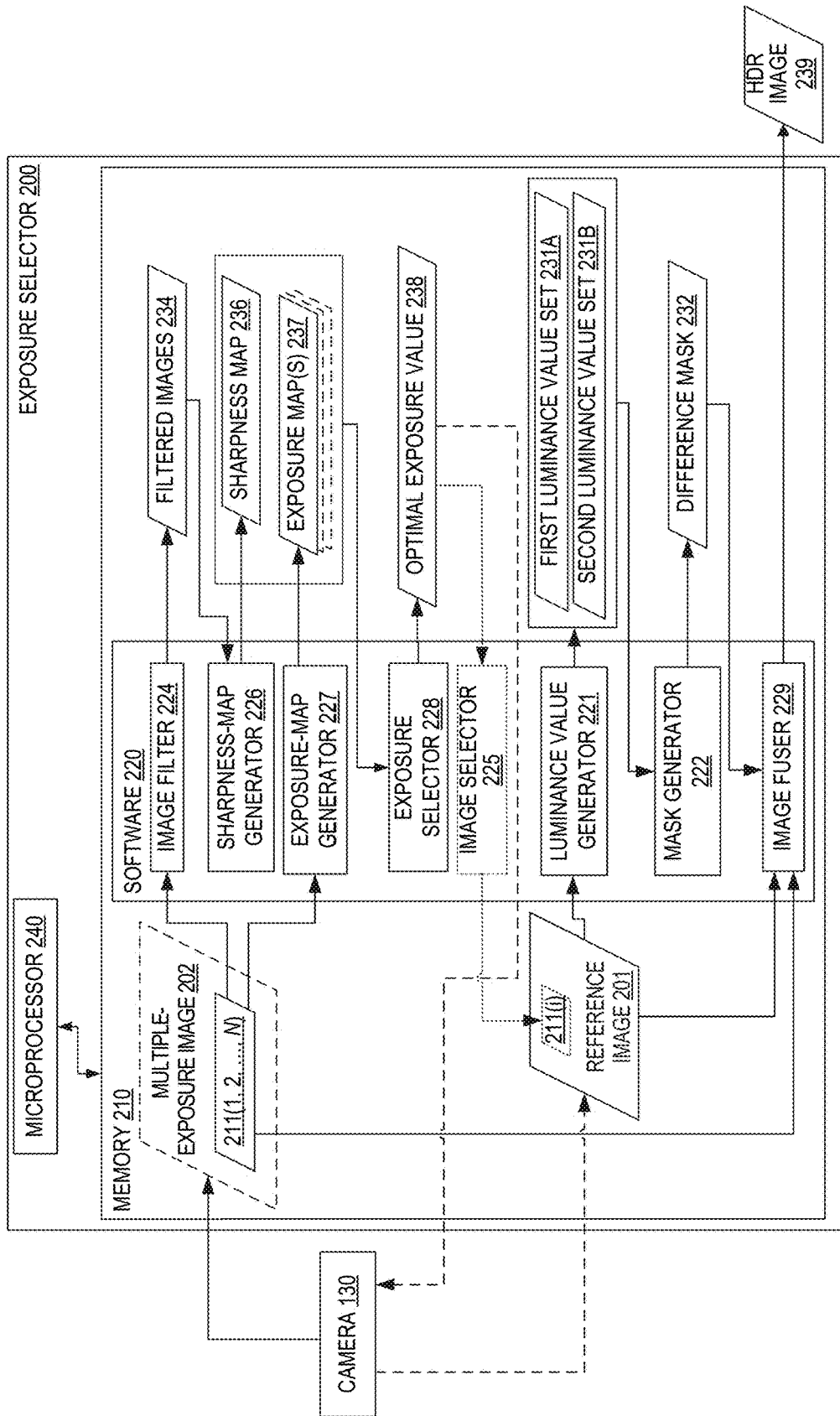


FIG. 2

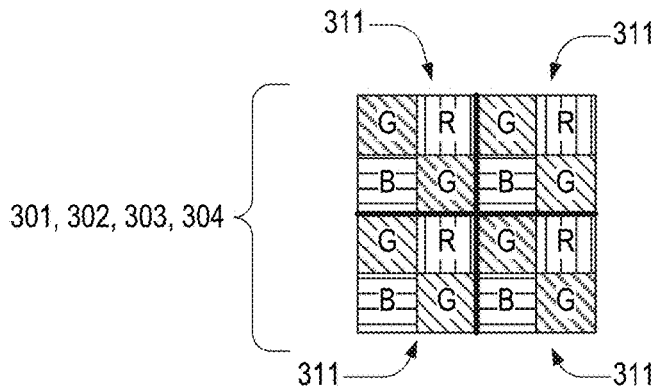
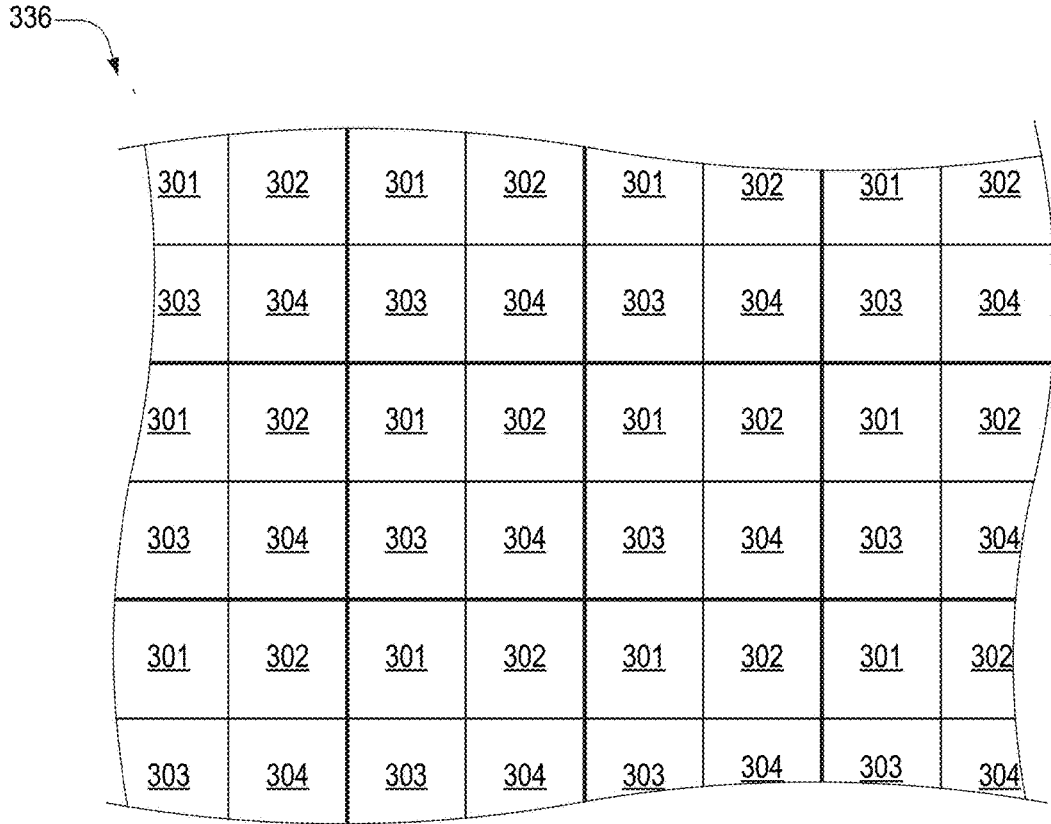


FIG. 3

403

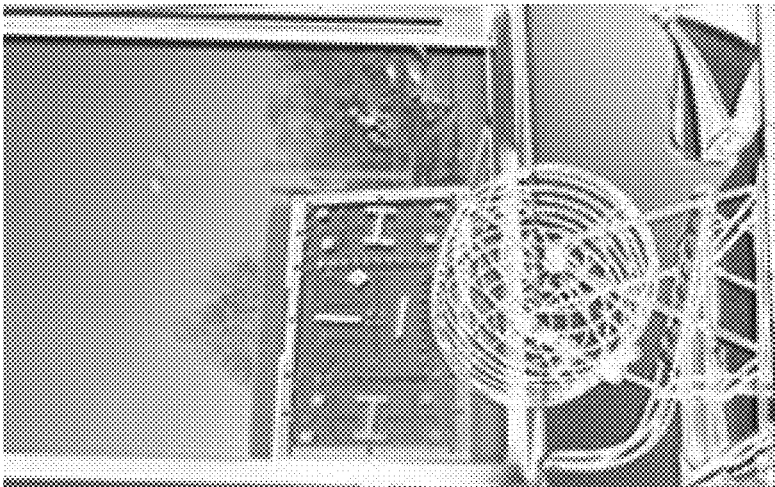


FIG. 4C

402

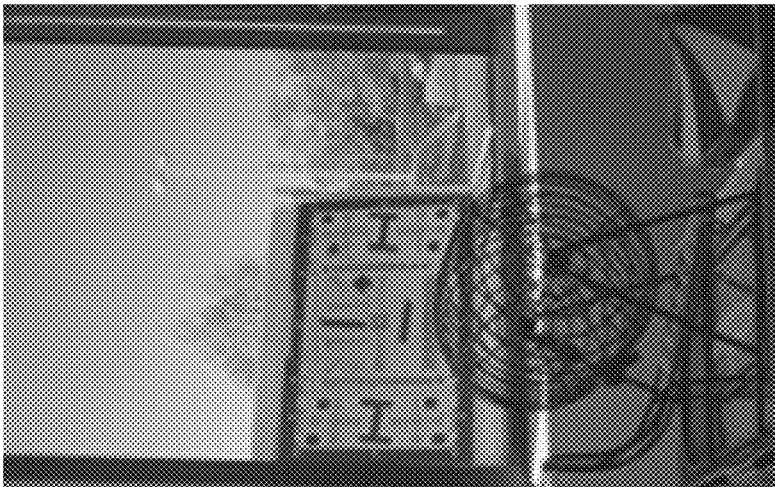


FIG. 4B

401

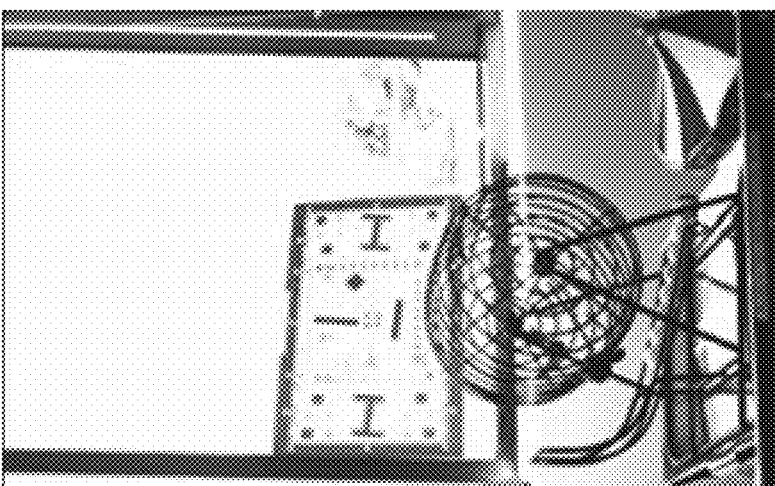


FIG. 4A

540

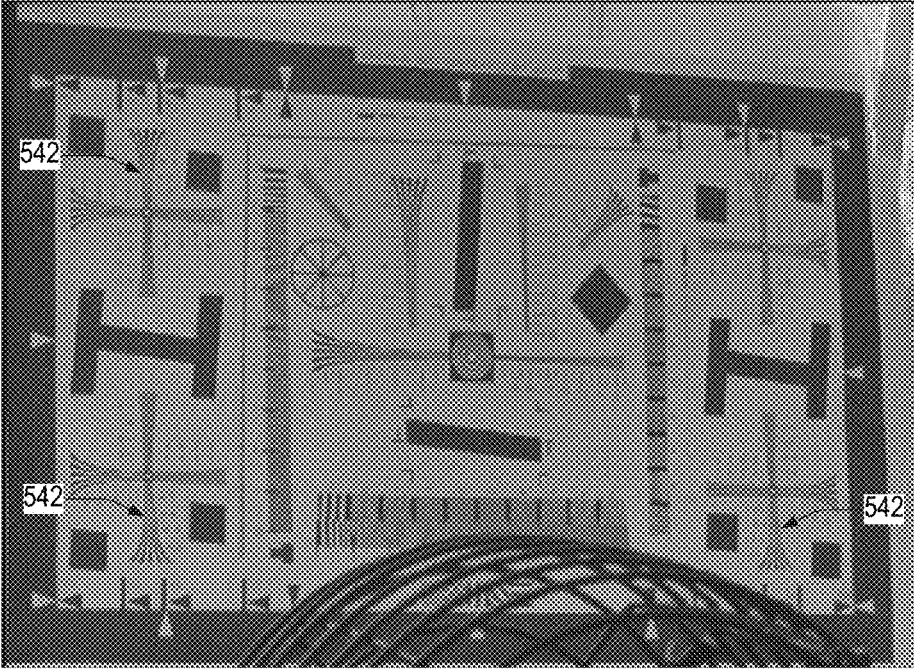


FIG. 5A

530

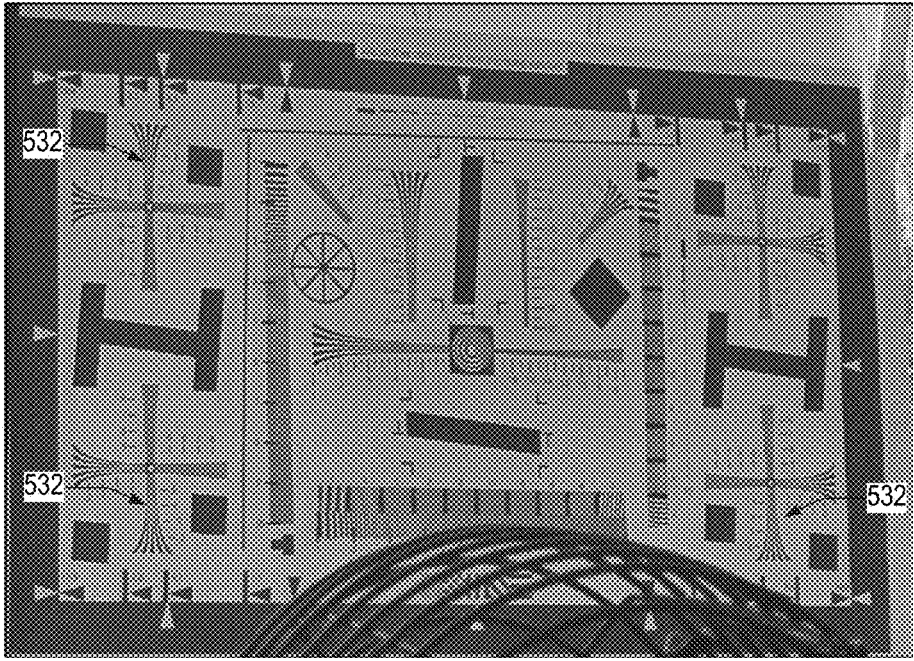


FIG. 5B

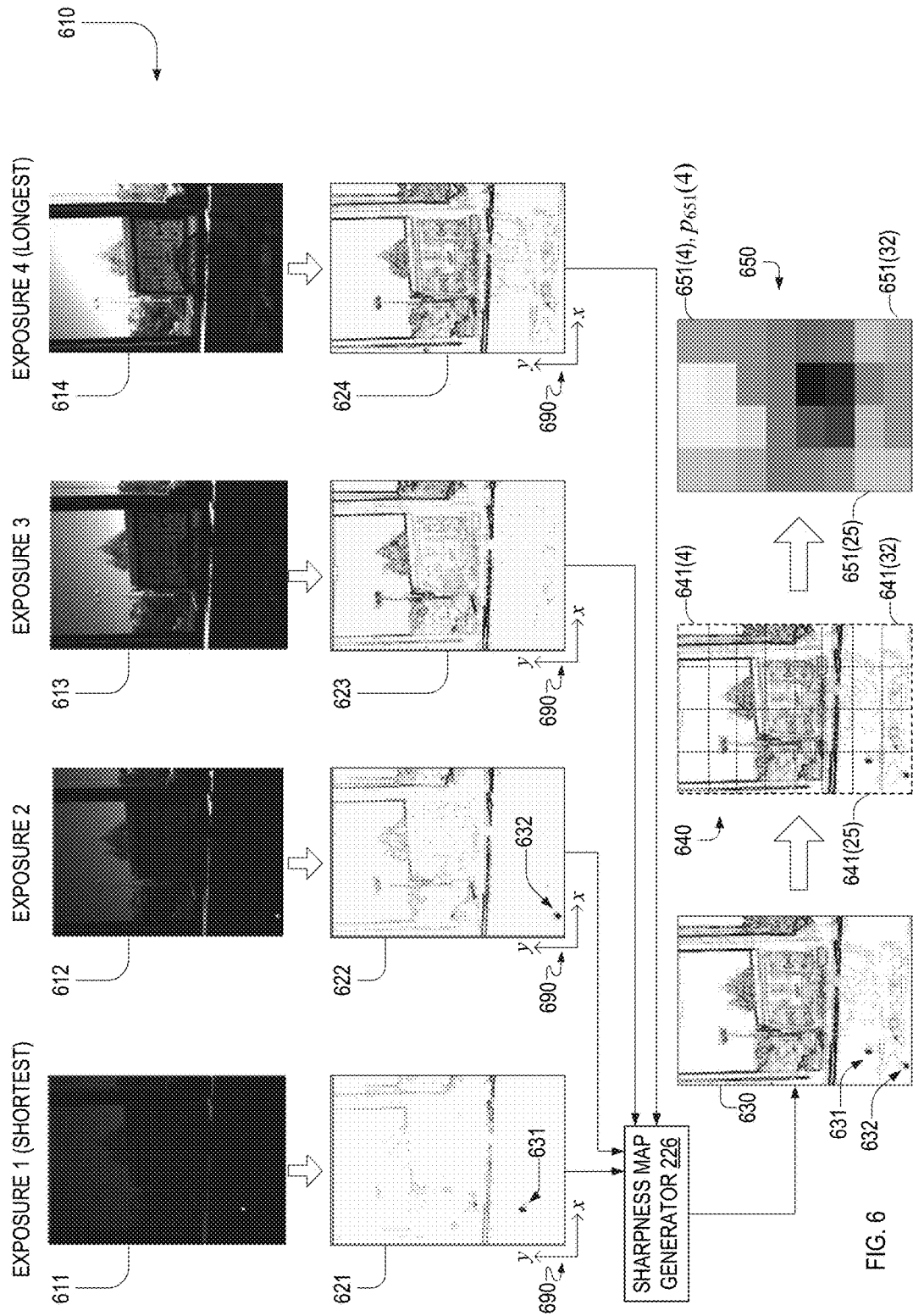


FIG. 6

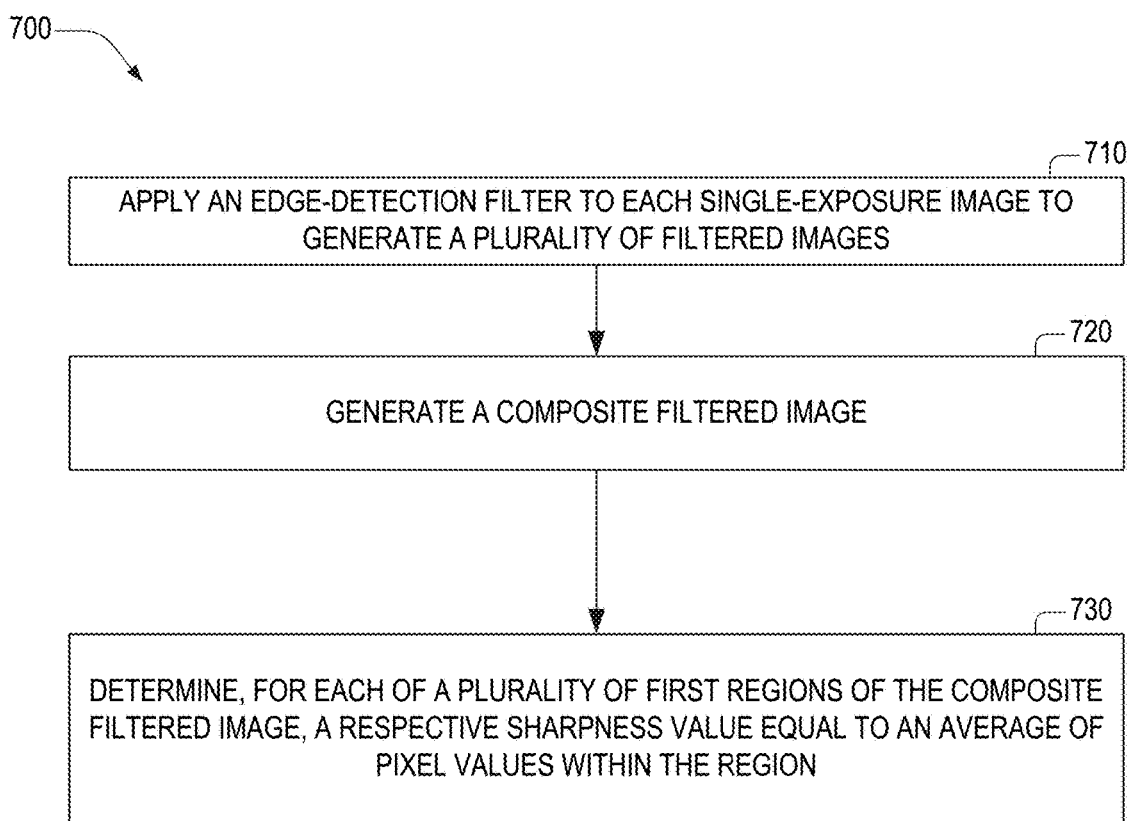


FIG. 7

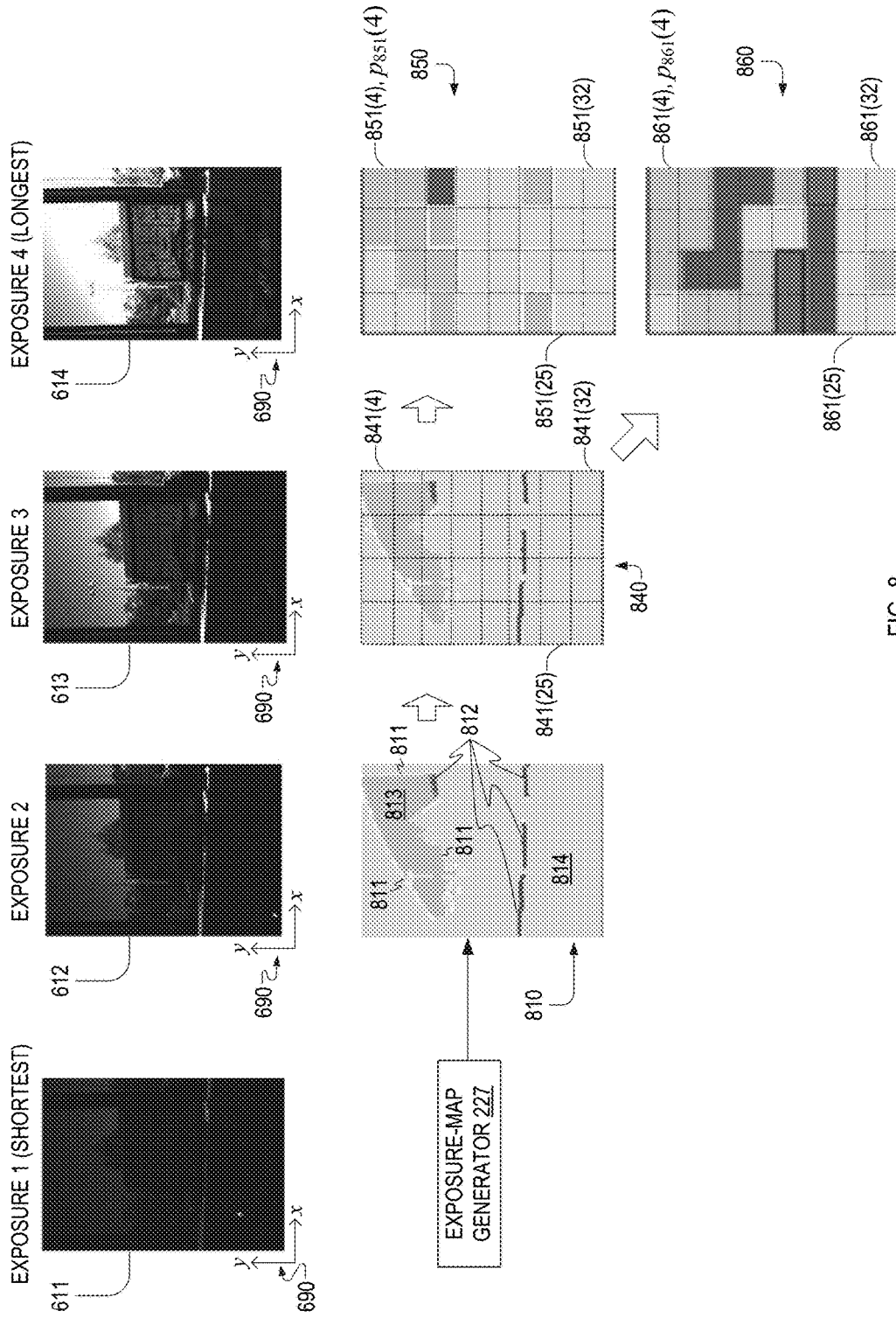


FIG. 8

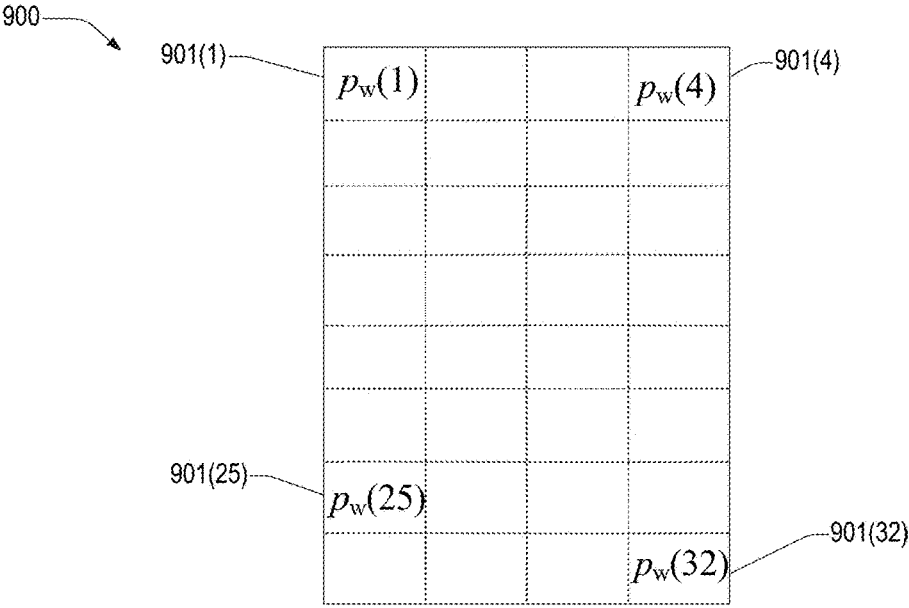


FIG. 9

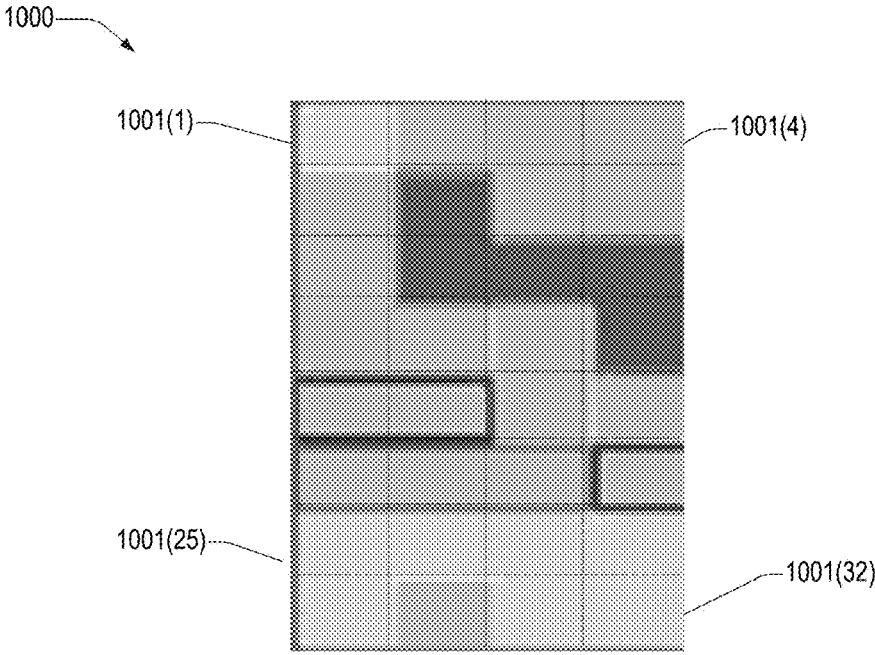


FIG. 10

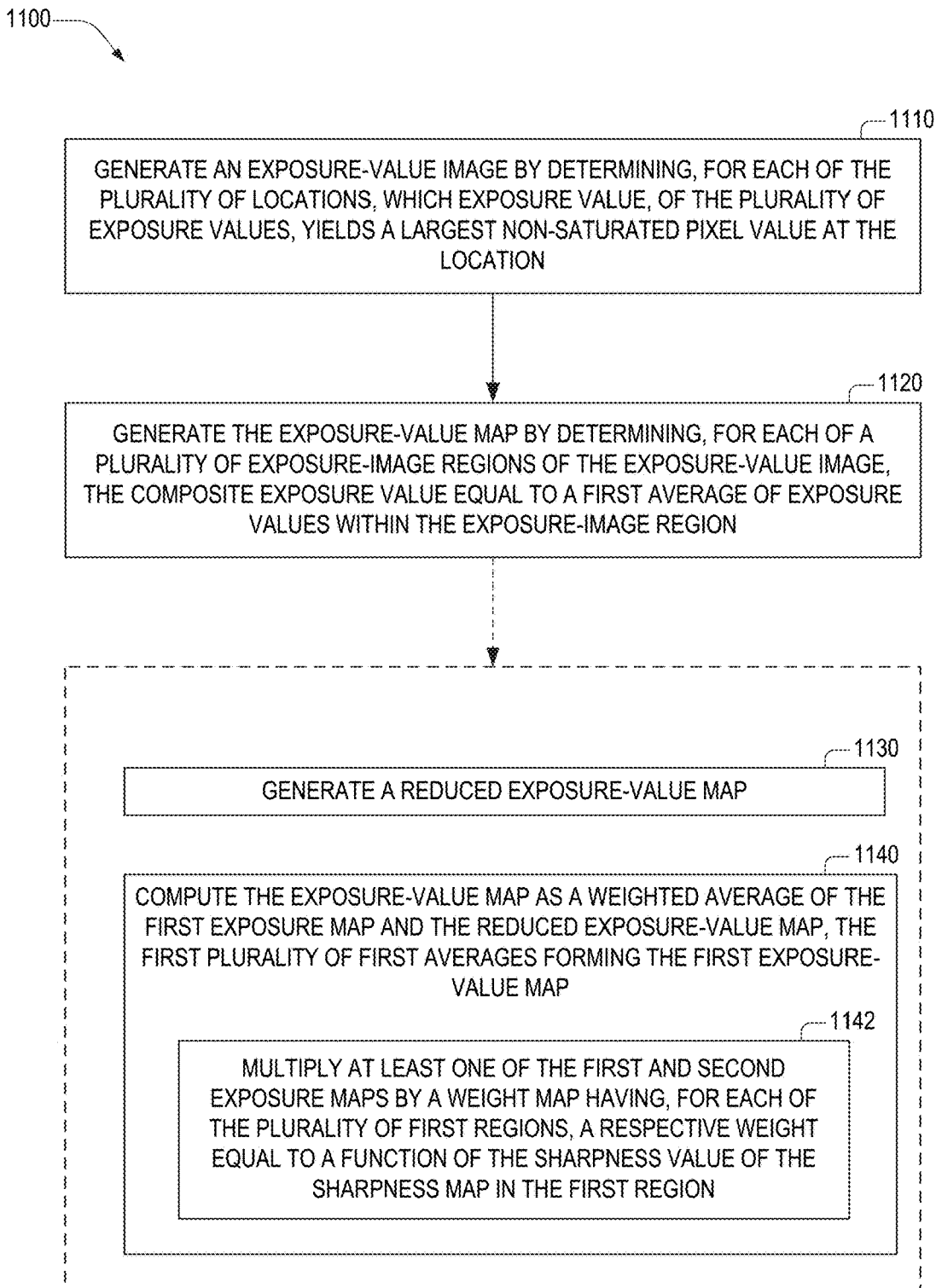


FIG. 11

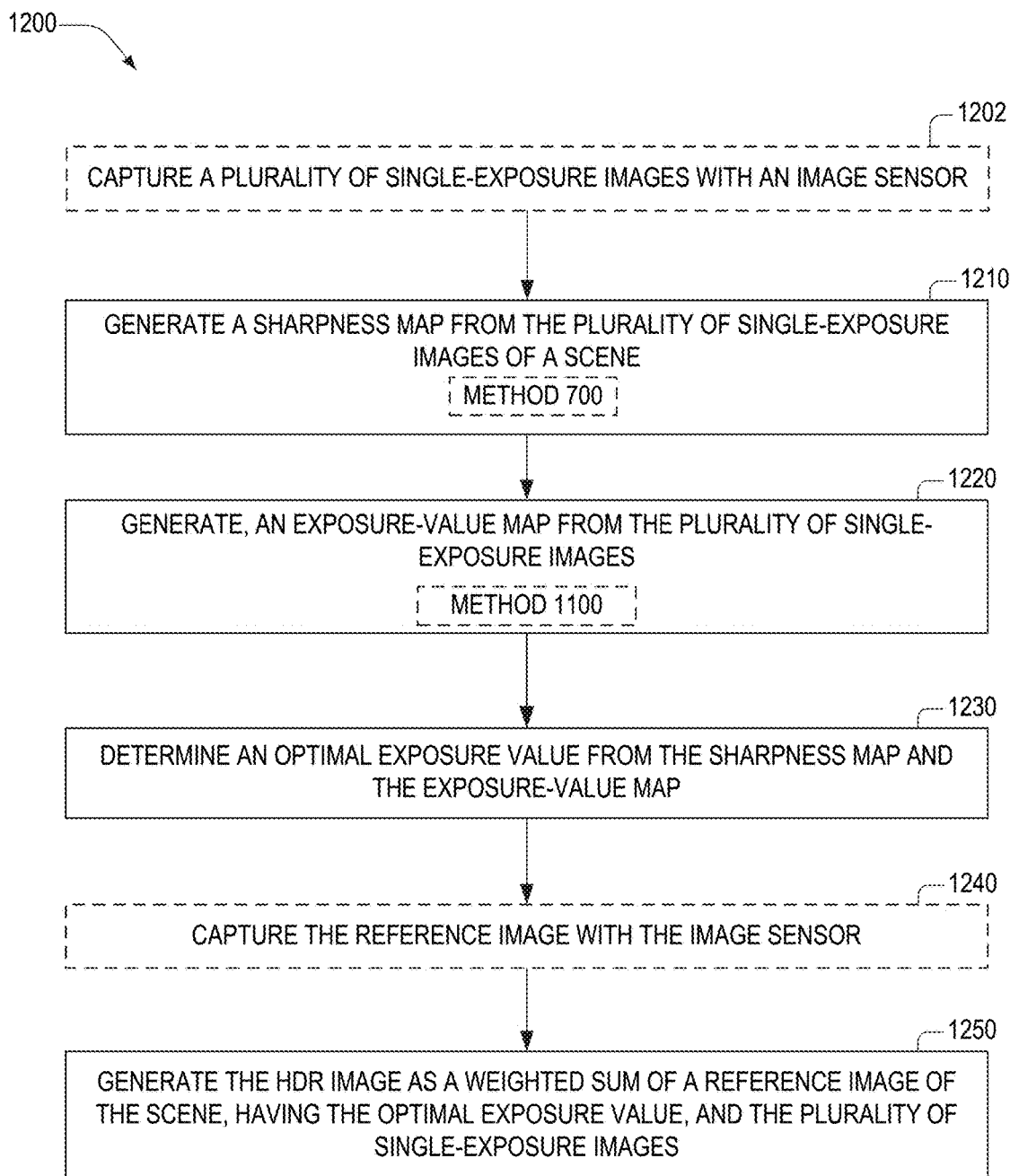


FIG. 12

EXPOSURE SELECTOR FOR HIGH-DYNAMIC RANGE IMAGING AND ASSOCIATED METHOD

BACKGROUND

[0001] Many consumer electronics products include at least one camera. These include tablet computers, mobile phones, and smart watches. In such products, and in digital still cameras themselves, high-dynamic range (HDR) functionality enables images of scenes having an increased dynamic range of luminosity. Some HDR images are synthesized from a combination of multiple images.

SUMMARY OF THE EMBODIMENTS

[0002] As used herein, “multiple-exposure image” includes an image taken in a manner such that different pixels of the image sensor capturing the image are exposed according to different exposure values. “Single exposure image” includes an image taken in a manner such that all pixels of the image sensor, or at least those pixels corresponding to the given image captured, are exposed according to the same exposure value. Some HDR images are synthesized from a combination of a multiple-exposure image with low-resolution and a higher-resolution single exposure image. The quality of such an HDR image partly depends on the exposure time of the single-exposure image. Embodiments herein determine an optimal exposure time of the single-exposure image.

[0003] In a first embodiment, a method for generating an HDR image includes (i) generating a sharpness map of sharpness values from a plurality of single-exposure images of a scene, each single-exposure image having a respective one of a plurality of exposure values, and (ii) generating, from the plurality of single-exposure images, an exposure-value map of composite exposure values of the single-exposure images. The method also includes (iii) determining an optimal exposure value from the sharpness map and the exposure-value map, and (iv) generating the HDR image by combining a reference image of the scene, captured with the optimal exposure value, and at least two of the plurality of single-exposure images.

[0004] In a second embodiment, an exposure selector includes a memory and a microprocessor. The memory stores non-transitory computer-readable instructions and is adapted to store the plurality of single-exposure images, of a scene, having a respective one of a plurality of exposure times. The microprocessor is adapted to: (i) generate, from the plurality of single-exposure images of the scene, a sharpness map of sharpness values of the single-exposure images, (ii) generate, from the plurality of single-exposure images, an exposure-value map of composite exposure values of the single-exposure images,

[0005] (iii) determine an optimal exposure value from the sharpness map and the exposure-value map, and (iv) generate the HDR image by combining a reference image of the scene, captured with the optimal exposure value, and at least two of the plurality of single-exposure images.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE FIGURES

[0006] FIG. 1 depicts a camera imaging a scene having a high dynamic range of luminance.

[0007] FIG. 2 shows an embodiment of an exposure selector that may be implemented within the camera of FIG. 1.

[0008] FIG. 3 depicts a color filter array (CFA), which is an example of the CFA of the camera of FIG. 1.

[0009] FIGS. 4A-4C depict, respectively, an exemplary single-exposure image and an exemplary multiple-exposure image, and an exemplary difference mask formed therefrom.

[0010] FIG. 5A illustrates an exemplary combined image formed from the multiple-exposure image of FIG. 4B and exemplary single-exposure images having a second exposure time.

[0011] FIG. 5B illustrates an exemplary combined image formed from the multiple-exposure image of FIG. 4B and single-exposure images having a second exposure time.

[0012] FIG. 6 illustrates an exemplary sharpness map and precursor images thereof.

[0013] FIG. 7 is a flowchart illustrating an exemplary method for generating a sharpness map of a multiple-exposure image formed from a plurality of single-exposure images, in an embodiment.

[0014] FIG. 8 illustrates an exposure map, a reduced-exposure map, and precursor images thereof, in an embodiment.

[0015] FIG. 9 illustrates an exemplary weight map based on the sharpness map of FIG. 6.

[0016] FIG. 10 illustrates an exemplary weighted-exposure map that is a sum of exposure maps of FIG. 8 weighted by the weight map of FIG. 9.

[0017] FIG. 11 is a flowchart illustrating a method for generating the exposure map of FIG. 8, in an embodiment.

[0018] FIG. 12 is a flowchart illustrating a method for generating the HDR image of FIG. 5B, in an embodiment.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE EMBODIMENTS

[0019] FIG. 1 depicts a camera 130 imaging a scene 120 having a high dynamic range of luminance. Scene 120 includes a person 121 in front of a window 122, through which a sunny scene 123 is visible. Camera 130 includes an imaging lens (not shown), an image sensor 132, a memory 110, and a microprocessor 140 communicatively coupled to the image sensor. Image sensor 132 includes a pixel array 134A and may include a color filter array (CFA) 136 thereon. Pixel array 134A includes a plurality of pixels 134, not shown in FIG. 1 for clarity of illustration. Each color filter of CFA 136 is aligned with a respective pixel 134 of pixel array 134A. The imaging lens images scene 120 onto image sensor 132. Image sensor 132 also includes circuitry 138 that includes at least one analog-to-digital converter.

[0020] Indoor lighting, not shown, illuminates the front of person 121 facing the camera while sunlight illuminates sunny scene 123. In scene 120, person 121 and sunny scene 123 have respective differing luminosities. Since the sunlight is significantly brighter than the indoor lighting, luminosity of sunny scene 123 far exceeds luminosity of person 121 such that scene 120 has a high dynamic range of luminosity. Standard digital imaging enables capture of scene 120 using a single exposure time optimized for either (but not both) luminosity of person 121 or sunny scene 123. When the exposure time is optimized for luminosity of person 121, person 121 is properly exposed while sunny scene 123 is overexposed. When the exposure time is

optimized for luminosity of sunny scene **123**, sunny scene **123** is properly exposed while person **121** is underexposed.

[0021] FIG. 2 shows an exemplary exposure selector **200** that combines a reference image **201** and a plurality of single-exposure images **211** to generate an HDR image **239**. Exposure selector **200** may be implemented within camera **130**. Images **201** and **211** may be of the same scene, e.g., scene **120**. Reference image **201** may be a single-exposure image. Single-exposure images **211** include images **211(1)**, **211(2)**, . . . , **211(N)**, where N is a positive integer. Single-exposure images **211** may form a multiple-exposure image **202**, which is a composite of single-exposure images **211**.

[0022] Single-exposure images **211** may be captured simultaneously or sequentially by camera **130**. Reference image **201** may have a higher resolution than each single-exposure image **211**, for example, when camera **130** captures single-exposure images **211** simultaneously. Reference image **201** may be one of single-exposure images **211**, for example, when camera **130** captures single-exposure images **211** sequentially.

[0023] Exposure selector **200** includes a microprocessor **240** and a memory **210** that stores software **220** that includes computer-readable instructions. Microprocessor **240** may be a digital signal processor such as an image processor. Memory **210** may be transitory and/or non-transitory and may include one or both of volatile memory (e.g., SRAM, DRAM, or any combination thereof) and nonvolatile memory (e.g., FLASH, ROM, magnetic media, optical media, or any combination thereof).

[0024] Memory **210** and microprocessor **240** may function as memory **110** and microprocessor **140**, respectively, of camera **130**, FIG. 1. Microprocessor **240** is adapted to execute the instructions to perform functions of exposure selector **200** as described herein. Memory **210** stores one or both of reference image **201** and single-exposure images **211**. Memory **210** may store images **201** and **211** in either an image file format, such as JPEG and TIFF, or a raw image format, such as TIFF/EP and Digital Negative (DNG).

[0025] Software **220** includes one or more of the following software modules for producing respective data outputs. An image filter **224** is configured to generate filtered images **234** from single-exposure images **211**. A sharpness-map generator **226** is configured to generate sharpness map **236** from filtered images **234**. An exposure-map generator **227** is configured to generate at least one exposure map **237** from single-exposure images **211**. Exposure selector **228** is configured to generate an optimal exposure value **238** from sharpness map **236** and the at least one exposure map **237**.

[0026] Camera **130** may use optimal exposure value **238** to generate reference image **201** having said optimal exposure value, for example, when single-exposure images **211** (1-N) are captured simultaneously. Alternatively, exposure selector **200** may include an image selector **225** which, based on optimal exposure value **238**, selects one of single-exposure images **211(1-N)** to function as reference image **201**.

[0027] A luminance value generator **221** is configured to generate, from images **201** and **211**, a first luminance value set **231A** and a second luminance value set **231B**. A mask generator **222** is configured to generate a difference mask **232** from luminance value sets **231A**, **231B**. With difference mask **232**, image fuser **229** combines reference image **201** and single-exposure images **211** to generate HDR image **239**.

[0028] FIG. 3 depicts a CFA **336**, which is an example of CFA **136** of camera **130**. CFA **336** includes an interleaved array of color filter cells **301**, **302**, **303**, and **304**. Each color filter cell **301-304** is a two-by-two array of color filters, such as a Bayer cell **311**, such that CFA **336** is a Bayer array. Each Bayer cell **311** includes one red color filter (“R”), two green color filters (“G”), and one blue color filter (“B”). While color filter cells **301-304** are structurally identical, they are differentiated herein because, as discussed below, image sensor pixels beneath each filter cell **301-304** have different exposure times when capturing single-exposure images **211**. Herein, a red pixel, a green pixel, and a blue pixel denote imager sensor pixels aligned beneath a red color filter, a green color filter, and a blue color filter, respectively.

[0029] It should be appreciated that other CFA arrangements, and exposure value arrangements, may be utilized without departing from the scope hereof. For example, a multiple-exposure image may correspond to fewer or more than four exposure times. For example, multiple-exposure image may be formed from nine images having different exposure times, corresponding to nine color filter cells, in a tiled three-by-three array, each having a different exposure time when capturing the multiple-exposure image.

[0030] FIGS. 4A and 4B depict an exemplary single-exposure image **401** and an exemplary multiple-exposure image **402**, respectively of a same scene captured by camera **130** that includes CFA **336** of FIG. 3. Images **401** and **402** are examples of reference image **201** and a multiple-exposure image **202**, respectively. Single-exposure image **401** results from camera **130** capturing the scene with pixels **134** beneath each color filter cell **301-304** having the same exposure time t_{401} .

[0031] Multiple-exposure image **402** results from camera **130** capturing the scene with pixels beneath each color filter cell **301-304** having a respective exposure time t_1 , t_2 , t_3 , and t_4 , where $t_1 < t_2 < t_3 < t_4$ and subscripts 1-4 are exposure indices k. Exposure time t_k and corresponding exposure index k are examples of corresponding exposure values. An exposure value as used herein may also be a quantity derived from one or more of an exposure index and an exposure time.

[0032] Multiple-exposure image **402** is an interleaved composite of four single-exposure images (**611**, **612**, **613**, and **614** of FIG. 6) having respective exposure times t_{1-4} , which enables multiple-exposure image to have a higher dynamic range than single-exposure image **401**. Single-exposure images **611-614** are examples of single-exposure images **211**, and are captured by pixels **134** beneath color filter cells **301-304**, respectively. Accordingly, each of single-exposure images **611-614** has lower resolution than single-exposure image **401**. Hence, while multiple-exposure image **402** has a larger dynamic range than single-exposure image **401**, it also has a lower resolution.

[0033] FIG. 4C depicts a difference mask **403** that is an absolute difference between respective luminance values of single-exposure image **401** and multiple-exposure image **402**. Luminance values of single-exposure image **401** and multiple-exposure image **402** are examples of first luminance value set **231A** and second luminance value set **231B**, respectively. Difference mask **403** is an example of difference mask **232** stored in memory **210** of exposure selector **200**, FIG. 2. The luminance values used to generate difference mask **403** are based on the following relationship between a luminance value Y and pixel values R, G, and B of red, green, and blue sensor pixels used to capture images

401 and **402**: $Y=0.30R+0.59G+0.11B$. Without departing from the scope hereof, coefficients of R, G, and B used to determine luminance value Y may vary from those presented. White regions of difference mask **403** denote minimum luminance differences between images **401** and **402**, while black regions of difference mask **403** denote maximum luminance differences.

[0034] In the above example, luminance value sets **231A**, **231B** are generated from R, G, and B values of images **401** and **402**. Images **401** and **402** result from demosaicing “raw” sensor pixel values from image sensor **132**. Alternatively, luminance value sets **231A**, **231B** may be generated directly from raw sensor pixel values from image sensor **132**, that is, independent of a demosaicing process. For example, when CFA **136** is a Bayer pattern, raw sensor pixel values from image sensor **132** includes pixel values corresponding to red, green, and blue pixels. Luminance value sets **231A**, **231B** may be generated from these pixel values and be independent of demosaicing used to generate images **201** and **211**.

[0035] FIG. 5A depicts a HDR image **540**, which is a weighted sum of single-exposure image **401**, multiple-exposure image **402**, and difference mask **403**. In an embodiment of exposure selector **200**, image fuser **229** implements the weighted sum. By including both images **401** and **402**, HDR image **540** has both the high-resolution of single-exposure image **401** and the high dynamic range of multiple-exposure image **402**. Equation (1) is a mathematical representation of HDR image **540**, where for HDR image **540**, data arrays M_{Δ} , I_1 , I_2 , and I_{Σ} represent difference mask **403**, single-exposure image **401**, multiple-exposure image **402**, and HDR image **540** respectively.

$$I_{\Sigma}=I_1(1-M_{\Delta})+I_2M_{\Delta} \quad \text{Eq. (1)}$$

[0036] For optimal combination of images **401** and **402**, exposure time t_{401} of single-exposure image **401** is at least approximately equal to one of exposure times t_1 , t_2 , t_3 , and t_4 of multiple-exposure image **402**. Two quantities that differ by less than five percent are examples of “approximately equal” quantities. In the example of HDR image **540**, exposure time t_{401} equals exposure time t_4 , the longest exposure time of image of multiple-exposure image **402**.

[0037] In the example of HDR image **540**, exposure time t_{401} may be chosen to equal the same one of exposure times t_{1-4} regardless of any properties of images **401** and **402**. However, Applicant has determined that for optimal quality of HDR image **540**, the best choice of exposure time t_{401} —that is, one of exposure times t_1 , t_2 , t_3 , and t_4 —depends on determining proper exposure times of in-focus regions (herein also “sharp” regions) of multiple-exposure image **402**. A proper exposure time of an in-focus region results in a combined image with in-focus regions that are neither over-exposed nor under-exposed. For example, HDR image **540** has overexposed regions **542** that blur out test-chart features.

[0038] In the example of multiple-exposure image **402**, the best choice of exposure time t_{401} , of candidate exposure times t_{1-4} , may be $t_{401}=t_3$, which results in a HDR image **530** shown in FIG. 5B. Equation (1) is a mathematical representation of HDR image **530**, where for HDR image **530**, data arrays M_{Δ} , I_1 , I_2 , and I_{Σ} represent difference mask **403**, single-exposure image **401** (with $t_{401}=t_3$), multiple-exposure image **402**, and HDR image **530** respectively. In HDR image **530**, regions **532** corresponding to regions **532** are less

exposed such that the test-chart features are resolvable. HDR image **530** is an example of HDR image **239**.

[0039] Determination of a best exposure time from candidate exposure times, e.g., t_3 that yields HDR image **530**, includes generating a sharpness map and an exposure-value map from plurality of single-exposure images of a scene. FIGS. 6 and 7 illustrate a method for generating a sharpness map. FIGS. 8-10 illustrate a method for generating an exposure value map. For sake of brevity, exposure-value maps and exposure maps may be used interchangeably herein.

[0040] A sharpness map is a relative measure of image sharpness of plurality of regions of a multiple-exposure image. FIG. 6 illustrates a sharpness map **650** (bottom-right) formed from a single-exposure image set **610** (top row) that includes a plurality of single-exposure images of a same scene each having different exposures times. In this example, single-exposure image set **610** includes single-exposure images **611-614** that are interleaved to form multiple-exposure image **402**. Single-exposure images **611-614** are captured by pixels corresponding to color filter cells **301**, **302**, **303**, and **304**, respectively, of CFA **336**. Without departing from the scope hereof, single-exposure image set **610** may include more or fewer than four images.

[0041] FIG. 6 includes filtered images **621-624** of the green channel of respective single-exposure images **611-614**. Filtered images **621-624** are examples of filtered images **234** and may be formed from one or of more than one channels (e.g., red, green, and blue) of each respective image **611-624** without departing from the scope hereof. In this example, filtered images **621-624** were generated using a kernel h that is a discrete approximation to the Laplacian filter. Specifically, a kernel h is a 3×3 matrix (a convolution matrix) having a matrix element $h_{2,2}=8$ and all other matrix elements $h_{i,j}=-1$, $i \neq j$. Filtered images **621-624** may be generated using other edge-detection kernels without departing from the scope hereof. As such, the term feature-extracted images describes filtered images **621-624**.

[0042] Filtered images **621-624** are also normalized by luminance values of their respective images **611-614** computed by luminance value generator **221**. The luminance values of images **611-614** are based on the following relationship between a luminance value Y and pixel values R, G, and B or red, green, and blue sensor pixels used to capture images **401** and **402**: $Y=0.30R+0.59G+0.11B$. Without departing from the scope hereof, coefficients of R, G, and B used to determine luminance value Y may vary from those presented.

[0043] Each filtered image **621-624** includes a plurality of respective pixel values p at location (x, y) therein, denoted herein as $p_{621}(x, y)$, $p_{622}(x, y)$, $p_{623}(x, y)$, and $p_{624}(x, y)$, respectively. Locations (x, y) are distance from to the origin of a coordinate axes **690** shown in FIG. 6. FIG. 6 also includes a composite filtered image **630** (bottom row, left), which at any coordinate (x, y) has a pixel value $p_{630}(x, y)$ equal to the maximum value of pixel values $p_{621}(x, y)$, $p_{622}(x, y)$, $p_{623}(x, y)$, and $p_{624}(x, y)$ of filtered images **621-624** respectively. For example, filtered image **621** has high pixel values, indicated as black in images **621-624**, at region **631**, whereas region **631** is white in remaining filtered images **622-624**. Similarly, filtered image **622** has high pixel values at region **632**. Accordingly, composite filtered image **630** includes these high pixel values at regions **631** and **632**.

Composite filtered image **630** may be generated by sharpness-map generator **226** of software **220**, FIG. 2.

[0044] FIG. 6 also includes a segmented image **640** (bottom row, middle) and sharpness map **650** (bottom row, right). Segmented image **640** is composite filtered image **630** divided into a plurality of regions **641(1-N_b)**. In this example N_b=32. For clarity of illustration, not all regions **641** are enumerated in FIG. 6.

[0045] Sharpness-map generator **226** generates sharpness map **650** from filtered image **630**. Sharpness map **650** is an example of sharpness map **236**, and has a plurality of regions **651(1-N_b)** corresponding to regions **641(1-N_b)** respectively. Region **651(i)** has a uniform pixel value p_{651(i)} equal to the average pixel value of its corresponding region **641(i)**, where i∈{1, 2, . . . , N_b}. For example, pixels in regions **651(4)**, **651(25)**, and **651(32)** have respective pixel values p₆₅₁ equal to the average pixel values of regions **641(4)**, **641(25)**, and **641(32)**, respectively.

[0046] FIG. 7 is a flowchart illustrating a method **700** for generating a sharpness map of a multiple-exposure image formed from a plurality of single-exposure images. Method **700** may be implemented within one or more aspects of exposure selector **200**. For example, method **700** is implemented by microprocessor **240** executing computer-readable instructions of software **220**. FIGS. 6 and 7 are best viewed together in the following description.

[0047] In step **710**, method **700** applies an edge-detection filter to each single-exposure image to generate a plurality of filtered images. In an example of step **710**, image filter **224** applies kernel h to single-exposure images **611-614** to generate filtered images **621-624**, respectively.

[0048] In step **720**, method **700** generates a composite filtered image, each pixel coordinate thereof having a pixel value equal to a maximum of pixel values at the respective pixel coordinate throughout each of the plurality of filtered images. In an example of step **710**, sharpness-map generator **226** generates composite filtered image **630** from filtered images **621-624**. In an embodiment, sharpness-map generator **226** disregards saturated pixel values when evaluating the maximum of pixel values, at the pixel coordinate, of the plurality of filtered images.

[0049] In step **730**, method **700** determines, for each of a plurality of sharpness-map regions of the composite filtered image, a respective sharpness value equal to an average of pixel values within the sharpness-map region. In an example of step **730**, sharpness-map generator **226** generates sharpness map **650** by determining, for each of a plurality of non-overlapping regions **641** of segmented image **640**, a respective a plurality of sharpness values **651** equal to an average of pixel values within the region.

[0050] An exposure value map illustrates the best exposure for a plurality of regions of a multiple-exposure image. The plurality of regions may be the same regions used for the sharpness map. FIG. 8 illustrates an exposure map **850**, which is an example of exposure map **237**. Exposure map **850** is formed from component single-exposure images **611-614**, which have respective exposure indices 1-4.

[0051] FIG. 8 includes an exposure-index image **810** generated by exposure-map generator **227** from component single-exposure images **611-614**. Each image **611-614** includes a plurality of respective pixel values p₆₁₀ at location (x, y) therein, denoted herein as p_{610(x, y, k)}, where exposure index k∈{1, 2, 3, 4}. Locations (x, y) are distance from the origin of coordinate axes **690** shown in FIG. 8. For

example, at location (x, y), image **611** has pixel value p_{610(x, y, 1)} and image **612** has pixel value p_{610(x, y, 2)}. Exposure-index image **810** has a plurality of pixel values p_{810(x, y)} equal to one of four exposure indices k∈{1, 2, . . . , N_e} according to Equation (2), where N_e=4 in this example. Quantity p_{max} is a maximum pixel value corresponding to saturated exposure. For example, for an eight-bit quantization, p_{max}=255.

$$p_{810(x, y)} = \max_{k \in \{1, 2, \dots, N_e\}} (k [p_{610(x, y, k)} < p_{max}]) \quad \text{Eq. (2)}$$

For example, if for a given location (x₁, y₁) p_{610(x₁, y₁, {1,2})}<p_{max} and p_{610(x₁, y₁, {k≥3})}=p_{max}, then p_{810(x₁, y₁)}=2. FIG. 8 illustrates four regions **811**, **812**, **813**, and **814** of exposure-index image **810** having exposure values p₈₁₀ equal to exposure indices 1-4 respectively. Region **811** is shown as white in FIG. 8 and includes a region bordering region **813**.

[0052] Without departing from the scope hereof, each exposure value p_{810(x, y)} of exposure-index image **810** may be proportional to one of four exposure times t₁₋₄ of single-exposure images **611-614**, respectively. For example, exposure values p_{810(x, y)} equal to one of exposure times t_k∈{1, 2, . . . , N_e} according to Equation (3).

$$p_{810(x, y)} = \max_{k \in \{1, 2, \dots, N_e\}} (t_k [p_{610(x, y, k)} < p_{max}]) \quad \text{Eq. (3)}$$

[0053] FIG. 8 also includes a segmented index image **840**, which is exposure-index image **810** divided into a plurality of regions **841(1-N_b)** that correspond to a respective region **641** of segmented image **640**. For clarity of illustration, not all regions **841** are enumerated in FIG. 8.

[0054] Exposure-map generator **227** generates exposure map **850** from exposure-index image **810**. Exposure map **850** has a plurality of regions **851(1-N_b)** corresponding to regions **841(1-N_b)** respectively. Region **851(i)** has a uniform pixel value p_{851(i)} equal to the average pixel value of its corresponding region **841(i)**, where i∈{1, 2, . . . , N_b}. For example, pixels in regions **851(4)**, **851(25)**, and **851(32)** each have respective pixel values p₈₅₁ equal to the average pixel values of regions **841(4)**, **841(25)**, and **841(32)**, respectively. Exposure map **850** is illustrated with a grid superimposed thereon to show boundaries between adjacent regions **851**.

[0055] Exposure-map generator **227** may also generate a reduced-exposure map **860** from exposure-index image **810**. Reduced-exposure map **860** has a plurality of regions **861(1-N_b)** corresponding to regions **841(1-N_b)** respectively. Region **861(i)** has a uniform pixel value p_{861(i)} equal to the average of the lowest decile (quantile size q=10%) of pixel values its corresponding region **841(i)**, where i∈{1, 2, . . . , N_b}. For example, pixels in regions **861(4)**, **861(25)**, and **861(32)** have respective pixel values p₈₆₁ equal to the average of the lowest decile of exposure values of regions **841(4)**, **841(25)**, and **841(32)**, respectively. Quantile size q may deviate from ten percent without departing from the scope hereof. Exposure map **860** is illustrated with a grid superimposed thereon to show boundaries between adjacent regions **861**.

[0056] FIG. 9 illustrates an exemplary weight map **900** based on sharpness map **650** of FIG. 6. Weight map **900** has a plurality of regions $901(1-N_b)$ corresponding to regions $651(1-N_b)$ respectively of sharpness map **650**, FIG. 6, wherein each region $651(i)$ has a uniform pixel value $p_{651}(i)$, $i \in \{1, 2, \dots, N_b\}$. Region $901(i)$ has a uniform weight $p_w(i) = w(p_{651}(i))$, where w is a weighting function. Weighting function w is, for example, a Gaussian function, $w(p_{651}) = \exp(-0.5p_{651}^2/\sigma^2)$, and may have other functional forms without departing from the scope hereof.

[0057] FIG. 10 illustrates an exemplary weighted-exposure map **1000** that is a sum of exposure map **850** and reduced-exposure map **860** weighted by weight map **900**. Weighted-exposure map **1000** has a plurality of regions $1001(1-N_b)$ corresponding to regions $651(1-N_b)$ respectively of sharpness map **650**. Region $1001(i)$ has a uniform exposure value $p_{1000}(i)$, given by Equation (4). Exposure map **1000** is illustrated with a grid superimposed thereon to show boundaries between adjacent regions **1001**.

$$p_{1001}(i) = p_{850}(i) \cdot p_w(i) + p_{860}(i) \cdot (1 - p_w(i)) \quad \text{Eq. (4)}$$

In the example of weighted-exposure map **1000**, weight $p_w = \exp(-0.5p_{651}^2/\sigma^2)$, where $\sigma = 200$. As p_{651} , a measure of high-spatial frequency amplitude in sharpness map **650**, increases according to local picture sharpness, weight p_w decreases with increasing picture sharpness. Consequently, weighted-exposure map **1000** is weighted such that regions thereof corresponding to sharp regions of composite filtered image **630** have lower exposure value to avoid saturation.

[0058] A weighted sum of sharpness map **650** and exposure map **1000** yields an optimal exposure value **238**, also expressed herein as E_{opt} . For example, in Equation (5), E_{opt} is an optimal exposure index k_{opt} , i.e., one of exposure indices k corresponding to one of exposure times t_1 , t_2 , t_3 , and t_4 of multiple-exposure image **402**, FIG. 4.

$$E_{opt} = k_{opt} = \text{nint} \left(\sum_1^{N_b} p_{1001}(i) \cdot p_{651}(i) \right) \quad \text{Eq. (5)}$$

In Eq. (5), $\text{nint}(\bullet)$ denotes a nearest-integer function, and may be replaced with a floor function $\lfloor \bullet \rfloor$ or a ceiling function $\lceil \bullet \rceil$ without departing from the scope hereof.

[0059] Alternatively, optimal exposure value E_{opt} may be an optimal exposure time t_{opt} that is, one of exposure times t_1 , t_2 , t_3 , and t_4 , as shown in Eq. (6). In Eq. (6) summation $\Sigma := \sum_1^{N_b} p_{1001}(i) \cdot p_{651}(i)$ and N_e is the number of exposure times of multiple-exposure image **402**.

$$E_{opt} = t_{opt} = \min\{|\Sigma - t_1|, |\Sigma - t_2|, \dots, |\Sigma - t_{N_e}|\} \quad \text{Eq. (6)}$$

Optimal exposure value E_{opt} is an exposure time, for example, when each exposure value of exposure maps **850** and **860** is an average exposure time, rather than an average exposure index.

[0060] Using sharpness values p_{651} of sharpness map **650** and exposure values p_{1001} of exposure map **1000**, Eq. (5) yields $k_{opt} = \text{nint}(3.4) = 3$, which means that using exposure time t_3 in single-exposure image **401** (instead of exposure time t_4) yields HDR image **530** (FIG. 5B) with higher image quality than HDR image **540** (FIG. 5A).

[0061] FIG. 11 is a flowchart illustrating a method **1100** for generating an exposure map of a multiple-exposure image formed from a plurality of single-exposure images.

Method **1100** may be implemented within one or more aspects of exposure selector **200**. For example, method **1100** is implemented by microprocessor **240** executing computer-readable instructions of software **220**. FIGS. 8-11 are best viewed together in the following description.

[0062] In step **1110**, method **1100** generates an exposure-value image by determining, for each of the plurality of locations, the exposure value (of a plurality of exposure values) yielding the largest non-saturated pixel value at the location. Examples of exposure values include exposure times and exposure indices. In an example of step **1110**, exposure-map generator **227** generates exposure-index image **810**, which is an example of an exposure-value image.

[0063] In step **1120**, method **1100** generates the exposure-value map by determining, for each of a plurality of exposure-image regions of the exposure-value image, the composite exposure value equal to a first average of exposure values within the exposure-image region. In an example of step **1120**, exposure-map generator **1127** determines, for each region **841**, a respective uniform exposure value p_{851} of exposure map **850**. In a second example of step **1120**, exposure-map generator **1127** determines, for each region **841**, a respective uniform exposure value p_{861} of reduced-exposure map **860**.

[0064] Method **1100** optionally includes steps **1130** and **1140**. In step **1130**, method **1100** generates a reduced exposure-value map by determining, for each exposure-image region, a respective one of a plurality of second averages of exposure values within the exposure-image region. For each of the plurality of exposure-image regions, the first average exceeds the second average. In an example of step **1130**, exposure-map generator **1127** determines, for each region **841**, a respective uniform exposure value p_{861} of reduced-exposure map **860**.

[0065] In step **1140**, method **1100** computes the exposure-value map as a weighted average of the first exposure-value map and the reduced exposure-value map. Step **1140** optionally includes step **1142**. In step **1142**, method **1100** multiplies at least one of the first exposure-value map and the reduced exposure map by a weight map having, for each of the plurality of sharpness-map regions, a respective weight equal to a function of the sharpness value of the sharpness map in the sharpness-map region. In an example of step **1140** and **1142**, exposure-map generator **227** generates weighted-exposure map **1000** from exposure map **850**, reduced-exposure map **860**, and weight map **900**.

[0066] FIG. 12 is a flowchart illustrating a method for generating an HDR image from a plurality of single-exposure images of a scene, having a respective plurality of exposure times. Method **1200** may be implemented within one or more aspects of exposure selector **200**. For example, method **1200** is implemented by microprocessor **240** executing computer-readable instructions of software **220**. Steps **1202** and **1240** are optional.

[0067] In step **1202**, method **1200** captures a plurality of single-exposure images having a respective one of a plurality of exposure values. In an example of step **1202**, camera **130** captures single-exposure images **611-614** of FIG. 6. This example of step **1202** may include steps of (a) converting, with one or more analog-to-digital converters of circuitry **138**, each pixel charge to a respective first digital pixel value, and (b) storing the first digital pixel values in memory **210** as image **402**.

[0068] In step **1210**, method **1200** generates, from a plurality feature-extracted images corresponding to the plurality of single-exposure images, a sharpness map of sharpness values of the feature-extracted images. In an example of step **1210**, exposure selector **200** generates, from images **611-614**, sharpness map **650** by implementing method **700**.

[0069] In step **1220**, method **1200** generates, from the plurality of single-exposure images, an exposure-value map of composite exposure values of the single-exposure images. In an example of step **1220**, exposure selector **200** generates weighted-exposure map **1000** by implementing method **1100**.

[0070] In step **1230**, method **1200** determines an optimal exposure value from the sharpness map and the exposure-value map. For example, the sharpness map and the exposure-value map are added as a weighted sum. In an example of step **1230**, exposure selector **228** implements Eq. (5) using sharpness values p_{651} of sharpness map **650** and exposure values p_{1001} of exposure map **1000** to determine $k_{opt} = \text{nint}(3.4) = 3$, as described above. In a second example of step **1230**, exposure selector **228** implements Eq. (6) using sharpness values p_{651} of sharpness map **650** and exposure values p_{1001} of exposure map **1000** to determine an optimal exposure time t_{opt} .

[0071] In optional step **1240**, method **1200** captures the reference image with the image sensor according to the optimal exposure value. In an example of step **1240**, camera **130** captures single-exposure image **401** with exposure time t_3 . This example of step **1240** may include steps of (a) converting, with one or more analog-to-digital converters of circuitry **138**, each pixel charge to a respective first digital pixel value, and (b) storing the first digital pixel values in memory **210** as image **401**.

[0072] In step **1250**, method **1200** generates the HDR image by combining a reference image of the scene, captured with the optimal exposure value, and at least two of the plurality of single-exposure images. The least two of the plurality of single-exposure images is, for example, each of the single-exposure images. For example, the reference image and the plurality of single-exposure images are combined as a weighted sum. In an example of step **1250**, image fuser **229** generates HDR image **530**.

[0073] Combinations of Features:

[0074] Features described above as well as those claimed below may be combined in various ways without departing from the scope hereof. The following examples illustrate some possible, non-limiting combinations:

[0075] (A1) A method for generating an HDR image includes (i) generating a sharpness map of sharpness values from a plurality of single-exposure images of a scene, each single-exposure image having a respective one of a plurality of exposure values, and (ii) generating, from the plurality of single-exposure images, an exposure-value map of composite exposure values of the single-exposure images. The method also includes (iii) determining an optimal exposure value from the sharpness map and the exposure-value map, and (iv) generating the HDR image by combining a reference image of the scene, captured with the optimal exposure value, and at least two of the plurality of single-exposure images.

[0076] (A2) In the method denoted by (A1), the step of generating the sharpness map may include (i) applying an edge-detection filter to each of the plurality of single-exposure images to generate a plurality of filtered images,

(ii) generating a composite filtered image, each pixel coordinate thereof having a pixel value equal to a maximum of pixel values at the respective pixel coordinate throughout each of the plurality of filtered images, and (iii) determining, for each of a plurality of sharpness-map regions of the composite filtered image, a respective sharpness value equal to an average of pixel values within the sharpness-map region.

[0077] (A3) In the method denoted by (A2), in which each of the plurality of single-exposure images has a plurality of pixel values each respectively corresponding to a one of a plurality of locations in the imaged scene, the step of generating the exposure-value map may include (i) generating an exposure-value image by determining, for each of the plurality of locations, which exposure value, of the plurality of exposure values, yields a largest non-saturated pixel value at the location, and (ii) generating the exposure-value map by determining, for each of a plurality of exposure-image regions of the exposure-value image, the composite exposure value equal to a first average of exposure values within the exposure-image region

[0078] (A4) In the method denoted by (A3), wherein the plurality of first averages form a first exposure-value map, the step of generating the exposure-value map may further include: (i) generating a reduced exposure-value map by determining, for each of the plurality of exposure-image regions, a respective one of a plurality of second averages of exposure values within the exposure-image region, for each of the plurality of exposure-image regions, the first average exceeding the second average, and (ii) computing the exposure-value map as a weighted average of the first exposure-value map and the reduced exposure-value map

[0079] (A5) In the method denoted by (A4), for each exposure-image region of the reduced exposure-value map, the second average may be an average of a subset of exposure values in the region. The subset excludes at least one exposure value in the exposure-image region greater than the first average.

[0080] (A6) In any method denoted by one of (A4) and (A5), in which each of the plurality of sharpness-map regions is congruent to a respective one of the plurality of exposure-image regions and corresponds to a same respective one of a plurality of image regions of one of the single-exposure images, the step of computing the exposure-value map may include weighting at least one of the first exposure-value map and the reduced exposure-value map by a weight map having, for each of the plurality of image regions, a respective weight equal to a function of the sharpness value of the sharpness map in the image region.

[0081] (A7) In any method denoted by (A6), wherein $i \in \{1, 2, \dots\}$ denotes the plurality of image regions, the first exposure-value map has a respective plurality of exposure values $p_1(i)$, and the sharpness map's sharpness values are denoted as $s(i)$, the weight map may have a respective plurality of weights determined by a weight function $w(s(i))$.

[0082] (A8) In any method denoted by (A7), the value of weight function $w(s(i))$ may be non-increasing as sharpness value $s(i)$ increases from its minimum value to its maximum value.

[0083] (A9) In any method denoted by one of (A1) through (A8), each composite exposure value may be one of an exposure time and an exposure index of one of the plurality of single-exposure images.

[0084] (A10) In any method denoted by one of (A1) through (A9), the step of determining may include: adding the sharpness values and the composite exposure values as a weighted sum to determine the optimal exposure value.

[0085] (A11) In any method denoted by one of (A1) through (A10), the step of generating the HDR image may include generating the HDR image as a weighted sum of the reference image of the scene and the plurality of single-exposure images.

[0086] (A12) Any method denoted by one of (A1) through (A11) may further include at least one of (i) capturing the plurality of single-exposure images with an image sensor; and, after the step of determining, (ii) capturing the reference image with the image sensor according to the optimal exposure value.

[0087] (A13) In any method denoted by (A12), in which the image sensor includes a plurality of sensor pixels each having a pixel charge corresponding to a respective intensity of light from the scene incident thereon, the step of capturing the plurality of single-exposure images may include: (i) converting, with an analog-to-digital converter, each pixel charge to a respective first digital pixel value, (ii) storing the first digital pixel values in a memory communicatively coupled to a microprocessor. The step of capturing the reference image may include (i) converting, with an analog-to-digital converter, each pixel charge to a respective second digital pixel value, and (ii) storing the second digital pixel values in a memory communicatively coupled to a microprocessor.

[0088] (B1) An exposure selector includes a memory and a microprocessor. The memory stores non-transitory computer-readable instructions and is adapted to store the plurality of single-exposure images, of a scene, having a respective one of a plurality of exposure times. The microprocessor is adapted to execute the instructions to implement any method denoted by (A1) through (A11).

[0089] Changes may be made in the above methods and systems without departing from the scope hereof. It should thus be noted that the matter contained in the above description or shown in the accompanying drawings should be interpreted as illustrative and not in a limiting sense. The following claims are intended to cover all generic and specific features described herein, as well as all statements of the scope of the present method and system, which, as a matter of language, might be said to fall therebetween.

What is claimed is:

1. A method for generating a high-dynamic range (HDR) image comprising:

generating a sharpness map of sharpness values from a plurality of single-exposure images of a scene, each single-exposure image having a respective one of a plurality of exposure values;

generating, from the plurality of single-exposure images, an exposure-value map of composite exposure values of the single-exposure images;

determining an optimal exposure value from the sharpness map and the exposure-value map; and

generating the HDR image by combining a reference image of the scene, captured with the optimal exposure value, and at least two of the plurality of single-exposure images.

2. The method of claim 1, the step of generating the sharpness map comprising:

applying an edge-detection filter to each of the plurality of single-exposure images to generate a plurality of filtered images;

generating a composite filtered image, each pixel coordinate thereof having a pixel value equal to a maximum of pixel values at the respective pixel coordinate throughout each of the plurality of filtered images; and

determining, for each of a plurality of sharpness-map regions of the composite filtered image, a respective sharpness value equal to an average of pixel values within the sharpness-map region.

3. The method of claim 2, each of the plurality of single-exposure images having a plurality of pixel values each respectively corresponding to a one of a plurality of locations in the imaged scene, the step of generating the exposure-value map comprising:

generating an exposure-value image by determining, for each of the plurality of locations, which exposure value, of the plurality of exposure values, yields a largest non-saturated pixel value at the location; and

generating the exposure-value map by determining, for each of a plurality of exposure-image regions of the exposure-value image, the composite exposure value equal to a first average of exposure values within the exposure-image region.

4. The method of claim 3, the plurality of first averages forming a first exposure-value map, the step of generating the exposure-value map further comprising:

generating a reduced exposure-value map by determining, for each of the plurality of exposure-image regions, a respective one of a plurality of second averages of exposure values within the exposure-image region, for each of the plurality of exposure-image regions, the first average exceeding the second average; and

computing the exposure-value map as a weighted average of the first exposure-value map and the reduced exposure-value map.

5. The method of claim 4, for each exposure-image region of the reduced exposure-value map, the second average being an average of a subset of exposure values in the region, the subset excluding at least one exposure value in the exposure-image region greater than the first average.

6. The method of claim 4, each of the plurality of sharpness-map regions being congruent to a respective one of the plurality of exposure-image regions and corresponding to a same respective one of a plurality of image regions of one of the single-exposure images, the step of computing the exposure-value map comprising:

weighting at least one of the first exposure-value map and the reduced exposure-value map by a weight map having, for each of the plurality of image regions, a respective weight equal to a function of the sharpness value of the sharpness map in the image region.

7. The method of claim 6, wherein $i \in \{1, 2, \dots\}$ denotes the plurality of image regions, the first exposure-value map has a respective plurality of exposure values $p_1(i)$, and the sharpness map's sharpness values being denoted as $s(i)$:

the weight map having a respective plurality of weights determined by a weight function $w(s(i))$.

8. The method of claim 7, the value of weight function $w(s(i))$ being non-increasing as sharpness value $s(i)$ increases from its minimum value to its maximum value.

9. The method of claim 1, each composite exposure value being one of an exposure time and an exposure index of one of the plurality of single-exposure images.

10. The method of claim 1, the step of determining comprising: adding the sharpness values and the composite exposure values as a weighted sum to determine the optimal exposure value.

11. The method of claim 1, step of generating the HDR image comprising: generating the HDR image as a weighted sum of the reference image of the scene and the plurality of single-exposure images.

12. The method of claim 1, further comprising, after the step of determining:

capturing the reference image with an image sensor according to the optimal exposure value.

13. The method of claim 12, the image sensor including a plurality of sensor pixels each having a pixel charge corresponding to a respective intensity of light from the scene incident thereon,

the step of capturing the plurality of single-exposure images comprising:

converting, with an analog-to-digital converter, each pixel charge to a respective first digital pixel value; and

storing the first digital pixel values in a memory communicatively coupled to a microprocessor; and

the step of capturing the reference image comprising:

converting, with an analog-to-digital converter, each pixel charge to a respective second digital pixel value; and

storing the second digital pixel values in a memory communicatively coupled to a microprocessor.

14. An exposure selector for generating a high-dynamic range (HDR) image, comprising:

a memory storing non-transitory computer-readable instructions and adapted to store a plurality of single-exposure images, of a scene, having a respective one of a plurality of exposure times;

a microprocessor adapted to execute the instructions to: generate, from the plurality of single-exposure images of the scene, a sharpness map of sharpness values of the single-exposure images,

generate, from the plurality of single-exposure images, an exposure-value map of composite exposure values of the single-exposure images,

determine an optimal exposure value from the sharpness map and the exposure-value map, and

generate the HDR image by combining a reference image of the scene, captured with the optimal exposure value, and at least two of the plurality of single-exposure images.

15. The exposure selector of claim 14, the microprocessor being further adapted to execute the instructions to, when generating the sharpness map:

apply an edge-detection filter to each of the plurality of single-exposure images to generate a plurality of filtered images;

generate a composite filtered image, each pixel coordinate thereof having a pixel value equal to a maximum of pixel values at the respective pixel coordinate throughout each of the plurality of filtered images; and

determine, for each of a plurality of sharpness-map regions of the composite filtered image, a respective

sharpness value equal to an average of pixel values within the sharpness-map region.

16. The exposure selector of claim 14, each of the plurality of single-exposure images having a plurality of pixel values each respectively corresponding to a one of a plurality of locations in the imaged scene, the microprocessor being further adapted to execute the instructions to, when generating the exposure-value map:

generate an exposure-value image by determining, for each of the plurality of locations, which exposure value, of the plurality of exposure values, yields a largest non-saturated pixel value at the location; and

generate the exposure-value map by determining, for each of a plurality of exposure-image regions of the exposure-value image, the composite exposure value equal to a first average of exposure values within the exposure-image region.

17. The exposure selector of claim 16, the plurality of first averages forming a first exposure-value map, the microprocessor being further adapted to execute the instructions to, when generating the exposure-value map:

generate a reduced exposure-value map by determining, for each of the plurality of exposure-image regions, a respective one of a plurality of second averages of exposure values within the exposure-image region, for each of the plurality of exposure-image regions, the first average exceeding the second average; and

compute the exposure-value map as a weighted average of the first exposure-value map and the reduced exposure-value map.

18. The exposure selector of claim 17, for each exposure-image region of the reduced exposure-value map, the second average being an average of a subset of exposure values in the region, the subset excluding at least one exposure value in the exposure-image region greater than the first average.

19. The exposure selector of claim 17, each of the plurality of sharpness-map regions being congruent to a respective one of the plurality of exposure-image regions and corresponding to a same respective one of a plurality of image regions of one of the single-exposure images, the microprocessor being further adapted to execute the instructions to, when generating the exposure-value map:

weighting at least one of the first exposure-value map and the reduced exposure-value map by a weight map having, for each of the plurality of image regions, a respective weight equal to a function of the sharpness value of the sharpness map in the image region.

20. The exposure selector of claim 19, wherein $i \in \{1, 2, \dots\}$ denotes the plurality of image regions, the first exposure-value map has a respective plurality of exposure values $p_1(i)$, and the sharpness map's sharpness values being denoted as $s(i)$:

the weight map having a respective plurality of weights determined by a weight function $w(s(i))$.

21. The exposure selector of claim 20, the value of weight function $w(s(i))$ being non-increasing as sharpness value $s(i)$ increases from its minimum value to its maximum value.

22. The method of claim 14, each composite exposure value being one of an exposure time and an exposure index of one of the plurality of single-exposure images.

23. The method of claim 14, the microprocessor being further adapted to execute the instructions to, when combining:

add the sharpness values and the composite exposure values as a weighted sum to determine the optimal exposure value.

24. The method of claim 14, the microprocessor being further adapted to execute the instructions to, when generating the HDR image:

generate the HDR image as a weighted sum of the reference image of the scene and the plurality of single-exposure images.

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