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(54) **IMAGE ACQUISITION AND PROCESSING
SYSTEMS FOR VEHICLE EQUIPMENT
CONTROL**

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See application file for complete search history.

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Primary Examiner—Khoi Tran

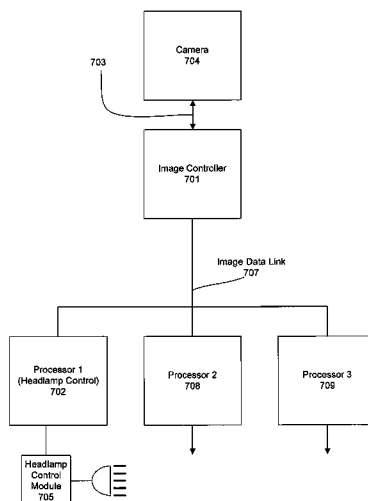
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(57) **ABSTRACT**

An apparatus is provided that includes at least one image sensor, and at least one processor. The processor is configured to receive at least a portion of at least one image from the at least one image sensor, wherein an aim of the at least one image sensor is a function of the at least one image. The processor is further configured to generate at least one vehicle equipment control signal as a function of at least one feature extracted from at least a portion of at least one image.

8 Claims, 13 Drawing Sheets



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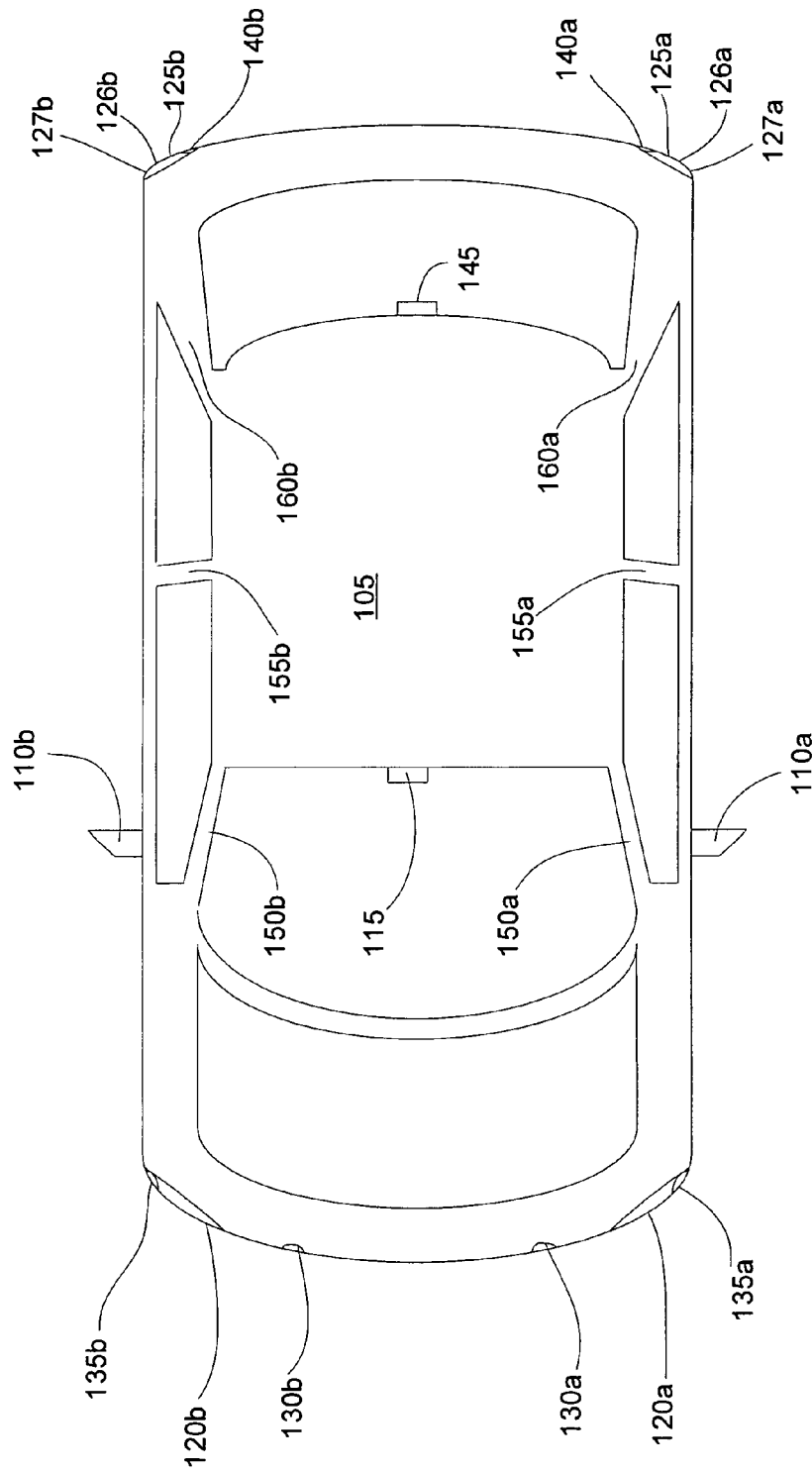


Fig. 1

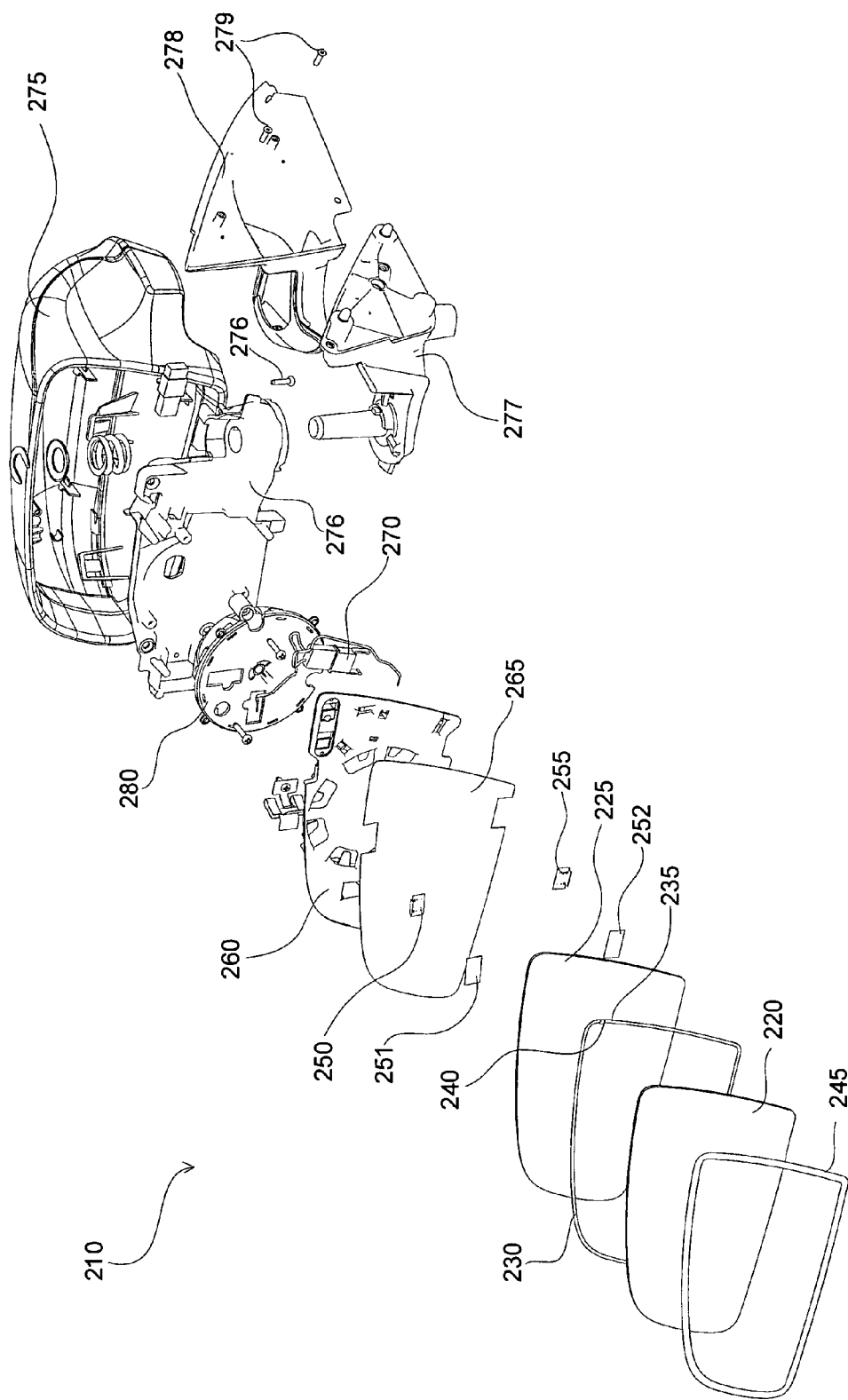


Fig. 2

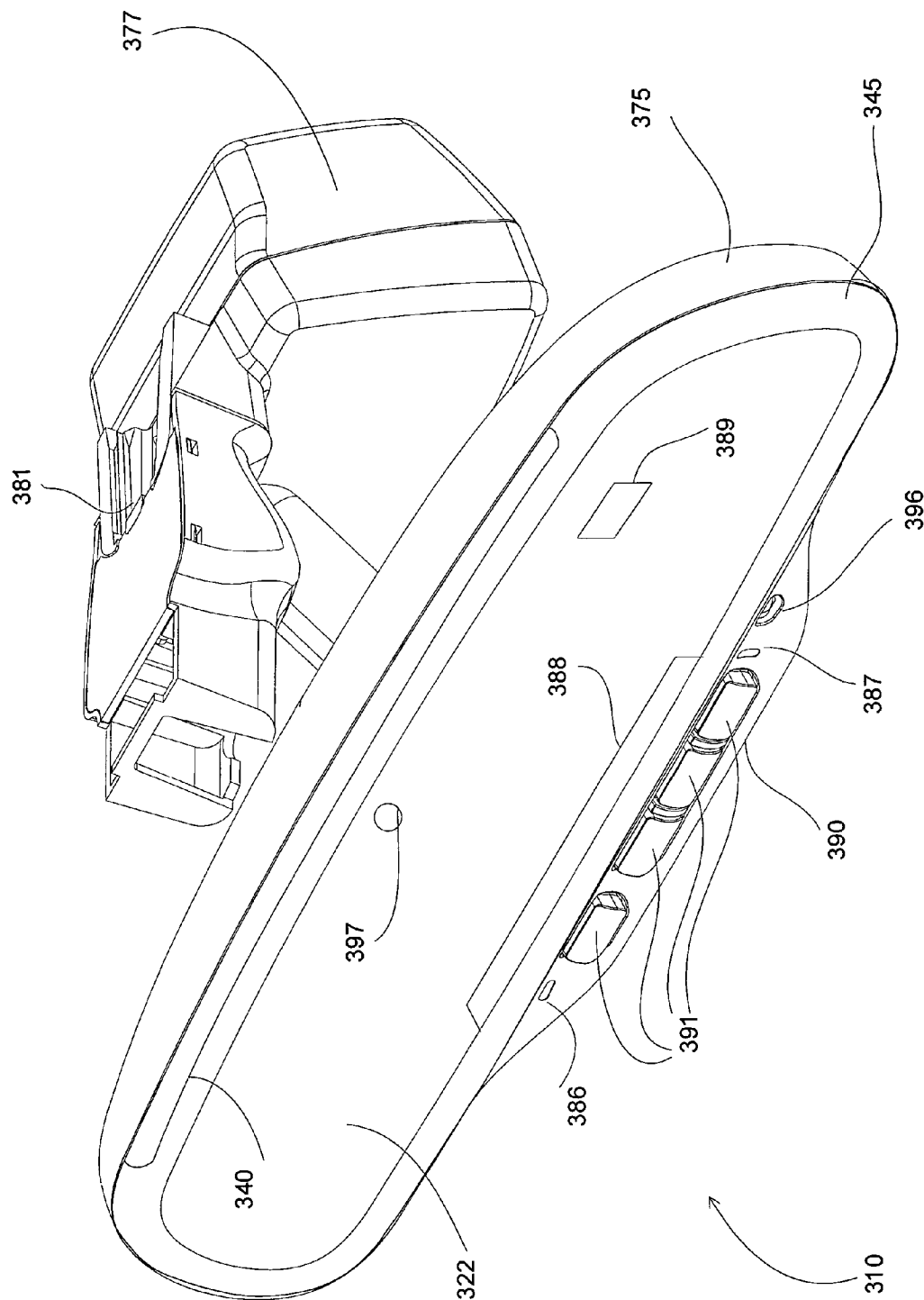


Fig. 3

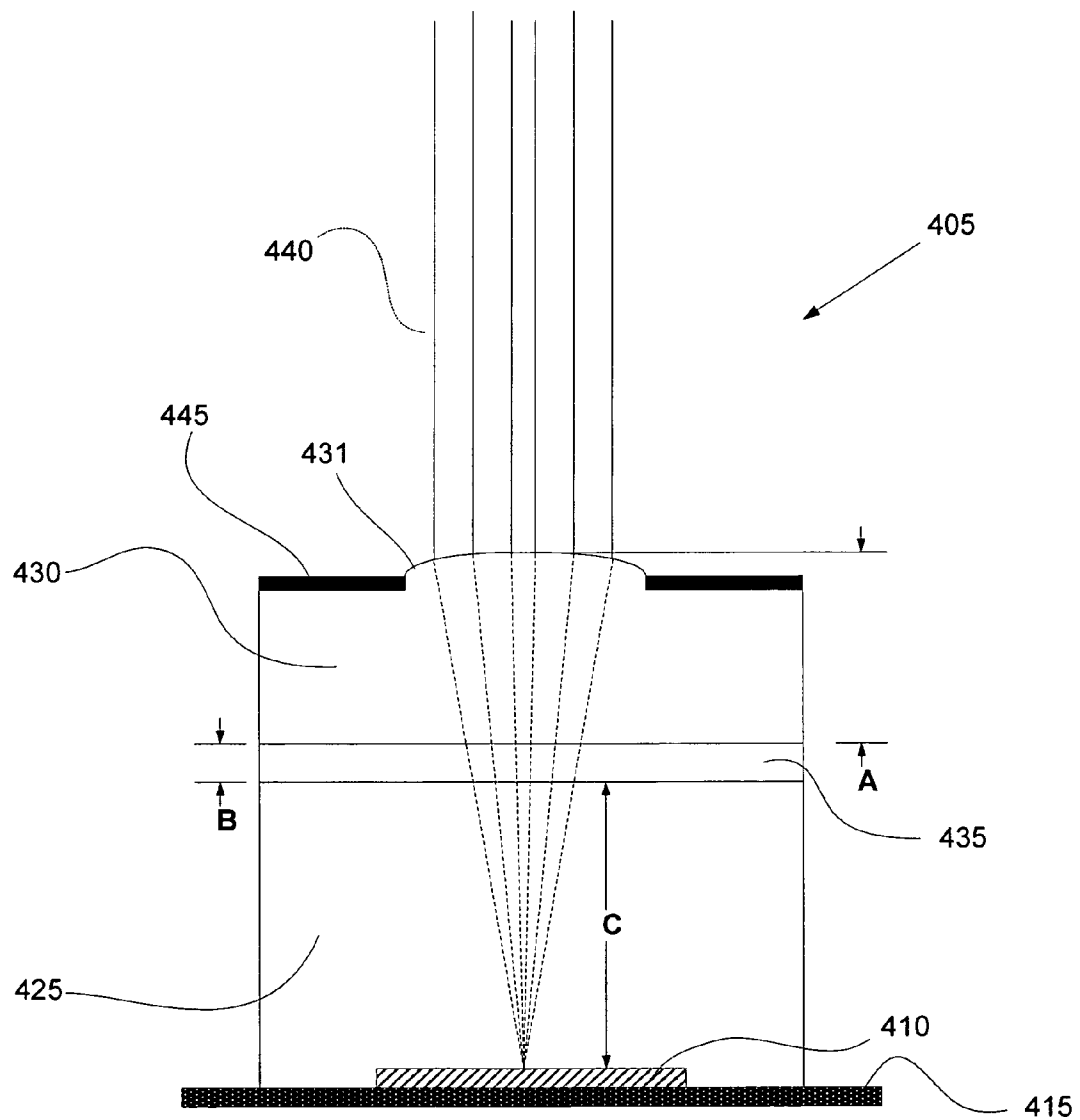


Fig. 4

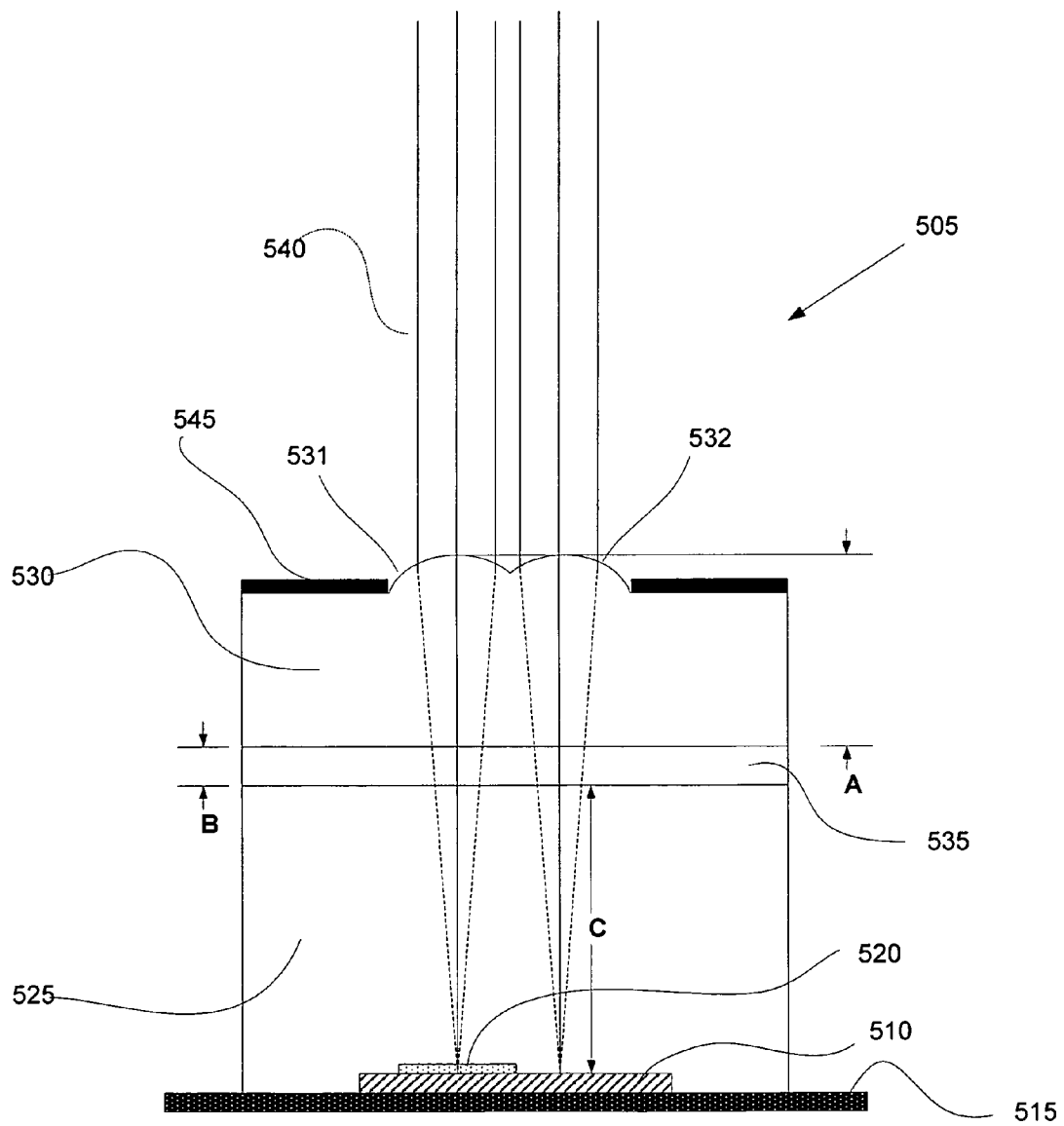


Fig. 5

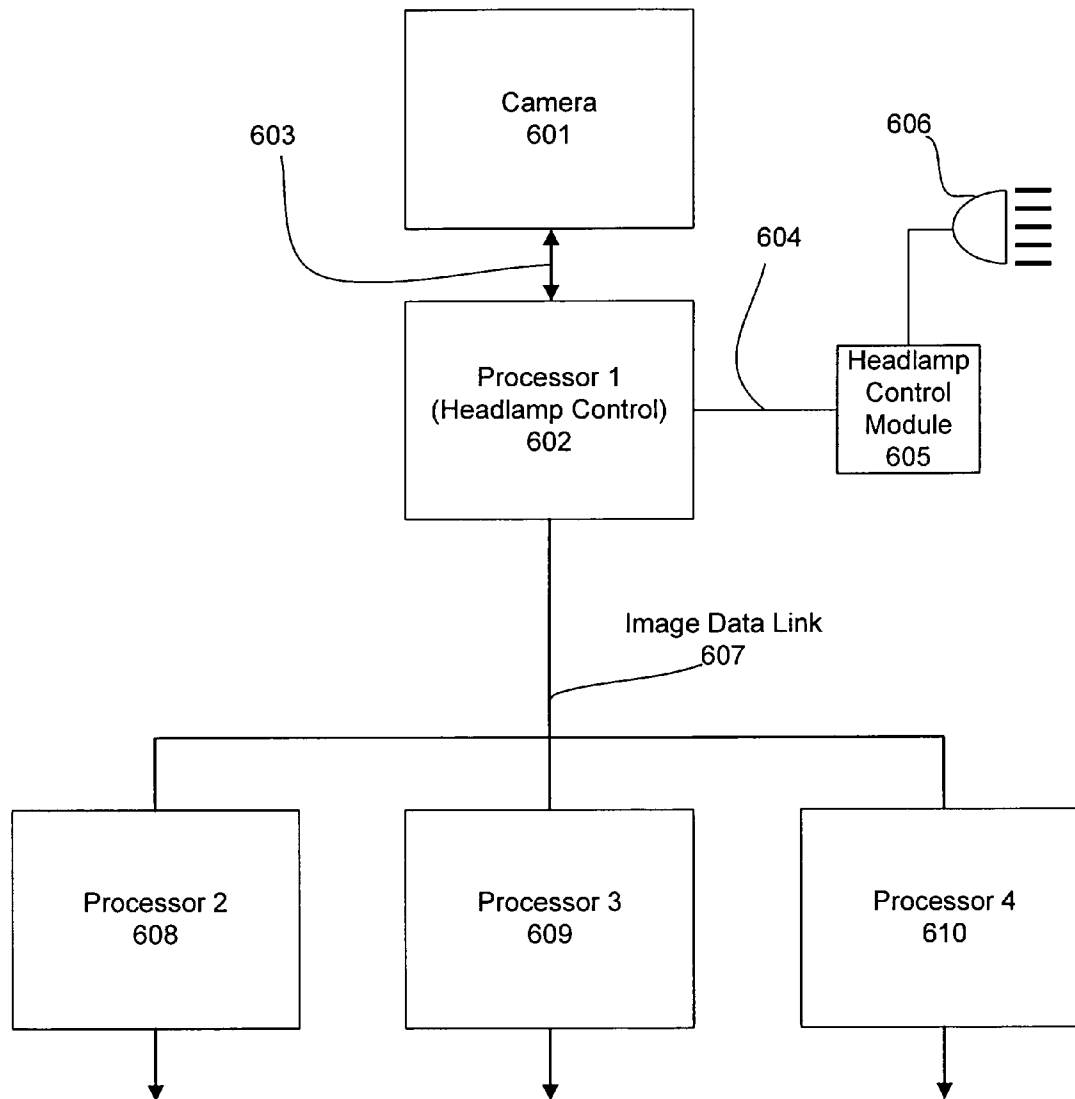


Fig. 6

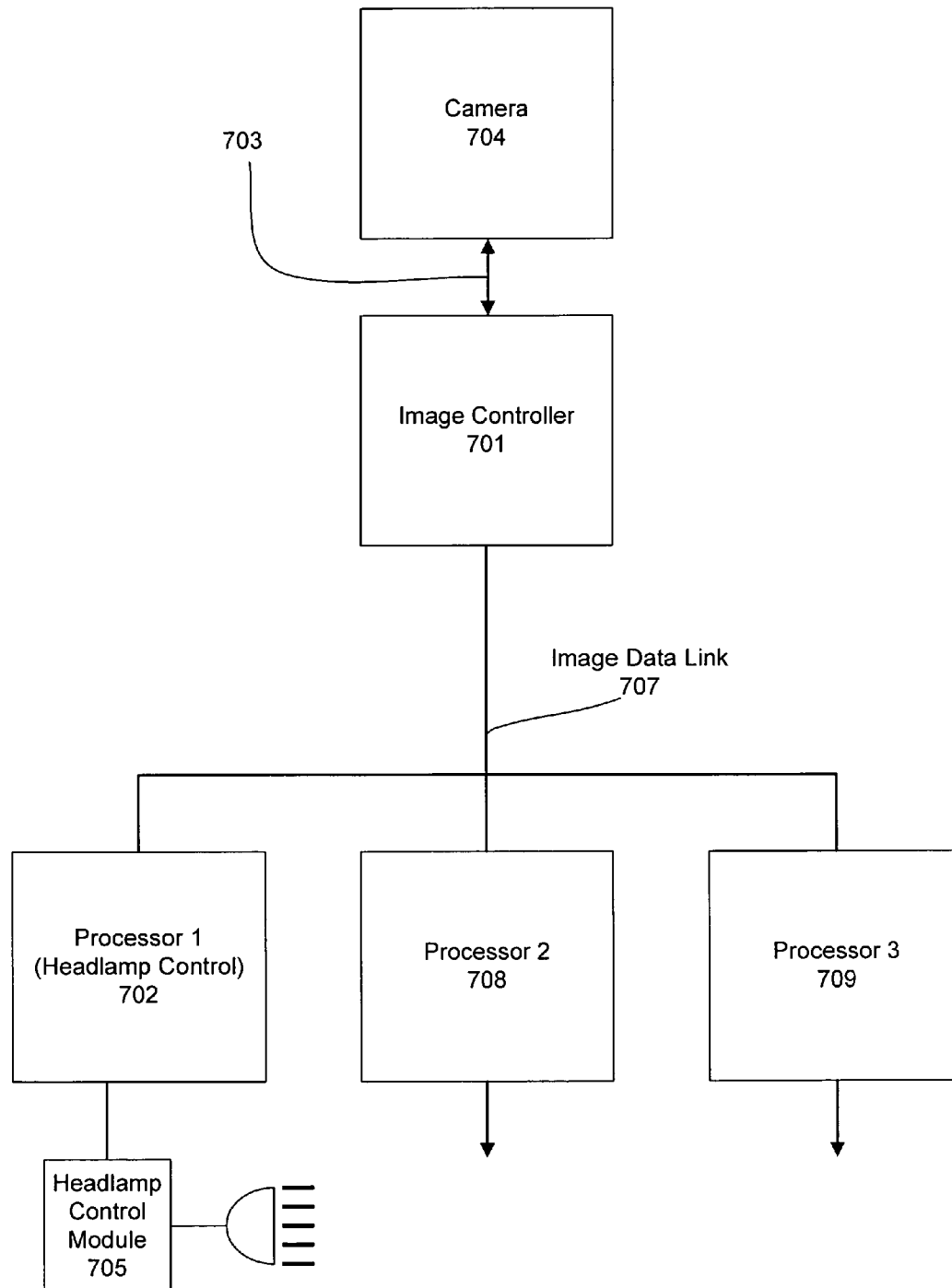


Fig. 7

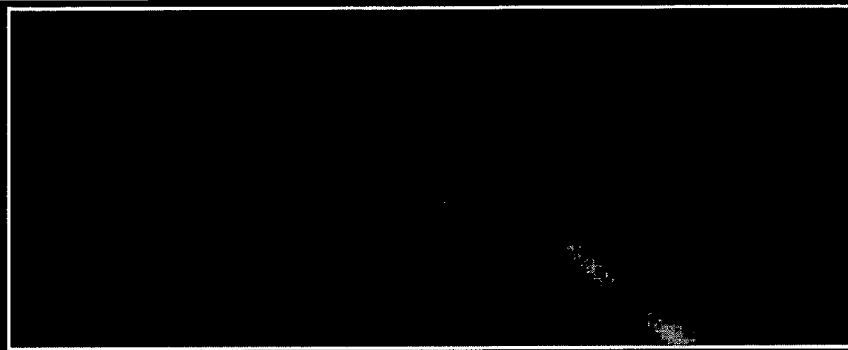


Fig. 8

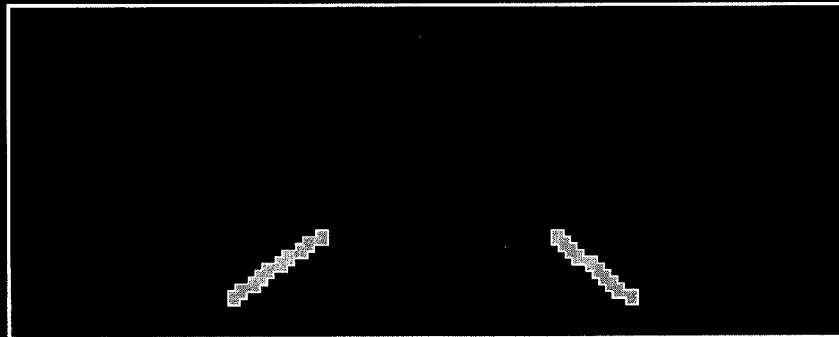
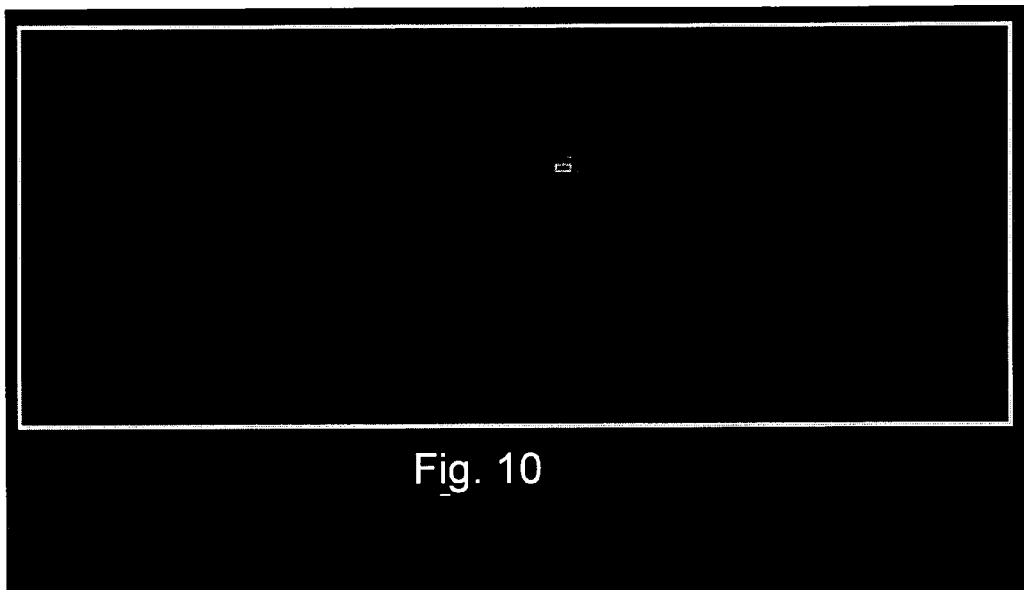


Fig. 9



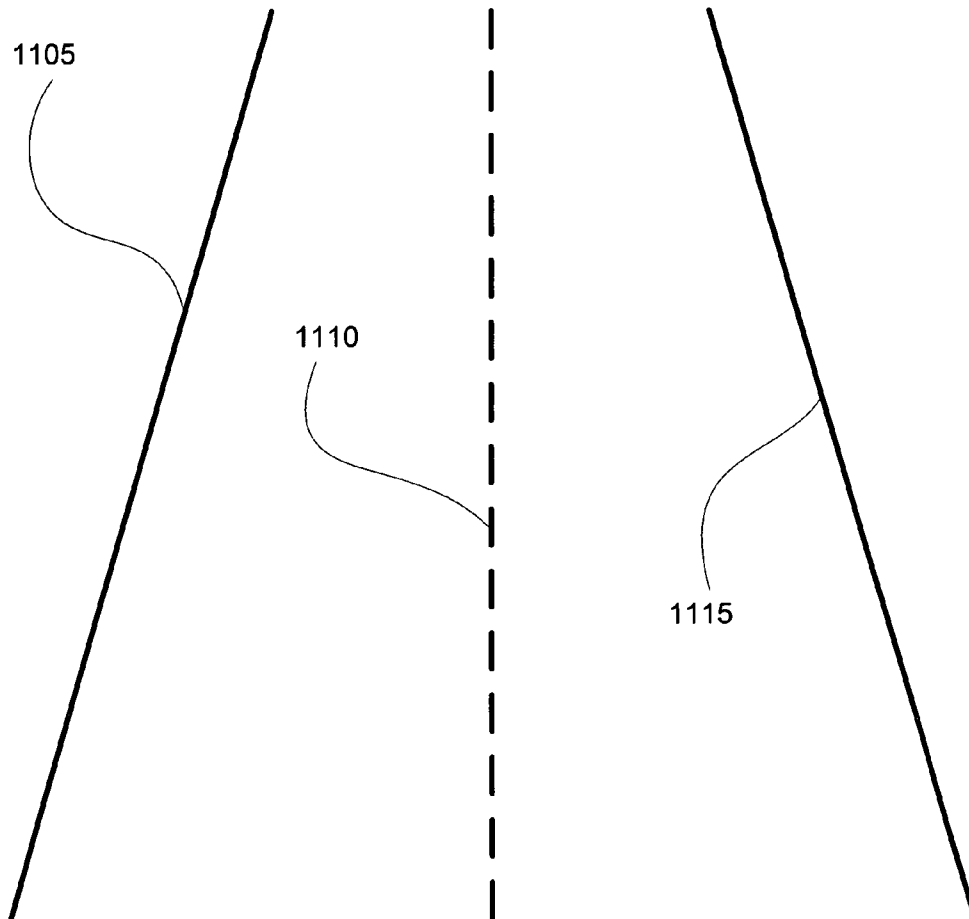


Fig. 11

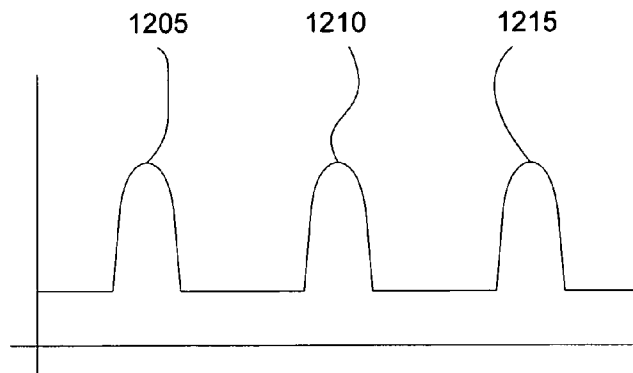


Fig. 12

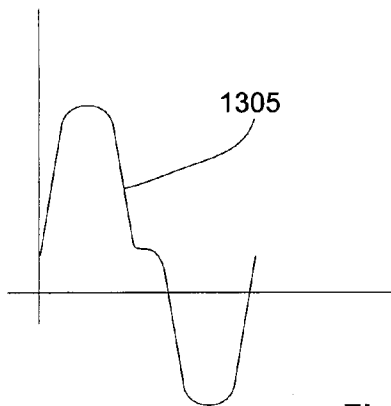


Fig. 13

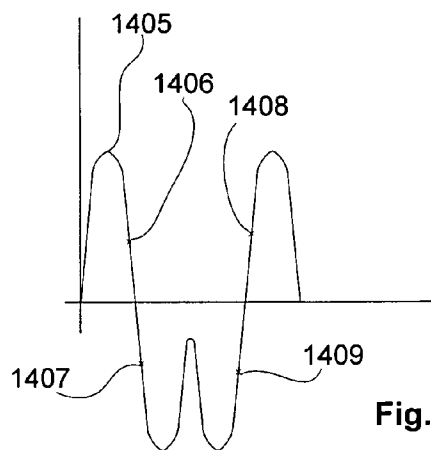


Fig. 14

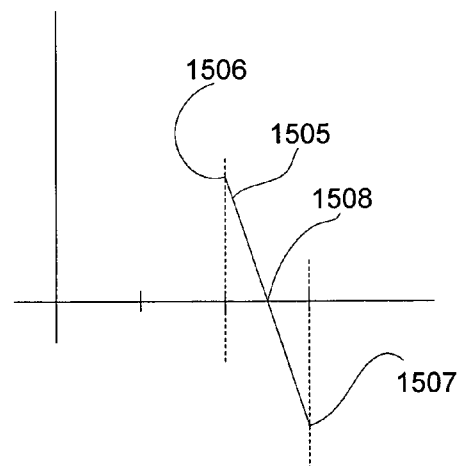


Fig. 15

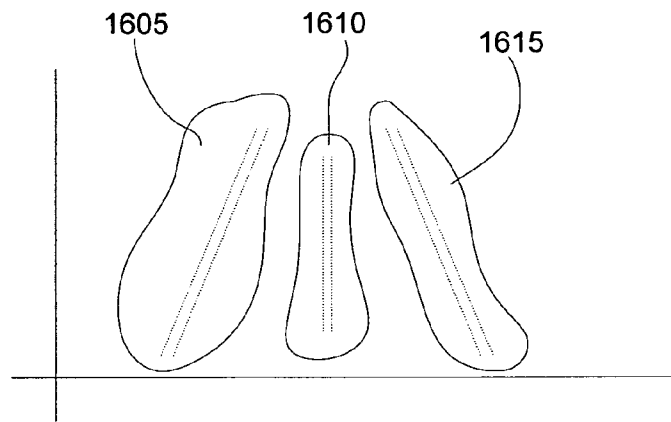


Fig. 16

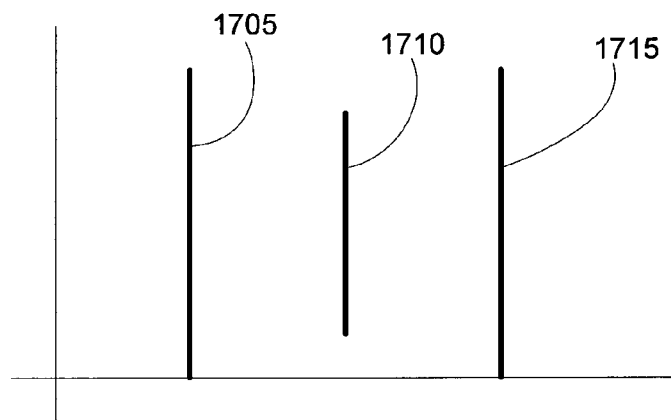


Fig. 17

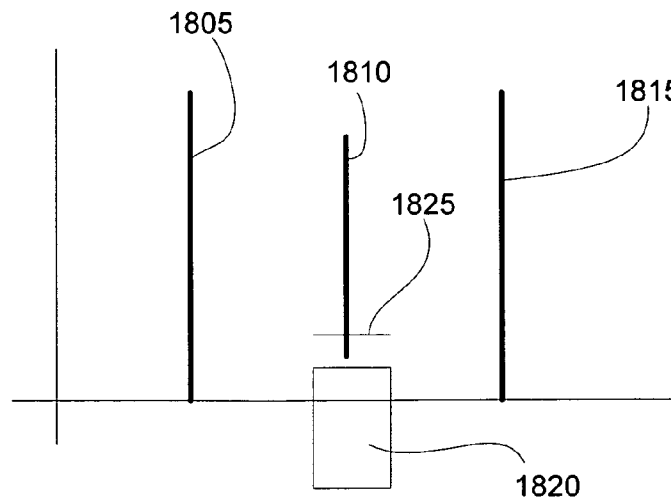


Fig. 18

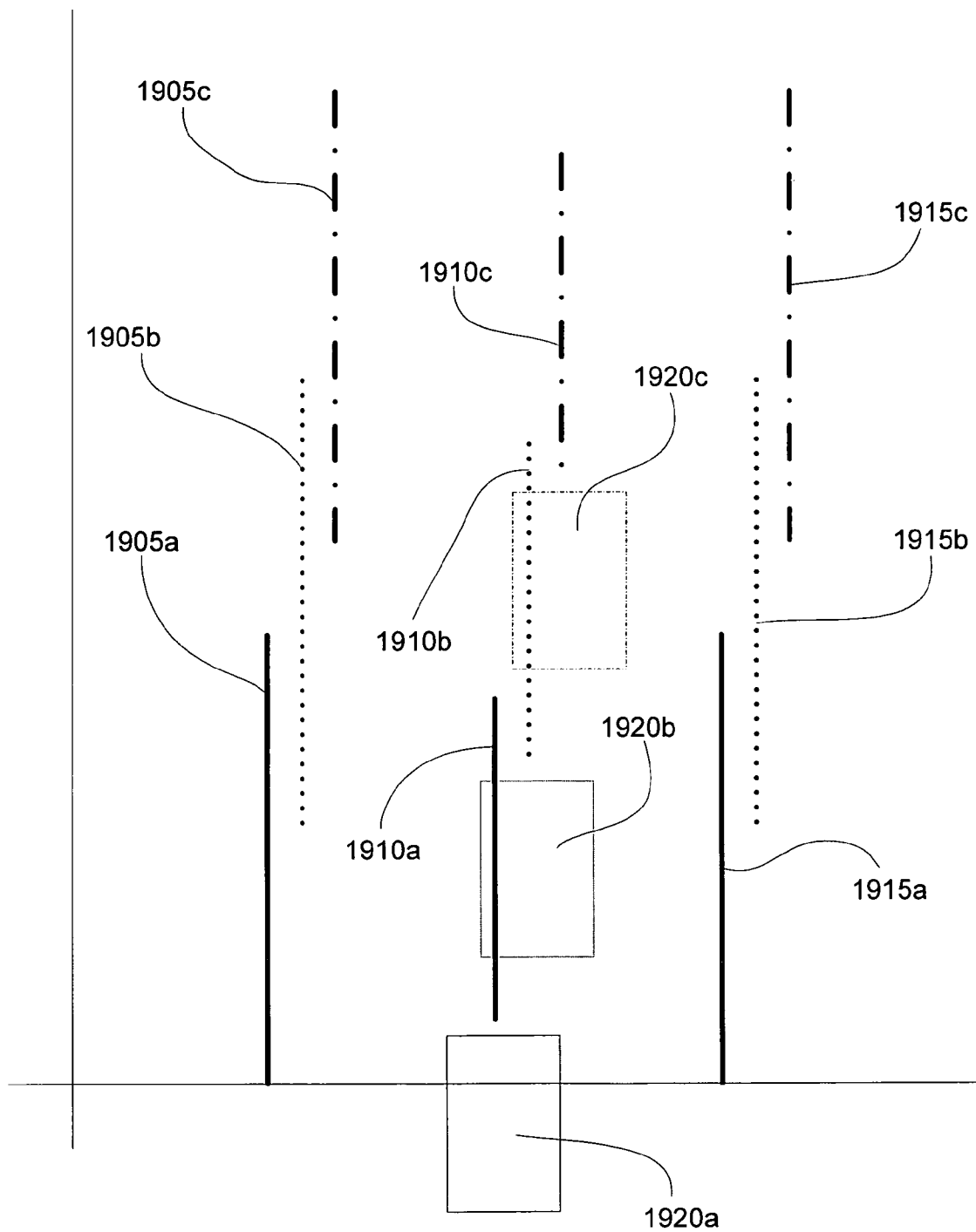


Fig. 19

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IMAGE ACQUISITION AND PROCESSING SYSTEMS FOR VEHICLE EQUIPMENT CONTROL

CROSS REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

This application claims the benefit under 35 U.S.C. §119 (e) of U.S. Provisional Patent Application Ser. No. 60/629, 108, entitled "IMPROVED IMAGE PROCESSING SYSTEM FOR VEHICLE EQUIPMENT CONTROL," which was filed Nov. 18, 2004; U.S. Provisional Patent Application Ser. No. 60/710,602, entitled "IMPROVED IMAGE ACQUISITION AND PROCESSING SYSTEM FOR VEHICLE EQUIPMENT CONTROL," which was filed Aug. 23, 2005; and United States Provisional Patent Application No. 60/715, 315 entitled "IMPROVED IMAGE PROCESSING SYSTEM FOR VEHICLE EQUIPMENT CONTROL AND VARIOUS VEHICLE EQUIPMENT CONTROL SYSTEMS," which was filed Sep. 8, 2005, the disclosures of which are incorporated in their entirety herein by reference.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

It has become common to incorporate vision systems within vehicles for automatic control and monitoring of various vehicle equipment systems. The present invention provides improvements in vehicle vision system components, vehicle vision systems and vehicle equipment control systems employing the vision system components and vision systems.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE FIGURES

FIG. 1 depicts a plan view of a controlled vehicle;
FIG. 2 depicts an exploded, perspective, view of an exterior rearview mirror assembly;
FIG. 3 depicts a perspective view of an interior rearview mirror assembly;
FIG. 4 depicts a sectional, profile, view of an image sensor;
FIG. 5 depicts a sectional, profile, view of an image sensor;
FIG. 6 depicts a block diagram of a vehicle equipment control system;
FIG. 7 depicts a block diagram of a vehicle equipment control system;
FIG. 8 depicts an actual image of a scene generally in front of a controlled vehicle;
FIG. 9 depicts a result of extracting features from the image as depicted in FIG. 8;
FIG. 10 depicts an actual image of a scene generally in front of a controlled vehicle;
FIG. 11 depicts a drawing of a roadway with lane markers;
FIG. 12 depicts a graph of a row of pixel data that would result from an image of the drawing of FIG. 11;
FIG. 13 depicts a graph of the first derivative of one of the lane markers of FIG. 12;
FIG. 14 depicts a graph of the second derivative of FIG. 13;
FIG. 15 depicts an exploded view of a section of the graph of FIG. 14;
FIG. 16 depicts the features identified in the drawing as depicted in FIG. 13;
FIG. 17 depicts a road model developed from a drawing as depicted in FIG. 13;
FIG. 18 depicts a road model developed from a drawing as depicted in FIG. 13 with a controlled vehicle superimposed; and

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FIG. 19 depicts a sequence of road models developed from a sequence of drawings each of which as depicted in FIG. 13 with a controlled vehicle superimposed.

DETAIL DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

Many vehicle equipment control systems have been proposed that incorporate imaging systems and related processors. In at least one embodiment described herein a single imaging system is provided to facilitate multiple vehicle system functionality. In at least one embodiment multiple imaging systems are provided to individually serve multiple or singular applications.

Vehicle exterior light control systems using a camera and image processing system have been developed and disclosed in commonly assigned U.S. Pat. Nos. 5,837,994, 5,990,469, 6,008,486, 6,130,448, 6,130,421, 6,049,171, 6,465,963, 6,403,942, 6,587,573, 6,611,610, 6,621,616, 6,631,316 and U.S. patent application Ser. Nos. 10/208,142, 09/799,310, 60/404,879, 60/394,583, 10/235,476, 10/783,431, 10/777, 468, 09/800,460 and 60/590,736; the disclosures of which are incorporated herein in their entirety by reference. In these systems, images are acquired of the view forward a motor vehicle. In at least one embodiment, an image sensor is optically coupled to the interior surface of the windshield such that reflections and, or, refraction from the interior windshield surface is substantially eliminated. These images are processed to determine the presence or absence of oncoming or preceding vehicles and the controlled vehicles exterior lights are adjusted, for example by turning off the high beams, to prevent glare to the drivers of other vehicles.

Moisture sensing, windshield wiper and HVAC controls are described in commonly assigned U.S. Pat. Nos. 5,923,027 and 6,617,566 as well as U.S. patent application Ser. Nos. 09/970,728 and 60/472,017, the entire disclosures of which are incorporated herein by reference.

With reference to FIG. 1, a controlled vehicle 105 may comprise a variety of exterior lights, such as, headlight assemblies 120a, 120b, foul conditions lights 130a, 130b, front turn signal indicators 135a, 135b, taillight assembly 125a, 125b, rear turn signal indicators 126a, 126b, rear emergency flashers 127a, 127b, backup lights 140a, 140b and center high mounted stop light (CHMSL) 145.

As described in detail herein, the controlled vehicle may comprise at least one control system incorporating various components that provide shared function with other vehicle equipment. An example of one control system described herein integrates various components associated with automatic control of the reflectivity of at least one rearview mirror element and automatic control of at least one exterior light. Such systems 115 may comprise at least one image sensor within a rearview mirror, an A-pillar 150a, 150b, a B-pillar 155a, 155b, a C-pillar 160a, 160b, a CHMSL or elsewhere within or upon the controlled vehicle. Images acquired, or portions thereof, maybe used for automatic vehicle equipment control. The images, or portions thereof, may alternatively, or additionally, be displayed on one or more displays. At least one display may be covertly positioned behind a transfective, or at least partially transmissive, electro-optic element. A common controller may be configured to generate at least one mirror element drive signal and at least one other equipment control signal.

Turning now to FIG. 2, various components of an outside rearview mirror assembly 210 are depicted. In at least one embodiment, an electro-optic mirror element is provided comprise a first substrate 220 having at least one conductive/reflective coating on an inward facing surface secured in a

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spaced apart relationship with a second substrate **225** having at least one conductive/reflective coating on an inward facing surface via a primary seal **230** to form a chamber there between. In at least one embodiment at least a portion of the primary seal is left void to form at least one chamber fill port **235**. An electro-optic medium is enclosed in the chamber and the fill port(s) are sealingly closed via a plug material **240**. Preferably, the plug material is a UV curable epoxy or acrylic material. Also shown is a spectral filter material **245** located near the periphery of the element. Electrical clips **250**, **255** are preferably secured to the element, respectively, via first adhesive material **251**, **252**. The element is secured to a carrier plate **260** via second adhesive material **265**. Electrical connections from the outside rearview mirror to other components of the controlled vehicle are preferably made via a connector **270**. The carrier is attached to an associated housing mount **276** via a positioner **280**. Preferably, the housing mount is engaged with a housing **275** and secured via at least one fastener **276**. Preferably the housing mount comprises a swivel portion configured to engage a swivel mount **277**. The swivel mount is preferably configured to engage a vehicle mount **278** via at least one fastener **279**. Additional details of these components, additional components, their interconnections and operation is provided herein.

Turning now to FIG. 3, there is shown an inside rearview mirror assembly **310** as viewed looking at the first substrate **322** with a spectral filter material **345** positioned between the viewer and a primary seal material (not shown). The mirror element is shown to be positioned within a movable housing **375** and combined with a stationary housing **377** on a mounting structure **381**. A first indicator **386**, a second indicator **387**, operator interfaces **391** and a first photo sensor **396** are positioned in a chin portion **390** of the movable housing. A first information display **388**, a second information display **389** and a second photo sensor **397** are incorporated within the assembly such that they are behind the element with respect to the viewer. As described with regard to the outside rearview mirror assembly, it is preferable to have devices **388**, **389**, **397** at least partially covert.

In preferred embodiments of such systems, lights from other vehicles and non-vehicular objects are identified by locating peak points of brightness in the image. Once located various properties of these bright points, such as the brightness, color, position, width, height, and motion are determined. The values of these parameters are analyzed using statistical methods to determine if the bright points correspond to the headlamps or tail lamps of other vehicles, or to non-vehicular light sources such as signs, reflectors, or other stationary lights. A significant challenge in the development of the image processing algorithms for vehicular lighting control is properly classifying the peak points in the image. Failure to correctly identify a light source may result in glare to the other vehicles, or shutting off of the high beams at inappropriate times resulting in controlled vehicle driver dissatisfaction.

The inventors have determined that the position of the bright point in the image is an extremely significant variable in the classification of the object. Peak points located in the center of the image are more likely to correspond to vehicular light sources while sources off to the side are more likely to correspond to signs or reflectors (other factors such as color, brightness, and motion are preferably simultaneously considered). The inventors are also aware from experience that the manufacturing of the camera and physical mounting of a camera in a vehicle is subject to variation. Thus the actual center of the image may not be known with high precision. To alleviate these problems, factory aim calibration is preferably

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utilized to establish the center of the image in the vehicle assembly plant. Automatic continuous aim calibration is also utilized as described in the aforementioned prior art.

While these aim methods are highly effective in establishing the appropriate image center calibration, there are limitations that the current invention overcomes. An apparatus similar to one utilized for headlamp aiming is preferably employed in the assembly plant. An illumination source is positioned in a predetermined position in front of each vehicle and at least one image is acquired. At least one image is analyzed to determine if the image sensor aim is acceptable.

In at least one embodiment, the present invention improves aiming methods by establishing an image aim calibration which occurs with every image cycle or with only a small number of cycles. Thus, the present invention is able to adapt very quickly to changes in road conditions and establish the position of the center of the road in the image and thus determine the position of identified bright peaks in the image relative to the road. This information can be used to better classify the identified peaks and results in improved performance and the potential elimination of the need for factory aim.

In at least one embodiment of the present invention, the painted road lane markers are identified to locate the position of the road. The intersection of the left and right lane in the image indicates the center of the road. Lane departure warning systems are commercially available on vehicles which identify lane markers and warn drivers who make lane changes without signaling. Some of these systems use an image sensor and image processing means to identify these lanes. The algorithms used in these systems may be used with an exterior light control system to identify the lanes for the purpose of aiming the exterior light control system rather than, or in addition to the lane departure warning function. A separate lane departure warning system may be equipment with a means to communicate the lane positions to the exterior light control system for the purpose of determining the road position for the exterior light control system.

A simple lane tracking algorithm is now presented which has been determined to be effective for lane identification for the purpose described herein. For this example the imaging system may be configured as described in FIG. 4 or 5. As depicted in FIG. 4, the imaging system **405** comprises an image sensor **410** mounted to a circuit board **415**. The image sensor is encapsulated in a material **425** to form a lens assembly **430** mount. The lens assembly comprises a first lens **431** configured for focusing light rays **440** from a scene upon the image sensor. The imaging system further comprises a mask **445** configured to form an aperture around the first lens. The overall image sensor resolution is 144x176 pixels. As depicted in FIG. 5, the imaging system **505** comprises an image sensor **510** mounted to a circuit board **515** with a spectral filter material **520** disposed over approximately one half of the associated pixels. The image sensor is encapsulated in a material **525** to form a lens assembly **530** mount. The lens assembly comprises a first lens **531** configured for focusing light rays **540** from a scene upon the half of the image sensor such that the light rays pass through the spectral filter material. The lens assembly comprises a second lens **532** configured for focusing light rays from substantially the same scene onto the other half of the image sensor such that the light rays do not pass through the spectral filter material. The imaging system further comprises a mask **545** configured to form an aperture around the first and second lenses. The overall image sensor resolution is 176x144 pixels. However, the array is split in two halves, each of which images substantially the same scene but one half does so through a spectral

filter. Each half uses a subwindow of pixels, for example 144 pixels wide×50 pixels high. Preferably the unfiltered half is used for lane detection. The field of view is preferably approximately 0.2 degrees per pixel. The lane detection algorithm preferably operates on the lower region of the image, for example the bottom 15 rows and does not necessarily utilize all columns. It should be understood that the following and subsequent examples may be applied to various image sensors with various resolutions and various optical configurations. As costs of image sensors and processors decrease, it may be advantageous to use an image sensor with higher resolution and a wider field of view, for example 50 degrees or more. The wider field of view will allow a larger aim correction, better detection of vehicles around curves, and tolerance to a wider range of windshield angles. The present invention should not be construed as limited to any specific type or configuration of image sensor.

In each row processing begins from the horizontal center pixel. Moving rightwards across the row, each pixel is examined to determine if it is significantly larger than the pixels two places to the right and left of the examined pixels. If so, it is determined that the pixel is imaging a portion of a bright line (i.e. the lane marker). The pixel's coordinate is stored in a list of right-lane coordinates and then the same process takes place moving left of the center pixel. If no bright pixel is found, then no coordinates are stored. The process repeats for each of the bottom 15 rows, storing the coordinates of the bright lane marker pixels in a right and left lane pixel list. If a sufficient number (for example at least 4) of pixels were found for right or left lanes, linear regression is performed to determine the slope and intercept of a line fitting the lane points. A R^2 goodness of fit value is preferably used to determine if the points fall nearly on a line and if so, the resulting linear equation is used as an indication of the lane position.

If both left and right lanes are identified with a good R^2 value, the position of the lanes and road are known. The center point is computed as the intersection of these lines. If only one of the two lines is found, the second line can be approximated by knowing the relationship which exists between the slopes of the right and left lane. This relationship has been experimentally determined using examples of data collected when two lanes are present. The slopes and intercepts of one lane can be seen to generally be related to the other, since road widths are generally consistent. Thus a reasonable approximation of the road position can be determined from a single lane. Once the road center and lane positions are determined, the position of an identified object relative to the road center can be used for an improved classification. Additionally, the position of an object relative to the lane line marker can also be used. For example objects right of the right lane are most likely to be signs.

In some cases road line markers will not be identified. This can be caused by a lack of paint on a rural road, snow, salt, or other sources of noise which obscure the lane or make it difficult for the described algorithm to identify the lane properly. For periods where the lane identification is intermittent, the center from recent prior identification of lane markers can be used. In other cases where lanes have not been identified for a longer period of time, the time averaged mean center position can be utilized. The present invention provides an improvement over prior systems by allowing the mean center to be calculated more quickly and dynamically than prior systems, due to fact that lanes are frequently visible. In cases where left and right lanes are clearly detected, the resultant center is averaged with the center from other recent time computations. The mean center should only be computed when the vehicle is traveling straight, which can be deter-

mined from a vehicle yaw sensor, a steering wheel sensors, a compass, or by insuring that the detected lanes slopes are approximately equal in magnitude but opposite in sign, thus indicating straight travel. When lanes are not present, the time averaged value is used as the calibrated image center point. FIG. 8 shows an image from the camera of a road with lane markers. FIG. 9 shows pixels selected on the lane markers using the above described method.

In another embodiment of the present invention, the road illumination gradient is used to determine the road position. As can be seen in FIG. 8, the lane lines point to the center of the image. In FIG. 10, an image of a snowy road is depicted; there are no visible lane markers. However, one can visually see the road and the perspective of the road narrowing to a center point. This center point is identified in software by looking at illumination gradients. At many of the pixels in the lower half of the image, there is a direction in which the brightness of the pixel relative to its neighbors changes little, and in the perpendicular direction changes more rapidly. A direction dependent gradient computation filter is used to determine the magnitude and direction of this change. For example, the Sobel Operators:

$$\nabla f = \begin{bmatrix} G_x \\ G_y \end{bmatrix} = \begin{bmatrix} -1 \cdot f_{i-1,j-1} - 2 \cdot f_{i-1,j} - 1 \cdot f_{i-1,j+1} + f_{i+1,j-1} + 2 \cdot f_{i+1,j} + f_{i+1,j+1} \\ -1 \cdot f_{i-1,j-1} - 2 \cdot f_{i,j-1} - 1 \cdot f_{i,j+1} + f_{i-1,j+1} + 2 \cdot f_{i,j+1} + f_{i+1,j+1} \end{bmatrix}$$

Where $f_{x,y}$ is the pixel grayscale value of the image pixel at location x,y and i,j is the current pixel location at which the gradient is being computed.

From these vectors the direction of the maximum gradient is computed. The direction perpendicular to this vector will point towards the center of the road. For any pixels exhibiting a strong gradient, the intersections of the perpendicular vectors to the gradient may be computed. This average intersection indicates the center of the road.

Formulas other than the Sobel operators may be used to determine gradient. It is especially useful to consider pixels beyond the adjacent pixels of the examined pixel.

In at least one embodiment, the motion of detected objects may be considered to determine the center of the image. As described in some of the prior referenced commonly assigned patents and patent applications, the detected objects may be tracked over time to determine their motion vector. In general, objects tend to emanate from the center of the image. The intersection of the motion vectors of several objects examined over time may be used to compute the average center point of the image. In cases where there are several objects this center point may be computed quickly.

Any of the above methods may be combined for best results. Other methods known in the art may also be combined with these methods. For example, when clear lanes are detected they may be used to determine the road location and center. When there are no clear lanes but strong gradients, these gradients may be used. When there is no clear road identified, the road location from recent images may be used. Finally, when the road had not been identified for an extended period of time, the time averaged mean center of the image from prior cycles may be used.

Classification of objects may be performed using a statistical analysis of collected and manually identified samples of objects recorded when driving. The various parameters of the object examined may include x-position, y-position, bright-

ness, color, width, height, age, x-motion, and y-motion. In the present invention, x-position & y-position may be expressed as a difference from the currently identified center of the image. The parameters are examined using statistical analysis methods, such as those in the commercially available software program Minitab. For example, a binary logistic regression may be used to develop an equation which relates these parameters to a probability that the object is an exterior light, and another equation may be generated to determine the probability that the object is a tail lamp.

The example data may be divided into various subsets since there is not usually a linear relationship between any of the parameters and the probability of the object being a vehicle light. Within a subset the relationship may be more linear. Objects in the center of the image may be analyzed to develop an equation characterizing these objects. Separate equations may be developed for different areas of the image. Separate equations may be developed for various vehicle speeds or various turning conditions. Turning conditions may be based upon yaw rate, steering wheel sensors, compass, or derived from the road identification. Separate regression equations may be developed for situations when the road center is clearly identified from situations where the road cannot be clearly identified. For example, when the road is identified a strong dependence on position may be used for classification. When the road is not identified, and the mean time-averaged image center location is utilized with a regression equation with less dependence on position, since the position information is less certain. Other methods of data analysis, such as those described in the referenced prior art may also be used in conjunction with the methods of the present invention. The inventions described herein for identification of the road may also be used for application other than exterior light control, for example lane departure warning systems.

Image sensors and image processing systems are increasingly being employed to perform a wide variety safety and convenience functions in motor vehicles. Examples of such functions include vision assistance, headlamp control, rain sensing, lane departure warning, collision avoidance, sign recognition, and adaptive cruise control. In some cases, where the fields of view needed for the application are similar or overlap, it is desirable to use a single camera to perform more than one of these or other functions. A single camera will require less physical space and may be less expensive than using multiple dedicated cameras.

While the use of a single camera to perform multiple functions is initially appealing, there are several technical and commercial obstacles complicating this goal. Many of the applications listed above require a field of view substantially in front of the vehicle, however the requirements of the camera are substantially different. A headlamp control system, which identifies the headlamps and tail lamps of oncoming and preceding vehicles, requires a field of view of 30° to 50°, resolution of approximately 5-10 pixels per degree, very high intra-scene dynamic range (i.e. the ability to sense a wide variety of light levels within a single image), very accurate color measurement for point light sources, and a frame rate of approximately 5 frames per second. A lane departure warning system requires a field of view of approximately 25°-35°, resolution of greater than 5 degrees per pixel, a wide inter-scene dynamic range to adapt to varying daytime and nighttime light levels, and a frame rate of approximately 10 frames per second. A sign recognition system requires a narrower field of view of view but a very high resolution of greater than 20 degrees per pixel.

To perform multiple functions the processor may have to process the image in very different ways. Reading a sign, for

instance, differs substantially in method and complexity from detecting headlamps or tail lamps. Some applications can function by analyzing a continuous stream of video images. Headlamp control, in contrast, requires the imager to abruptly change between exposure times and image windows. As described in the patents and patent applications incorporated by reference elsewhere herein street lamps can be distinguished from headlamps by detecting the AC ripple in their intensity. This detection requires the imager to acquire small windows at frame rates of 480 frames per second. After the streetlamp analysis, full field images are then acquired for the next cycle.

In addition to the technical hurdles there are substantial commercial hurdles complicating implementation of multiple functions from one camera. An automotive manufacturer may prefer to use different suppliers to provide different functionality based upon the expertise of the individual suppliers. The image processing software and methods developed by each supplier likely utilize a wide variety of computation hardware, each optimized for the particular function. Although it may be technically conceivable to implement several function on one processing platform it is likely very difficult or impractical to do so. Thus, to allow several different functions to be performed with a single camera it is necessary to provide the image data to different processing platforms provided for each application while preserving the image sensing control flexibility needed for some of the applications to operate properly.

The present invention provides a camera which can be controlled by one or more of the image processing systems to allow for a variety of image acquisition parameters while providing a continuous standard video stream to other applications.

An example embodiment of the present invention is shown in FIG. 6. In this example, an image sensor 601 is controlled by a processor 602. Communication of image sensor control parameters as well as image data occurs over communication bus 603, which may be a bi-directional serial bus, parallel bus, a combination of both, or other suitable means. Processor 602 serves to perform the headlamp control function by analyzing the images from camera 601, determining the headlamp state based upon these images, and communicating the determined headlamp state to a headlamp control module 605 thru bus 604, which may be a CAN bus or any other suitable communication link.

As described in hereinabove, the headlamp control function requires the image sensor to be activated in several different modes with different exposure times and different readout windows. Because of this complexity, Processor 602 is selected to both perform the headlamp control function and control the parameters of the image sensor 601. Other functions, such as those listed above, can receive the image data from image sensor 601 without needing the direct image sensor control required by the headlamp control function. Thus, the image data from image sensor 601 can be communicated to one or more other processors (shown as 608, 609 & 610) from processor 602 through and image data link 607. The image data link may be a MOST bus, a high-speed CAN bus, or any other suitable electronic data communication scheme. The communication can be unidirectional or bi-directional. The later case allows additional processors to communicate with processor 602 to modify the image acquisition parameters if required. In a preferred embodiment image data link 607 is implemented as described in commonly assigned U.S. Patent Application publication number 20050135465, the entire disclosure of which is incorporated herein by reference.

While performing the headlamp control function Processor 1 will request images of the full field of view at one or more exposure times. These images will then be processed for the headlamp control function. Simultaneously with processing, these images will be sent over image data link 607 to the other processors. Processor 602 may perform some pre-processing such as filtering, dynamic range compression, or color computation on the images before transmission. In addition to the image data the acquisition parameters used to take the image may be sent in the event this information is needed by one of the other applications. Once the image data is received, the other processors may analyze the data independent of processor 602 and perform the required function. Additional images required solely for the headlamp control function may be acquired between transmission of images to the other processors.

During conditions when the headlamp control function is not active, such as in daytime or when disabled, Processor 602 may still serve to acquire the images, pre-process the images, and transmit them to the other processors. Processor 602 may also perform auto-exposure control to determine the appropriate imaging parameters for the current lighting conditions. Alternatively, processor 602 may receive instructions from one of the other processors to adjust exposure time or other parameters. Occasionally the output from one function may be used to supplement performance of another function. For example, the location of road lanes detected by a lane departure warning system may be used by the headlamp control function to allow determination of the location of light sources relative to the road location. In this case, data other than image data may also be computed between functions over image data link 607.

In the first embodiment, Processor 602 serves as a "master" processor and the other processors serve to receive information from the master. In an alternative embodiment shown in FIG. 7 a dedicated image controller 704 is provided which serves to control the image sensor 701 and may serve to perform pre-processing such as auto-exposure, dynamic range compression, filtering, or color computation. The image data is then transmitted over data link 707 to each of the processors. Processor 702 again serves to perform the headlamp control function but requests images from the image controller 704 rather than controlling the camera directly. The one or more additional processors 708 & 709 may also request specific image data from image controller 704 or may simply receive image data on a regular interval. Image controller 704 manages the image requests from multiple processors while providing a regular output of image data to all processors. It is envisioned that image controller 704 may be provided integral with image sensor 701 and possibly even integrated monolithically on the same silicon chip as the image sensor.

In both embodiments described herein the image sensor 701 may be located on the mount of a vehicle rear-view mirror. Locating the camera on the mirror mount has several advantages: The mount is rigid and stationary, the mirror mount is typically located in the vehicle's windshield wiper path, and the factory installation is simplified as the mirror is already being attached. The camera may be placed separate from the mirror, but an additional factory installation step is then required.

Regardless of the location of image sensor 701, processor 702 (or alternatively image controller 704) may be co-located with image sensor 701, on the same or separate circuit boards. These processors may also be located in a rear-view mirror body and may serve to perform other functions such as a compass sensor or control of an auto-dimming rear-view

mirror. These processors may also be located in a headliner, over-head counsel, or other suitable location in the vehicle.

Turning now to FIG. 11 an image of a roadway is depicted including left lane line 1105, center lane line 1110 and right lane line 1115. In a preferred embodiment, the sensitivity of the associated image sensor is set such that the area within the image void of lane lines results in related pixel values of approximately twenty percent of the full scale value obtainable from the given pixels, it should be understood that the sensitivity may be set to result in thirty percent, forty percent, fifty percent or any other desired value. The most preferred sensitivity setting will result in the pixels actually detecting lane markings having a value less than full scale (i.e. not washed out).

FIG. 12 depicts a graph of the pixel values of a representative row of the image of FIG. 11. The left lane line 1205, the center lane line 1210 and the right lane line 1215 induce higher values in the associated pixels. It is desirable to identify the pixels in each row of the image that correspond to the edges of the given lane line. In a preferred embodiment a first derivative is taken of the values as depicted in FIG. 12; the result of the left lane line is depicted in FIG. 13 as first derivative 1305. Taking the first derivative of the values of FIG. 12 results in "thresholding out" noise associated with the raw pixel values. In even a more preferred embodiment a second derivative 1405 is calculated resulting in the graph depicted in FIG. 14. The second derivative reveals a positive to negative transition between points 1406 and 1407 indicative of a first edge of a lane line and a negative to positive transition between points 1409 and 1408 indicative of a second edge of a lane line. Taking the second derivative results in identification of the point of inflection associated with the given row of pixel values being analyzed. FIG. 15 depicts an exploded view of the positive to negative transition 1505 with point 1506 corresponding to a first pixel and point 1507 corresponding to a second pixel; interpolation of these values results in determining a precise location 1508 for an edge of the associated lane line. It should be understood that similar analysis may be performed to precisely locate each edge of each lane line within the associated image.

Turning now to FIG. 16 a translated image is depicted to include a first feature 1605, a second feature 1610 and a third feature 1615. In an ideal situation these three features will correspond to the left, center and right lane lines of the original image with associated noise removed or reduced as compared to the original image pixel values.

In a preferred embodiment, the values of FIG. 16 are transposed to derive a "plan view" of the corresponding left line 1705, center line 1710 and right line 1715. As depicted in FIG. 18 a rectangle 1820 indicative of the controlled vehicle is combined with a horizontal line 1825 to be used to determine whether or not the controlled vehicle is deviating from the appropriate lane. If the vehicle is suppose to be traveling in the right lane a determination will be made to check for intersection of either line 1810 or 1815 with the horizontal line 1825 and or rectangle 1820. If the vehicle is suppose to be traveling in the left lane a determination will be made to check for intersection of either line 1805 or 1810 with the horizontal line 1825 and or rectangle 1820. If either of the associated lines is found to be intersecting with the horizontal line 1825 and or rectangle 1820 an audible and or visual alarm may be initiated within the controlled vehicle cabin to alert the driver of a lane departure. It should be understood that an appropriate audible and or visual alarm device may be incorporated into a rearview assembly along with at least one corresponding image sensor and or at least one processor. It should also be understood that an output of a given processor and or

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image sensor may be provided to an original equipment manufacture to initiate an audible and or visual alarm anywhere within the vehicle in sight or hearing range of the driver. It should be understood that automatic steering may also be configured to be activated as a result of the lane detection algorithm discussed above. The steering of the vehicle may be "encouraged" to guide the controlled vehicle in a certain direction which may be overcome by the driver with slightly more force than required to steer the vehicle without a lane departure detected.

Turning to FIG. 19 a lane departure detection algorithm is described with reference to three consecutively acquired images. A first image depicted with solid graphics includes a left lane line 1905a, a center lane line 1910a, a right lane line 1915a and a controlled vehicle 1920a. A second image depicted with dotted graphics includes a left lane line 1905b, a center lane line 1910b, a right lane line 1915b and a controlled vehicle 1920b. A third image depicted with dashed graphics includes a left lane line 1905c, a center lane line 1910c, a right lane line 1915c and a controlled vehicle 1920c. In a preferred embodiment a controlled vehicle yaw sensor input and or a controlled vehicle speed input are combined with a sequence of consecutively acquired images to determine when the controlled vehicle has crossed or is about to cross a given lane line. As described with regard to the above embodiment different lane lines will be analyzed depending whether the controlled vehicle is suppose to traveling in the right lane or left lane. In a preferred embodiment, the speed of the controlled vehicle, the yaw of the controlled vehicle and the consecutively acquired images are combined to anticipate a lane departure. In a preferred embodiment an audible and or visual alarm is initiated upon an impending lane departure. In at least one embodiment the controlled vehicle steering is effected as described above.

In at least one embodiment at least one expected line width shall be utilized in determining whether a given "feature" is actually a lane line of interest or non-lane line noise. For example, an expected line width may be compared to an actual line width at a given distance from the controlled vehicle and the algorithm will perform a specific subroutine of subroutines based upon the difference from the expected width compared to the actual width. In at least one embodiment an image sensor assembly is configured such that an expected line width at approximately ten meters from the controlled vehicle is approximately four pixels wide; it should be understood that from three to four pixels wide at approximately ten meters is preferred. In at least one embodiment the expected lane line width is greater than one pixel at twenty-five meters. The width of the line may be determined as described elsewhere herein. In at least one embodiment an expected lane line pixel width, an expected lane line, a sub-combination thereof or a combination thereof are utilized to fix a position of a given feature relative the position of a controlled vehicle. It should be understood that given feature's characterization as being a lane line may be inferred from geographical dependent expected data. Such as for example having a lookup table of lane line widths dependent upon geographical data automatically selected based upon a geographical positioning system (GPS) incorporated into the controlled vehicle. It should be apparent that lane width for inference of a second feature based upon finding a first may also be stored in a geographically dependent lookup table. It should be understood that road dependent systems, such as magnets, or magnetic material, strategically placed periodically along a roadway may be incorporated as they become more available. As GPS data becomes more precise and reliable that information may be used in combination with geo-

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graphically dependent empirical data regarding the environment in which the controlled vehicle is traveling. The geographically dependent and visually dependent systems may be configured to enhance performance of the individually employed technologies.

In at least one embodiment an additional feature, not identified in a given image or given images, may be inferred from an expected feature given the fact that at least one other feature was found in a given image or a recent preceding image. In at least one embodiment the system is configured such lane lines are expected to be a predetermined distance from one another, therefore, position of a second lane line may be inferred from detection of the position of a first. Many nuisance situations such as at least partially snow covered roads, at least partially wet roads, at least partially shaded roads, road markings aside from lane lines, tar strips, skid marks of other tires, painted arrows and the like in the road and construction markings may be expected. In at least one embodiment various expected "feature characteristics" are utilized to distinguish actual lane lines from nuisances. Many of the techniques taught herein are valuable for that purpose.

In at least one embodiment pixel values extracted from at least one image are divided into a plurality of cells defining a series of sub-windows within the original image. These individual cells are subsequently analyzed to identify lane markers within each. Features extracted from the individual cells are then reassembled in a road model. One advantage of utilizing cells is to account for variations in the scene due to, for example, shadows cast on the roadway from buildings, trees, bridges and the like. Additionally, variations in pavement and/or road surfaces within a given image may be accounted for. As an example, an image may be divided into a series of three-by-three cells. It should be understood that an image may alternatively be divided into two columns, two rows, four columns, four rows, any sub-combination thereof or combination thereof. More cells may be employed within the spirit of the present invention.

Whether a complete image or a cell is being analyzed, in at least one embodiment the analysis begins by computing a running average of two, three, four, five or more pixel values across a given row. This step in the analysis will eliminate localized points of inflection in the pursuing analysis. In at least one embodiment, any pixel values in the given row below an overall row average are assigned a value equal to the row average. This procedure reduces the contrast in the resulting data. In at least one embodiment a first derivative is computed across the row. Subsequent to computing the first derivative, in at least one embodiment a group of first derivative values are utilized to compute an average and/or a middle range. In at least one embodiment the smoothed first derivative data is then utilized to compute a second derivative. In at least one embodiment the second derivative data is utilized to identify lane markers by identifying associated rising and falling edges. In at least one embodiment the above analysis is employed to accurately detect lane markers on wet roadway surfaces, roadway surfaces partially illuminated from other cars and or roadway lighting.

In at least one embodiment when a group of pixels in a given row or data are determined to be indicative of a "wide" bright spot, for example more than what would be expected for a lane marker, the data associated with a column defined by the wide bright spot is ignored in the analysis. This analysis is particularly well suited for dealing with illumination from oncoming vehicles at night or during dark, rainy, conditions.

In at least one embodiment a series of images are analyzed to detect lane markers. If a lane marker is determined to be

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present in one image and again in the next image a counter is incremented. If a lane marker is not detected in a subsequent image the counter is decremented. Once the counter reaches a predetermined threshold number the presents of a lane marker is determined to be verified. This analysis provides a

higher degree of certainty as to detection of lane markings. In at least one embodiment raw data from an image is first averaged and pixel values below the average are assigned the average value. Subsequently a first derivative is calculated. A thresholding function utilizing a histogram of this data is derived then weighted. Values in the histogram below 0.33 of the histogram are then disregarded and the values are assigned a zero value. A second derivative is then calculated. Finally, the points of inflection of the second derivative are utilized to interpolate zero crossing values.

It should be understood that the above description and the accompanying figures are for illustrative purposes and should in no way be construed as limiting the invention to the particular embodiments shown and described. The appending claims shall be construed to include all equivalents within the scope of the doctrine of equivalents and applicable patent laws and rules.

What is claimed is:

1. An apparatus, comprising:

at least one image sensor; and at least one processor configured to receive at least a portion of at least one image from said at least a portion of at least one image sensor, said processor is configured to compute an average of at least one row of said at least a portion of at least one image, assign the average value to any pixel values below said average, take a first derivative of modified pixel data, threshold the modified pixel data via a histogram analysis and then take a second derivative of threshold modified pixel data.

2. An apparatus as in claim 1 configured as a rearview mirror assembly comprising a stationary housing, said stationary housing comprising at least one device selected from the group comprising: an imager, an automatic exterior light control module, a moisture sensor module, a compass sensor, a compass, a speaker, a microphone, a windshield wiper automatic control, a digital signal processor, an automatic defogger control, a collision avoidance control, a lane departure warning module, an electro-optic mirror element control module, a supplemental illuminator module, a photo sensor and a processor.

3. An apparatus as in claim 1 configured as a rearview mirror assembly comprising, said rearview mirror assembly comprising at least one device selected from the group comprising: an imager, an automatic exterior light control module, a moisture sensor module, a compass sensor, a compass, a speaker, a microphone, a windshield wiper automatic control, a digital signal processor, an automatic defogger control, a collision avoidance control, a lane departure warning module, an electro-optic mirror element control module, a supplemental illuminator module, a photo sensor and a processor.

4. An apparatus as in claim 1 configured to function as at least one of the group selected from: an automatic exterior

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light control system, a moisture sensing system, a windshield wiper control, a defroster control, a defogger control, a lane keeping system, a lane departure warning system, a security system, a vision system, an adaptive cruise control system, a parking aid system, a blind spot warning system, a sun load sensing system, a blue sky detection system, a tunnel detection system, a day time running lights control system, a security system, an air bag activation system, a rear vision system, an occupancy detection system, a monitoring system, a collision avoidance system, an accident recreation system and an image acquisition system.

5. An apparatus comprising:

at least one image sensor; and

at least one processor configured to receive at least a portion of at least one image from said at least one image sensor, wherein a dynamic aim of said at least one image sensor is a function of said at least one image, such that said processor modifies pixel data of said received at least a portion of at least one image, takes a first derivative of said modified pixel data, thresholds said modified pixel data, and takes a second derivative of said threshold modified pixel data.

6. An apparatus as in claim 5 configured as a rearview mirror assembly comprising a stationary housing, said stationary housing comprising at least one device selected from the group comprising: an imager, an automatic exterior light control module, a moisture sensor module, a compass sensor, a compass, a speaker, a microphone, a windshield wiper automatic control, a digital signal processor, an automatic defogger control, a collision avoidance control, a lane departure warning module, an electro-optic mirror element control module, a supplemental illuminator module, a photo sensor, and a processor.

7. An apparatus as in claim 5 configured as a rearview mirror assembly comprising, said rearview mirror assembly comprising at least one device selected from the group comprising: an imager, an automatic exterior light control module, a moisture sensor module, a compass sensor, a compass, a speaker, a microphone, a windshield wiper automatic control, a digital signal processor, an automatic defogger control, a collision avoidance control, a lane departure warning module, an electro-optic mirror element control module, a supplemental illuminator module, a photo sensor, and a processor.

8. An apparatus as in claim 5 configured to function as at least one of the group selected from: an automatic exterior light control system, a moisture sensing system, a windshield wiper control, a defroster control, a defogger control, a lane keeping system, a lane departure warning system, a security system, a vision system, an adaptive cruise control system, a parking aid system, a blind spot warning system, a sun load sensing system, a blue sky detection system, a tunnel detection system, a day time running lights control system, a security system, an air bag activation system, a rear vision system, an occupancy detection system, a monitoring system, a collision avoidance system, an accident recreation system, and an image acquisition system.

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