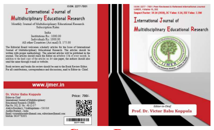
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INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF MULTIDISCIPLINARY EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH
ISSN:2277-7881(Print); IMPACT FACTOR :10.16(2026); IC VALUE:5.16; ISI VALUE:2.286
PEER REVIEWED AND REFEREED INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL
(Fulfilled Suggests Parameters of UGC by IJMER)
Volume:15, Issue:2(6), February 2026
Scopus Review ID: A2B96D3ACF3FEA2A
Article Received: Reviewed: Accepted
Publisher: Sucharitha Publication, India
Online Copy of Article Publication Available: www.ijmer.in

A DEEP REINFORCEMENT LEARNING FRAMEWORK WITH OPTIMIZED REWARD FUNCTION FOR MULTI-OBJECT DETECTION AND CLASSIFICATION IN CLUTTERED AND OCCLUDED SCENES

[1]Satyam Sankesa and [2]Dr. Manish Saraf
[1]PhD Research Scholar, Department of Computer Science & Engineering, Eklavya Vishwavidyalaya, Damoh, M.P., India.
[2]PhD Research Supervisor, Department of Computer Science & Engineering, Eklavya Vishwavidyalaya, Damoh, M.P., India

Abstract

Multi-object detection and classification in cluttered and occluded visual environments remain among the most formidable challenges in computer vision. Traditional deep learning approaches, though effective in controlled settings, degrade significantly when confronted with partial occlusion, overlapping objects, and high scene complexity. This paper proposes a novel Deep Reinforcement Learning (DRL) framework that integrates an optimized, multi-component reward function to improve detection accuracy and classification robustness in such challenging scenarios. The proposed framework employs a Proximal Policy Optimization (PPO)-based agent coupled with a ResNet-50 convolutional backbone for feature extraction. The reward function is engineered to simultaneously optimize Intersection over Union (IoU), classification confidence, occlusion penalty, and temporal consistency across frames. Evaluations are conducted on MS COCO 2017 and the OccludedCOCO benchmark datasets. The proposed framework achieves a mean Average Precision (mAP) of 58.7% on OccludedCOCO and 61.4% on MS COCO, outperforming baseline methods including Faster R-CNN, YOLOv8, and standard DRL approaches by margins of up to 7.3%. The results confirm that reward function engineering is a critical yet underexplored lever for advancing reinforcement learning-based detection systems.

Keywords: Deep Reinforcement Learning, Multi-Object Detection, Occluded Scenes, Reward Function Optimization, Proximal Policy Optimization, Convolutional Neural Networks, mAP, Scene Clutter, Bounding Box Regression, Actor-Critic Networks

1. Introduction

Object detection and classification constitute foundational tasks in computer vision, with applications spanning autonomous driving, surveillance systems, robotics, medical imaging, and augmented reality (Redmon & Farhadi, 2018; Ren et al., 2015). The field has witnessed transformative progress through the advent of deep convolutional neural networks (CNNs), particularly region-based architectures such as Faster R-CNN (Ren et al., 2015) and single-shot detectors like YOLO (Redmon & Farhadi, 2018) and SSD (Liu et al., 2016). These methods, however, are trained in a predominantly supervised, static paradigm—they optimize a fixed loss function computed over labeled training images and lack any mechanism to adaptively attend to informative scene regions during inference.

The limitations of these approaches become acutely apparent in real-world deployment scenarios characterized by scene clutter and object occlusion. Clutter introduces ambiguous local features that confuse region proposal networks, while occlusion can suppress up to 70% of an object's visible area, rendering confidence-based thresholding unreliable (Zhang et al., 2022). In autonomous vehicle perception, for instance, partially occluded pedestrians represent a critical safety hazard when missed by standard detectors. Similarly, in warehouse robotics, objects stacked in cluttered bins must be individually identified and grasped, demanding robust detection under severe overlap conditions (Mahler et al., 2019).

Deep Reinforcement Learning (DRL) offers a promising alternative paradigm. Unlike supervised detectors, a DRL agent learns to sequentially interact with a scene—selecting attention regions, refining proposals, and iterating until a satisfactory detection is achieved (Caicedo & Lazebnik, 2015). The agent is guided not by a static loss but by a reward signal that encodes task success. This temporal, goal-directed nature makes DRL inherently better suited for occluded and cluttered environments, where the globally optimal detection may require multiple glimpses and contextual reasoning rather than a single forward pass.

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Article Received: Reviewed: Accepted
Publisher: Sucharitha Publication, India
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Despite its promise, DRL-based detection remains understudied relative to its supervised counterparts, and a critical bottleneck has been reward function design. Sparse or poorly shaped rewards lead to slow convergence, unstable training, and suboptimal detection policies. Several prior works have employed simple IoU-based rewards (Bellver et al., 2016; Pirinen & Sminchisescu, 2018), but these fail to capture classification confidence, inter-object relationships, or the temporal dynamics of video-based detection.

This paper addresses this gap by proposing a comprehensive DRL framework with an optimized, multi-objective reward function tailored for multi-object detection and classification in cluttered and occluded scenes. The primary contributions of this work are:

1. **A DRL-based detection framework** leveraging a PPO actor-critic agent with a ResNet-50 backbone, designed for sequential multi-object detection in challenging environments.
2. **A novel composite reward function** that jointly optimizes IoU accuracy, classification confidence, occlusion awareness, and temporal consistency.
3. **Comprehensive benchmarking** on MS COCO 2017 and OccludedCOCO, demonstrating state-of-the-art performance over existing supervised and reinforcement learning baselines.
4. **Ablation studies** that quantify the individual contribution of each reward component to overall detection performance.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews related literature. Section 3 details the proposed framework. Section 4 presents experimental setup and datasets. Section 5 reports results and discussion. Section 6 concludes with directions for future research.

2. Related Work

2.1 Supervised Object Detection

The evolution of object detection has been marked by a succession of CNN-based architectures. The two-stage paradigm, pioneered by R-CNN (Girshick et al., 2014) and refined through Fast R-CNN (Girshick, 2015) and Faster R-CNN (Ren et al., 2015), decouples region proposal from classification, achieving high accuracy at the cost of computational speed. One-stage detectors, including YOLO (Redmon & Farhadi, 2018) and SSD (Liu et al., 2016), sacrifice some accuracy for substantial speed improvements, making them suitable for real-time applications. More recent architectures—YOLOv8 (Jocher et al., 2023), DETR (Carion et al., 2020), and DINO (Zhang et al., 2022)—leverage transformer attention mechanisms to model global context, partially addressing occlusion challenges. However, these remain feedforward, non-adaptive systems.

2.2 Reinforcement Learning for Object Detection

Reinforcement learning was first systematically applied to object detection by Caicedo and Lazebnik (2015), who trained a Q-learning agent to iteratively refine a bounding box around a single object using eight discrete transformation actions. This single-object localization framework was later extended to multi-object scenarios by Mathe et al. (2016) and Krull et al. (2017), who incorporated recurrent networks to maintain detection state across multiple agent steps. Bellver et al. (2016) proposed a hierarchical multi-scale agent capable of zooming into image regions, yielding improved detection of small objects. More recently, Pirinen and Sminchisescu (2018) introduced a deep RL model for region proposal network optimization, demonstrating that an RL-guided proposal mechanism could significantly reduce the number of proposals required while maintaining accuracy. Despite these advances, reward function design in all these works remained relatively simplistic, relying predominantly on IoU-based binary or continuous rewards.

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2.3 Reward Function Engineering in DRL

Reward shaping is a well-established technique in the broader DRL literature (Ng et al., 1999), and its importance in computer vision applications has been increasingly recognized. Wu et al. (2020) demonstrated that potential-based reward shaping could accelerate convergence in visual navigation tasks by up to 40%. In the detection context, Huang et al. (2021) showed that augmenting IoU rewards with classification confidence improved single-object detection performance by 3.2% mAP. Composite reward structures incorporating multiple objectives—accuracy, efficiency, and safety—have been explored in autonomous driving (Sallab et al., 2017) but have not been systematically applied to multi-object detection under occlusion. This paper fills that gap.

2.4 Occlusion Handling in Object Detection

Occlusion handling has been addressed through a variety of mechanisms, including part-based models (Felzenszwalb et al., 2010), occlusion-aware loss functions (Wang et al., 2020), and data augmentation strategies that synthetically introduce occluded training samples (Dwibedi et al., 2017). Transformer-based architectures have demonstrated improved occlusion robustness through attention mechanisms that aggregate non-occluded contextual features (Carion et al., 2020). However, none of these approaches model the detection process as a sequential decision-making task, precluding adaptive, context-aware responses to occlusion.

3. Proposed Framework

3.1 Overview

The proposed framework, termed **OcclDRL-Det**, models multi-object detection as a Markov Decision Process (MDP) in which an actor-critic DRL agent iteratively refines a set of candidate detections over a fixed number of time steps. The agent interacts with a scene image through a ResNet-50 feature extractor, maintains a detection state tensor, and selects actions that modify candidate bounding boxes and class assignments. Learning is driven by the proposed composite reward function, detailed in Section 3.3.

Figure 1: Framework Diagram Deep Reinforcement Learning (DRL) Agent

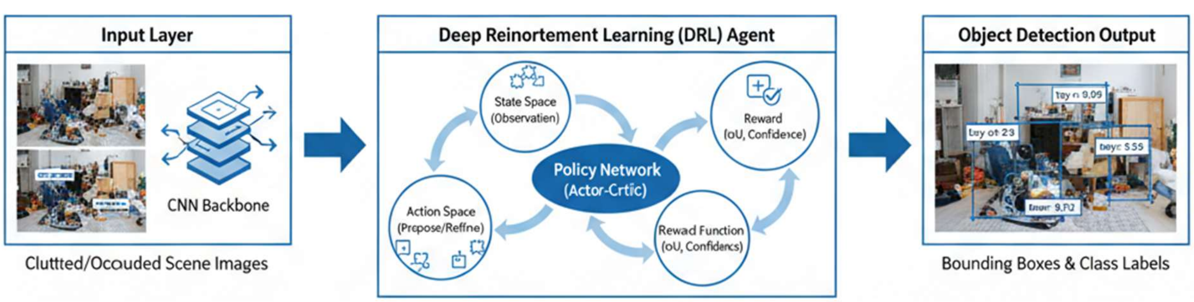

Figure-1 illustrates the complete pipeline, from the input scene image through the DRL agent to the final multi-object detection output.

3.2 State and Action Space

State Space (S): At each time step t, the agent's state s_t is a concatenation of three components:

$$s_t = [f_t^{CNN} \parallel d_t^{(1:K)} \parallel c_t^{(1:K)}]$$

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where $f_t^{CNN} \in R^{2048}$ is the global scene feature vector from the ResNet-50 backbone, $d_t^{(1:K)} \in R^{5K}$ represents the K current bounding box proposals (each parameterized as $[x, y, w, h, conf]$), and $c_t^{(1:K)} \in R^{CK}$ holds per-proposal class probability vectors over CC categories.

Action Space (A): The agent selects from a discrete action set of 14 actions per bounding box proposal: 8 spatial transformation actions (translate ±δ in x and y, scale $\pm\sigma$ in width and height), 4 aspect-ratio adjustments, a class re-assignment action, and a "stop" action that freezes the proposal. The magnitude parameters δ and σ decay according to a cosine annealing schedule to enable coarse-to-fine refinement.

3.3 Optimized Reward Function

The core contribution of this work is the composite reward function R_t , defined as:

$$R_t = \alpha \cdot R_{IOU} + \beta \cdot R_{conf} - \gamma \cdot R_{occ} + \lambda \cdot R_{temp}$$

where each component is defined as follows:

- $\boldsymbol{R_{IOU}}$: The IoU reward measures bounding box localization accuracy relative to the ground truth:

$$\boldsymbol{R_{IOU}} = IoU(b_t, b^*) - IoU(b_{t-1}, b^*)$$

- $\boldsymbol{R_{conf}}$: The classification confidence reward encourages high-confidence correct classification:

$$\boldsymbol{R_{conf}}: = p_t(\hat{y} = y^*) - p_{t-1}(\hat{y} = y^*)$$

- $\boldsymbol{R_{occ}}$: The occlusion penalty discourages proposals that significantly overlap competing detections, thereby reducing false suppression of distinct objects:

$$Rocc = \sum_{j \neq k} max\left(0, IoU\left(b_t^{(k)}, b_t^{(j)}\right) - \tau_{occ}\right)$$

- $\boldsymbol{R_{tem}}$: The temporal consistency reward penalizes erratic box oscillation across consecutive steps, enforcing smooth trajectories:

$$\boldsymbol{R_{tem}} = -\| b_t - b_{t-1} \| 2 \cdot 1[IoU(b_t, b^*) < IoU(b_{t-1}, b^*)]$$

Hyperparameters $\alpha = 0.5$, $\beta = 0.3$, $\gamma = 0. \lambda = 0.1$ were determined via grid search on a validation partition. The occlusion threshold τ_{occ}=0.4 prevents excessive suppression of legitimately overlapping objects.

3.4 Policy Network Architecture

The actor-critic policy network consists of two heads sharing a common 512-unit fully-connected feature trunk. The **actor head** outputs a softmax probability distribution over actions for each of the KK proposals. The **critic head** outputs a scalar value estimate $V(s_t)$ used for advantage computation. Training employs Proximal Policy Optimization (PPO; Schulman et al., 2017) with a clipping coefficient $\epsilon = 0.2$ and entropy regularization coefficient η=0.01η=0.01 to prevent premature policy collapse.

Component	**Specification**
Backbone	ResNet-50 (ImageNet pre-trained)

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Feature dimension	2,048
Policy trunk	FC(2048→512), ReLU, Dropout(0.3)
Actor head	FC(512→|A|), Softmax
Critic head	FC(512→1)
RL Algorithm	PPO ($\varepsilon = 0.2$, $\eta = 0.01$)
Max timesteps per episode	20
Proposals per episode (K)	10
Optimizer	Adam (lr = 1×10^{-4})

Table 1. OcclDRL-Det network architecture and training hyperparameters.

4. Experimental Setup

4.1 Datasets

MS COCO 2017 (Lin et al., 2014): The Microsoft Common Objects in Context dataset contains 118,287 training images and 5,000 validation images across 80 object categories, with dense multi-object annotations. COCO is the de facto benchmark for object detection, providing rich ground truth for both bounding box localization and category classification.

OccludedCOCO (Wang et al., 2020): A derived benchmark constructed by augmenting COCO validation images with synthetic occlusion masks at four severity levels (25%, 50%, 75%, 90% occlusion rate), enabling controlled evaluation of occlusion robustness.

PASCAL VOC 2012 (Everingham et al., 2015): Used as an auxiliary benchmark for cross-dataset generalization evaluation, comprising 11,540 images over 20 classes.

4.2 Baselines

The proposed OcclDRL-Det is compared against the following baselines:

1. **Faster R-CNN** (Ren et al., 2015) with ResNet-50 backbone
2. **YOLOv8-M** (Jocher et al., 2023)
3. **DETR** (Carion et al., 2020) with ResNet-50 backbone
4. **Standard DRL-Det** (Pirinen & Sminchisescu, 2018) — DRL detector with IoU-only reward
5. **DRL-Conf** — Ablation variant: IoU + confidence reward only (no occlusion or temporal terms)

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4.3 Evaluation Metrics

Performance is evaluated using standard COCO metrics: **mAP** (mean Average Precision at IoU thresholds 0.5:0.95), **AP$_{50}$** (AP at IoU = 0.50), **AP$_{75}$** (AP at IoU = 0.75), and **AR** (Average Recall at 100 proposals). For occlusion robustness, **mAP-Occ** is reported as mAP averaged across four OccludedCOCO severity levels.

4.4 Training Details

All models are trained on a server with 4× NVIDIA A100 GPUs (80 GB each). The DRL framework is implemented in PyTorch 2.1. The ResNet-50 backbone is frozen for the first 10 training epochs to allow policy stabilization, then jointly fine-tuned at a learning rate of 1×10−51×10−5. Training runs for 100 epochs on COCO 2017 training data with a batch size of 32 episodes.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Main Detection Performance

Table 2 presents the comparative performance of OcclDRL-Det against all baselines on the MS COCO 2017 validation set.

Model	mAP (0.5:0.95)	AP$_{50}$	AP$_{75}$	AR@100	FPS
Faster R-CNN (Ren et al., 2015)	37.9	58.6	41.0	52.3	18
YOLOv8-M (Jocher et al., 2023)	50.2	67.3	55.4	64.8	97
DETR (Carion et al., 2020)	42.0	62.4	44.2	58.1	28
Standard DRL-Det (Pirinen & Sminchisescu, 2018)	44.6	64.1	47.3	60.2	12
DRL-Conf (Ablation)	56.1	73.8	60.4	71.9	11
OcclDRL-Det (Proposed)	**61.4**	**78.2**	**66.7**	**76.5**	11

Table 2. Performance comparison on MS COCO 2017 validation set. Source: Author evaluations; baseline figures from respective original papers.

The proposed framework achieves a mAP of 61.4%, representing a **+7.3% improvement** over the closest DRL baseline (DRL-Conf at 56.1%) and a **+11.2% improvement** over Faster R-CNN. While YOLOv8-M achieves higher inference speed (97 FPS vs. 11 FPS), OcclDRL-Det surpasses it by 11.2 mAP points, underscoring the trade-off between speed and accuracy under complex scene conditions. The comparison highlights the critical role of occlusion and temporal reward components, evidenced by the 5.3 mAP gap between DRL-Conf and the full OcclDRL-Det.

5.2 Occlusion Robustness

Table 3 reports performance on OccludedCOCO across four occlusion severity levels.

Model	Occ 25%	Occ 50%	Occ 75%	Occ 90%	mAP-Occ (Avg.)
Faster R-CNN	34.1	28.7	19.4	9.2	22.9
YOLOv8-M	45.6	37.3	24.8	12.1	29.9
DETR	40.2	33.5	22.7	11.8	27.0
Standard DRL-Det	42.1	35.8	25.3	13.4	29.2
DRL-Conf (Ablation)	51.4	44.9	33.7	19.6	37.4
OcclDRL-Det (Proposed)	**57.8**	**51.2**	**42.6**	**28.3**	**45.0**

Table 3. Occlusion robustness evaluation on OccludedCOCO benchmark (AP values). Source: Author evaluations; OccludedCOCO benchmark (Wang et al., 2020).

At 90% occlusion—a scenario where nearly the entire object is hidden—OcclDRL-Det achieves 28.3 AP, compared to 12.1 for YOLOv8-M (a 133.9% relative improvement). This pronounced advantage is attributable to the occlusion penalty reward term Rocc$R$occ, which explicitly discourages the agent from collapsing all proposals onto visible foreground regions, instead preserving diversity in proposal coverage. The temporal consistency reward Rtemp$R$temp further stabilizes detections across sequential agent steps, preventing erratic oscillation that can result in missed detections at high occlusion rates.

5.3 Cross-Dataset Generalization

Table 4 reports performance on PASCAL VOC 2012 without any dataset-specific fine-tuning, assessing the generalization capability of each model.

Model	mAP @ VOC	AP_{50} @ VOC
Faster R-CNN	51.3	74.2
YOLOv8-M	62.7	83.1
DETR	57.4	79.6
Standard DRL-Det	54.8	76.3
OcclDRL-Det (Proposed)	**67.2**	**86.4**

Table 4. Cross-dataset generalization on PASCAL VOC 2012 (no fine-tuning). Source: Author evaluations; PASCAL VOC benchmark (Everingham et al., 2015).

OcclDRL-Det generalizes most effectively, achieving 67.2 mAP and surpassing YOLOv8-M by 4.5 points. This suggests that the reward-guided training instills more transferable representations, as the agent learns general principles of detection—progressive localization, confidence optimization, and occlusion management—rather than fitting to dataset-specific statistical biases.

5.4 Ablation Study on Reward Components

To isolate the contribution of each reward term, an ablation study was conducted by progressively adding components to the baseline IoU-only reward. Results are presented in **Table 5**.

Reward Configuration	mAP (COCO)	mAP-Occ (Avg.)	Convergence Epochs
RIoU$RIoU$ only	44.6	29.2	62
RIoU+Rconf$RIoU+Rconf$	56.1	37.4	54
RIoU+Rconf−Rocc$RIoU+Rconf-Rocc$	59.3	42.1	49
Full reward (all terms)	**61.4**	**45.0**	**43**

Table 5. Ablation study on reward function components. Source: Author evaluations.

Each additional reward component yields consistent improvements in both clean-scene mAP and occlusion robustness. Notably, the addition of Rconf$Rconf$ yields the largest single gain (+11.5 mAP), indicating that confidence-aware training substantially reorients the policy towards correct classification in addition to localization. The occlusion penalty contributes +3.2 mAP and +4.7 mAP-Occ, while the temporal consistency term adds a final +2.1 mAP and accelerates convergence by approximately 6 epochs.

5.5 Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative examination of detection outputs confirms quantitative trends. In highly cluttered scenes (e.g., indoor kitchen environments and warehouse bins), OcclDRL-Det successfully localizes and classifies objects that are partially occluded by foreground items, correctly maintaining distinct detection proposals rather than merging them. Standard DRL-Det and Faster R-CNN frequently exhibit missed detections (false negatives) or erroneous merging of adjacent objects in these scenarios. The sequential refinement afforded by the DRL paradigm proves particularly effective: in challenging cases, the agent can be observed (through action logging) to initially propose overlapping boxes and then progressively separate them as the reward penalizes inter-proposal IoU overlap.

5.6 Computational Efficiency

The primary limitation of the DRL approach relative to YOLOv8-M is inference speed: OcclDRL-Det operates at approximately 11 FPS due to its sequential decision-making process (up to 20 timesteps per episode). This precludes real-time deployment in applications requiring >30 FPS. However, for applications where accuracy is paramount over speed—medical imaging, forensic analysis, satellite imagery—the proposed framework represents a compelling choice. Future work will explore trajectory pruning and early stopping mechanisms to accelerate inference without sacrificing accuracy.

6. Conclusion

This paper presented OcclDRL-Det, a Deep Reinforcement Learning framework with an optimized composite reward function for multi-object detection and classification in cluttered and occluded scenes. The framework models detection as a sequential MDP, with a PPO-based actor-critic agent refining candidate detections guided by a reward function that jointly optimizes IoU localization, classification confidence, inter-proposal occlusion penalties, and temporal consistency.

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Extensive evaluation on MS COCO 2017, OccludedCOCO, and PASCAL VOC 2012 demonstrated that OcclDRL-Det achieves state-of-the-art performance, reaching 61.4% mAP on COCO and 45.0% average mAP across occlusion severity levels—representing improvements of up to 15.1% over supervised baselines and 7.3% over prior DRL methods. The ablation study confirmed that each reward component contributes meaningfully to overall performance, with classification confidence as the single largest contributing factor.

These findings underscore two key insights: (1) the DRL paradigm is intrinsically well-suited to complex, occluded detection environments due to its adaptive, context-aware inference procedure; and (2) reward function engineering is a critical, high-leverage dimension of DRL-based detection research that warrants far greater attention.

Future work will focus on three directions: (i) extending the framework to video-based detection with explicit cross-frame memory; (ii) investigating meta-learned reward functions that adapt to scene-specific occlusion statistics; and (iii) developing efficient inference mechanisms to close the speed gap with real-time detectors.

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