Self-sustaining processes at all scales in wall-bounded turbulent shear flows

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We collect and discuss the results of our recent studies which show evidence of the existence of a whole family of self-sustaining motions in wall-bounded turbulent shear flows with scales ranging from those of buffer-layer streaks to those of large-scale and very-large-scale motions in the outer layer. The statistical and dynamical features of this family of self-sustaining motions, which are associated with streaks and quasi-streamwise vortices, are consistent with those of Townsend’s attached eddies. Motions at each relevant scale are able to sustain themselves in the absence of forcing from larger- or smaller-scale motions by extracting energy from the mean flow via a coherent lift-up effect. The coherent self-sustaining process is embedded in a set of invariant solutions of the filtered Navier–Stokes equations which take into full account the Reynolds stresses associated with the residual smaller-scale motions.

This article is part of the themed issue ‘Toward the development of high-fidelity models of wall turbulence at large Reynolds number’.

1. Introduction

The flow visualizations of Kline \textit{et al.} [1] revealed that the near-wall region of turbulent boundary layers is populated by very robust streaky motions. The average spanwise streak-spacing is $\lambda_z \approx 100$, in wall units and in the buffer layer, and it increases with distance from the wall [1,2], as confirmed by early direct
numerical simulations which also revealed the existence of quasi-streamwise vortices [3] associated with the streaks. Streaky motions also exist in the logarithmic and the outer regions, which are populated by large-scale structures with dimensions of the order of the outer length scale $\delta$ (e.g. the half channel width in Poiseulle flow, the full channel width in plane Couette flow, or the boundary-layer thickness). Large-scale motions (LSMs) have typical streamwise and spanwise sizes of $\lambda_1 \approx 2\delta - 3\delta$ and $\lambda_2 \approx \delta - 1.5\delta$, respectively [4,5]. Very-large-scale motions, (VLSMs), also known as ‘superstructures’, have been shown to exist with streamwise scales extending up to $\lambda_2 \approx O(10\delta)$ [6–8]. These large and very-large-scale motions are especially relevant at high Reynolds numbers, where they account for an increasingly significant amount of the turbulent kinetic energy and Reynolds stress in the outer region [9] and they modulate the near-wall cycles [10].

Townsend [11] hypothesized that the logarithmic region would be composed of self-similar energy-containing motions, the size of which is proportional to their distance from the wall. By a suitable superposition of these hypothetical motions, termed ‘attached eddies’, under the constraint of a constant Reynolds shear stress typical of the log layer, Townsend predicted that the wall-parallel velocity components of turbulence intensities in the logarithmic region would exhibit the logarithmic wall-normal dependence. Although Townsend speculated that the double-cone eddy is a possible statistical form of the attached eddy, he did not commit to a specific type of eddy nor to any specific sustaining mechanism. Based on experimental observations Perry & Chong [12] extended Townsend’s theory by introducing a more specific structural model based on the assumption that the attached eddies are, at least on average, in the form of Theodorsen’s [13] $\Lambda$-vortices with dimensions going from those of buffer-layer streaks to those of the outer-layer structures. A series of theoretical studies have refined this model (e.g. [14,15]) and a number of experimental studies have supported these structural theories with the detection of intense vortical structures which were associated with $\Lambda$-vortices (see [16,17]).

In the cited structural models, it is assumed that the mechanism sustaining the whole turbulent motion is associated with the production of ‘small’ $\Lambda$-vortices in the buffer layer with the characteristic size of the buffer-layer streaks observed by Kline et al. [1]. These buffer-layer $\Lambda$-vortices then feed larger and larger $\Lambda$-vortices, up to large-scale motions, by merging or parent–offspring regeneration [18,19] where a sufficiently strong initial hairpin vortex generates a spatially growing packet of hairpins. Very-large-scale motions are attributed to the concatenation of large-scale motions [7,9]. Following this rationale, large-scale motions in the outer layer would not exist in the absence of supporting or co-supporting [20] motions in the buffer layer.

The relevance of this ‘bottom-up’ scenario based on $\Lambda$-vortices, especially in the high Reynolds number regime, is, however, not universally accepted. Some recent studies have challenged the idea that hairpin vortices are a prominent feature of high Reynolds number turbulence and that the parent–offspring mechanism is active in turbulent environments with counter-evidence [21,22]. Even more importantly, and independent of the question of the existence or not of prominent $\Lambda$-vortices, a growing number of recent results suggest that buffer-layer motions are not ultimately necessary to sustain large-scale and very-large-scale motions. For instance, it has been shown that the strong modification of the buffer-layer energy production processes does not lead to a significant change in the motions at larger scales [23,24]. These findings lead to at least two fundamental questions on the nature of high Reynolds number turbulence: (i) If not the $\Lambda$-vortices, what is the nature of Townsend’s attached eddies? and (ii) How do these eddies sustain?

The scope of this article is to collect and discuss a series of recent investigations which provide some answers to these questions, resulting in a description of high Reynolds number wall-bounded turbulence in terms of a continuum of self-sustaining motions which draw energy directly from the mean flow. In §2, we will discuss how linear models of coherent perturbations to the turbulent mean flow show that energy can be extracted directly from the mean flow at scales ranging from those of the buffer-layer streaks to those of large-scale and very-large-scale motions. In §3, we will discuss how the large-scale and very-large-scale motions can be isolated from smaller-scale motions, and show that motions in the logarithmic and outer regions do sustain
themselves even when the energy production processes at smaller scales, and in particular in the buffer layer, are artificially switched off. The coherent self-sustaining process identified by this analysis is crystallized in invariant solutions which take the averaged effect of smaller-scale motions into account, as discussed in §4. In §5, it will be shown that the family of isolated self-sustaining motions has all the characteristics of Townsend’s attached eddies. Some conclusions and perspectives will be drawn in §6.

2. The coherent lift-up effect

Contrary to canonical turbulent free shear flows, the turbulent mean flow profile of most wall-bounded shear flows is linearly stable [28–33], leaving unanswered the question of how turbulent motions can extract energy from the mean flow. The important progress realized in the understanding of non-normal energy amplifications in linearly stable laminar flows [25] has, however, motivated a re-examination of this question. Early studies along these lines have computed the optimal energy amplifications by using the turbulent mean flow profile as the base flow in the linearized Navier–Stokes equations (rearranged in the form of the usual Orr–Sommerfeld–Squire equations), neglecting Reynolds stresses associated with turbulent fluctuations [30]. It was found that perturbations leading to the (unconstrained) maximum energy growth have spanwise wavelength \( \lambda_z \approx 3 \delta \), where \( \delta \) is the channel half-width, which is almost the same value found for laminar base flow profiles. The characteristic spanwise spacing of near-wall streaks (\( \lambda_z^+ \approx 100 \)) was obtained under the constraint that the time scale of optimal solutions is of the order of the eddy turn-over time in the buffer layer [30]. Important progress was made by using the generalized Orr–Sommerfeld and Squire operators, which include a non-uniform eddy viscosity \( \nu_T(y) \) associated with the turbulent mean flow used to model the turbulent Reynolds stresses. An incorrect early expression of these operators [31] has been amended in later studies [26,32] to

\[
\mathcal{L}_{OS} = -i k_x (U' \Delta - U'') + \nu_T \Delta^2 + 2 \nu_T \Delta D + \nu_T'' (D^2 + k^2)
\]

and

\[
\mathcal{L}_{SQ} = - i k_x U + \nu_T \Delta + \nu_T' D,
\]

where \( k_x = 2 \pi / \lambda_x \), \( k_z = 2 \pi / \lambda_z \), \( k^2 = k_x^2 + k_z^2 \), \( \lambda_x \) and \( \lambda_z \) are the streamwise and spanwise wavelength, \( D \) and \( D' \) denote \( \partial / \partial y \) and \( \Delta = D^2 - k^2 \). Computing the optimal temporal energy amplification with these operators (and without any further restriction on the optimization times as in [30]) two peaks for the maximum energy amplification are found for long streamwise wavelengths \( \lambda_x \gg \lambda_z \), as shown in figure 1. The main (outer) peak scales in outer units and roughly corresponds to large-scale streaky motions in the outer region. The associated maximum energy growth increases proportionally to a Reynolds number based on outer units \( Re_{out} = U_c \delta / \nu_T,_{max} \) [26,32]. The secondary (inner) peak scales in inner (wall) units and corresponds to \( \lambda_z^+ \approx 90 \) [26,31,32,34], i.e. the most probable spanwise wavelength of near-wall streaks [2]. Optimal streaks associated with the secondary peak correspond well to the observed near-wall streaks. Structures with scales broadly lying between these two peaks correspond to log-layer streaks and are approximately self-similar [35]. This approach has then been extended by computing the optimal response to harmonic and stochastic forcing [33,35,36], confirming the existence of an inner and an outer amplification peak corresponding to the buffer-layer and large-scale streaky structures with intermediate (log-layer) scales also amplified. Experiments, where large-scale coherent streaks were steadily forced in the turbulent boundary layer, confirmed that coherent (temporally averaged) large-scale streaks can be transiently amplified in space [37]. The artificial forcing of large-scale coherent streaks was then used to reduce the turbulent drag [36,38].

The results obtained in most of the canonical wall-bounded turbulent shear flows (Couette flow, pressure-driven channel and pipe flows, zero pressure gradient boundary layer) provide

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1The total eddy viscosity is educed from \( \tau / \rho = \nu_T(y) (\partial U / \partial y) \), where \( \tau \) is the total shear stress. Without \( \nu_T(y) \) the turbulent mean flow \( U \) would not be a steady solution of the Reynolds-averaged Navier–Stokes equations.
sound evidence for the existence of the coherent lift-up effect,\(^2\) by which quasi-streamwise streaky motions with spanwise length scales ranging from those of the buffer-layer streaks to those of the large-scale and very-large-scale motions are able to extract energy directly from the mean flow.

### 3. Self-sustaining process at large scale

In addition to the existence of the robust coherent lift-up effect discussed in §2, it was also shown that large-scale coherent streaks can undergo secondary instabilities at sufficiently large amplitudes [39,40], suggesting that a ‘coherent’ self-sustaining process similar to the buffer-layer one [41,42] might be at work also at larger scales in turbulent flows. To prove that such a type of process actually exists, however, it should be verified that motions of a given scale of interest are not sustained by larger- or smaller-scale motions.

The standard way to exclude larger-scale motions is to simulate the flow in domains of the desired streamwise and spanwise size and to enforce periodic boundary conditions on the boundaries. In this way, for instance, it has been possible to show that streaky motions in the buffer layer are self-sustaining [43]. Excluding smaller-scale motions without seriously damaging the solution at the considered scale has proven to be a challenging issue. Our preliminary tests, in which under-resolved Navier–Stokes simulations were used in order to exclude motions smaller than the grid spacing, were inconclusive because the considered large-scale structures were too poorly resolved and unphysical energy production peaks appeared corresponding to the grid size. This could have been expected because residual motions, unresolved by the grid, must be modelled, as is well known by practitioners of large-eddy simulations (LESs). The idea has therefore been to use LESs and to model small-scale motions with a purely dissipative model which inhibits energy production by the (unresolved) small scales [44,45]. The equations used in

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\(^2\)The term ‘coherent’ lift-up here is used to emphasize the fact that the optimal energy amplification is computed on averaged streaks by explicitly accounting for the Reynolds stresses associated with turbulent fluctuations and to differentiate these results from standard lift-up computations, where Reynolds stresses are not taken into account and which give different results.
LESs are the usual ones [46,47] and can be obtained by applying a filter to the incompressible Navier–Stokes equations

\[ \frac{\partial \bar{u}_i}{\partial x_i} = 0; \quad \frac{\partial \bar{u}_i}{\partial t} + \bar{u}_j \frac{\partial \bar{u}_i}{\partial x_j} = - \frac{\partial \bar{q}}{\partial x_i} + \nu \frac{\partial^2 \bar{u}_i}{\partial x_j^2} - \frac{\partial \bar{t}_{ij}^r}{\partial x_j}, \]

where the overbar denotes the filtering action, \( \bar{r}^r = \bar{r}^R - tr(\bar{r}^R)I/3 \), with \( \bar{t}_{ij}^R = \bar{u}_i\bar{u}_j - \bar{u}_i\bar{u}_j \) and \( \bar{q} = \bar{p} + tr(\bar{r}^R)/3 \). A subgrid model in terms of eddy viscosity \( \nu_t \) is used to model the anisotropic residual stress tensor \( \bar{t}_{ij} = -2\nu_t\bar{S}_{ij} \), where \( \bar{S}_{ij} \) is the rate of strain tensor associated with the filtered velocity field. The eddy viscosity is given by the static Smagorinsky model [48]: \( \nu_t = D(C_s^2/D_\Delta)^2 \bar{S} \), where \( \bar{S} \equiv (2\bar{S}_{ij}\bar{S}_{ij})^{1/2} \), \( \bar{\Delta} = (\bar{\Delta}_x\bar{\Delta}_y\bar{\Delta}_z)^{1/3} \) is the average length scale of the filter based on the mean grid spacing and \( C_s \) is the Smagorinsky constant and \( D = 1 - e^{-(y^+/A)^2} \) is the wall damping function proposed in [49] to drive (physically) to zero the eddy viscosity at the wall.

The use of the static Smagorinsky model, and not of better performing dynamic models, ensures that there is no energy transfer from residual motions to the (larger scale) filtered motions. In this way it is therefore possible to simulate large-scale and very-large-scale motions excluding any energy input from motions at smaller scales. An additional problem, however, is that, if motions on a single scale are to be isolated, all the other motions at smaller scales have to be filtered. The most immediate way to do this would be to greatly increase the grid spacing \( \Delta \). However, preliminary tests have shown that, by following this approach, only a few points in physical space would be available to represent well-isolated large-scale structures, leading to inaccurate single-scale solutions. Recalling that the effective ‘Smagorinsky mixing length’ \( l_0 = C_s \Delta \) is the product of the grid spacing by the Smagorinsky constant [51], we had the idea of increasing the filter width by increasing \( C_s \) instead of \( \Delta \), thereby preserving the (spatial) accuracy of the solutions [44,45]. The production term of an increasing range of small-scale motions is therefore quenched in overdamped simulations\(^3\) by increasing \( C_s \) above its ‘optimal’ value \( C_s = 0.05 \), which provides the best a posteriori tests [53]. We have shown that in these overdamped simulations the friction Reynolds number is not greatly affected by the increase in \( C_s \) [44,45,52], indicating that the resulting flows maintain the high Reynolds numbers.

Using the overdamped LES technique, it has been shown that large-scale and very-large-scale motions can sustain themselves in the turbulent plane channel and Couette flows even when small-scale structures (including buffer-layer and log-layer structures) are artificially quenched [44,52], as shown in figure 2. More quantitative measures such as the location of the peaks in the pre-multiplied energy spectra confirm that the surviving large-scale and very-large-scale motions have almost the same characteristic spanwise mean spacing as the natural ones (figure 3). Intermediate-scale motions, which populate the logarithmic region, have been shown to be motions with almost the same characteristic spanwise mean spacing as the natural ones (figure 3). The amplified streak subsequently undergoes ‘rapid’ streamwise meandering motions, reminiscent of streak instability or non-normal amplification of a sinuous mode on top of the streaks (figure 4e) [39,40,42,55]. This eventually results in the breakdown of the streaks and regeneration of new quasi-streamwise vortical structures\(^4\) (figure 4f).

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\(^3\)Most of the results described in this paper have been obtained using a Fourier spectral discretization in the horizontal plane and second-order accurate finite differences in the wall-normal direction. More details about the numerics can be found in the cited references, e.g. [44,45,52].

\(^4\)The reader can refer to [54] for a detailed statistical quantification of this process.
Figure 2. Iso-surface \( u^+ = -2 \) of instantaneous streamwise velocity fluctuations in the turbulent plane channel at \( Re_\tau \simeq 950 \) (data from simulations reported in [27,44,50]). At \( C_s = 0.05 \) (a), large-scale streaky motions are populated with small-scale structures. At \( C_s = 0.3 \) (b), small-scale structures are quenched and the self-sustaining large-scale motions are isolated. (Online version in colour.)

Figure 3. Spanwise premultiplied power spectrum \( k_z E_{uu}(\lambda_z) \) (a,c) and streamwise premultiplied power spectrum \( k_x E_{uu}(\lambda_x) \) (b,d) for, respectively, the reference simulation with \( C_s = 0.05 \) (a,b) and with \( C_s = 0.2 \) (c,d), where \( E_{uu} \) is the one-dimensional power spectrum of the streamwise velocity. The premultiplied spectra are extracted in the inner \( (y^+ = 16, 30, 70, 108, \text{ solid red lines}) \) and in the outer layer \( (y^+/h = 0.38, 0.65, 1, \text{ dashed blue lines}) \) in the turbulent plane channel (replotted with data at \( Re_\tau \simeq 550 \) reported in [44]). (Online version in colour.)
4. Large-eddy exact coherent structures

The specific mechanism by which the coherent large-scale structures discussed in §3 self-sustain can be further investigated by looking for the existence of invariant solutions of the filtered, possibly overdamped, Navier–Stokes equations similarly to what has been done to understand transitional structures (where the the unfiltered Navier–Stokes equations were considered at lower Reynolds numbers). Invariant solutions of the filtered equations take into full account small-scale motions but only their locally averaged effect (the local average is obtained through the filtering action). It is, in this way, possible to compute steady large-scale solutions even if small-scale motions are unsteady but their local average is statistically steady. To compute these solutions, the (possibly overdamped) LES code used to show the existence of the self-sustaining process has been coupled to a Krylov–Newton algorithm capable of finding steady, travelling-wave or relative periodic solutions where both the Reynolds number $Re$ and the Smagorinsky constant $C_s$ are used as continuation parameters. The computed large-scale solutions will be labelled large-eddy exact coherent solutions (LECSs) to differentiate them from the exact coherent solutions (ECSs; as defined in [57]), which are solutions of the unfiltered Navier–Stokes equations and are therefore computed neglecting the Reynolds stresses associated with smaller-scale turbulent fluctuations.

The first LECSs have been computed in turbulent plane Couette flow and correspond to statistically steady large-scale motions [52,56] (figure 5). Those solutions have been connected to previously known [58–60] solutions of the (unfiltered) Navier–Stokes equations by continuation to $C_s = 0$. It was also shown that the upper branch and the lower branch solutions at a given Reynolds number could be connected by an upper and a lower $C_s$-branch of solutions issued from a saddle–node bifurcation at high $C_s$ (figure 6). In a similar way, Rawat et al. [61] were
also able to continue their travelling-wave (ECS) solution of the Navier–Stokes equations to a LECS with \( C_s = 0.05 \) in plane Poiseuille flow, and Sasaki et al. [62] have been able to continue the 'gentle' relative periodic orbit ECS solution of Kawahara & Kida [63] to a LECS up to \( Re = 400 \) in plane Couette flow. More recently, it has been shown [64] that travelling-wave solutions can
be computed in the plane channel even at Reynolds numbers an order of magnitude higher than those previously considered in [52,62].

The computation of these large-eddy coherent solutions confirms the existence of a coherent self-sustaining process at large scales. This process does not rely on energy inputs from larger-scale nor from smaller-scale motions, including those in the buffer layer. These results also seem promising, if seen from the perspective of laminar–turbulent transition studies where the subcritical transition to turbulence has been related to the appearance of invariant solutions of the Navier–Stokes equations. In this context upper-branch (ECS) solutions of the Navier–Stokes equations display features consistent with the turbulent flow issued from the transition process [65,66]. As additional solutions appear when the Reynolds number is increased and additional small scales develop in the turbulent regime, it is, however, not clear that only a small number of ECSs could be used to describe the turbulent statistics even at moderate Reynolds numbers [67,68]. It remains to be investigated if turbulent statistics, at least at a given spatial scale, could be built using proper averaging of LECSs (steady, travelling wave or periodic) which would naturally embed the effect of small-scale fluctuation motions without the need for additional small-scale solutions.

5. Relation to Townsend’s attached eddies

The self-similar nature of the optimal perturbations [35] and the self-sustaining processes [45] discussed in §2 and §3 are clearly reminiscent of the concept of ‘attached eddies’ described by Townsend [11]. This issue was further investigated by a set of numerical experiments [50,54] based on LESs introduced to isolate the statistical and dynamical behaviours of the self-sustaining motions at each spanwise length scale \( \lambda_z \) between \( \lambda_z^+ = 100 \) and \( \lambda_z = 1.5\delta \) by combining two techniques, one of which explicitly filters out the motions wider than \( \lambda_z \) [69] and the other damps out the motions smaller than \( \lambda_z \) by elevating \( C_s \) as described in §3. The statistical structures of the computed self-sustaining motions at each spanwise length scale were found to be approximately self-similar with respect to the given spanwise length \( \lambda_z \), as shown in figure 7 by their spectra. Furthermore, the wall-parallel velocity components of the self-sustaining motions in the logarithmic region were large in the region relatively close to the wall, whereas their wall-normal velocity and Reynolds shear stress were small. It is important to highlight that the aforementioned features of the self-sustaining motions in the logarithmic region exactly fulfil all the theoretical requirements for predicting turbulence intensities in the logarithmic region in Townsend’s original theory [11,12], suggesting that these motions are likely to be Townsend’s attached eddies [45,50].

The numerical experiments by [50,54] revealed that each of the self-sustaining motions at a given spanwise length scale \( \lambda_z \) is composed of two structural elements: streaks and quasi-streamwise vortical structures. The former streaky structures, which predominantly carry the streamwise turbulent kinetic energy, are long, extending over \( \lambda_x \approx 10\lambda_z \) in the streamwise direction (figure 7a), consistent with the linear analysis in §3. On the other hand, the latter quasi-streamwise vortical structures equally carry all the velocity components, and do not make any contribution to the region close to the wall (for example, compare the peak wall-normal location in the streamwise velocity spectra with the one in the wall-normal velocity spectra). Furthermore, the quasi-streamwise vortical structures are much shorter than the streaks and their streamwise extent was found to be only \( \lambda_x \approx 2 \sim 3\lambda_z \) (figure 7b). This size agrees well with that of the vortical structures called either hairpin vortex packets [5,17,19] or tall attached vortex clusters [70]. It should be mentioned that this length scale is well predicted by the most unstable wavelength of the streak instability [39,40], suggesting that they are presumably an outcome of this process. It should be stressed that the existence of the two structural elements, streaks and quasi-streamwise vortical structures, is essential for sustaining motions at a given \( \lambda_z \), as their interaction lies in the heart of the self-sustaining process. It is thus appropriate to interpret streaks and quasi-streamwise vortices as two dynamically interconnected elements of a single attached eddy rather than two different classes of flow structures.
It is also important to highlight that the self-similar scaling of the streaky motions and quasi-streamwise vortical structures discussed retrieves most of the important features in one- and two-dimensional spectra of all the velocity components and the Reynolds stresses, including the emergence of $k_x^{-1}$. Each of the self-sustaining attached eddies also contain the Reynolds stress-lacking ‘inactive’ component, as Townsend originally hypothesized [11], and this was found to correspond to each of the streaky motions below $y \simeq 0.5 \lambda_z$ [50]. Further inspection of the dynamics of each of the attached eddies revealed that the streaks and quasi-streamwise vortical structures form a self-sustaining process [41,55,65] exactly the same as the one shown in figure 3 with a turn-over time scale of $\bar{U}_m/\lambda_z \simeq 2$ [54]. The streaks are amplified from quasi-streamwise vortices via a coherent lift-up effect [26,30,35]; they then undergo rapid oscillation via secondary instability and/or transient growth on top of the streaks [39,40,42,55]; the quasi-streamwise vortical structures are nonlinearly regenerated [41,54,55]. The time scale of the self-sustaining process corresponds well to that of the ‘bursting’ in the logarithmic region, indicating that the bursting is naturally embedded in the self-sustaining process [54].

In addition to our own findings based on linear theory and on numerical experiments, more recently there has been further evidence which directly supports the existence of the self-similar coherent structure. For instance, it has been recently experimentally shown [71] that proper orthogonal decomposition (POD) modes extracted in the logarithmic region from Princeton’s superpipe data are self-similar with respect to the spanwise length scale and/or the distance from the wall. Furthermore, it has recently been found that most turbulent skin friction at sufficiently high Reynolds numbers ($Re_{\tau} > 1000$) is generated by the self-similar self-sustaining motions in the logarithmic region [69,72]. In particular, the coherent lift-up effect was found to play a crucial role in transferring the streamwise momentum to the near-wall region (i.e. friction generation). Smart enforcing of this transfer at large scale was demonstrated to reduce a substantial amount of drag by modifying the self-sustaining processes at other scales [36], and its artificial inhibition also yielded a significant amount of drag reduction at high Reynolds numbers [54,69,72], suggesting the practical importance of the self-sustaining processes in skin-friction control.

6. Conclusion

Let us briefly summarize and then discuss the main results that we have collected and reviewed here. Probably the most important new finding is that large-scale [44,52] and moderate-scale [45] structures can self-sustain when smaller-scale motions are artificially quenched in over-damped
large-eddy simulations of the turbulent flow. A continuum of self-sustaining motions therefore exists which, furthermore, statistically and dynamically consistent with the features of Townsend’s attached eddies, including an approximate self-similarity in the logarithmic region [35,45,50,64]. The existence of coherent self-sustained processes at large scale is also confirmed by the computation of invariant large-scale solutions of the filtered (fully nonlinear) Navier–Stokes equations [52,56,61,62,64]. The ability of the moderate- and large-scale structures to self-sustain is supported by generalized linear stability analyses revealing that the non-normal amplification of coherent quasi-streamwise streaks from coherent quasi-streamwise vortices provides a robust mechanism for the extraction of kinetic energy from the turbulent mean flow at scales ranging from those of buffer-layer streaks to those of the large-scale and very-large-scale structures [26,31–36]. The mechanism by which these coherent motions self-sustain is similar to the self-sustaining process, which was proposed to model the buffer-layer dynamics [41,42]. A notable difference, however, is that because the self-sustained ‘coherent’ structures exist in a suitably averaged or filtered sense, especially at large scales, it is essential to include in the picture the Reynolds stresses associated with the fluctuating or residual smaller-scale motions.

When put together, these results promote the idea that turbulence in wall-bounded flows is built upon a continuum of coherent self-sustaining processes with scales ranging from those of buffer-layer structures to those of large-scale and very-large-scale motions. The whole picture is consistent with Townsend’s ‘attached eddies’ paradigm, including the self-similarity of logarithmic layer structures [35,45,50], but it significantly differs from currently widespread dynamical interpretations based on bottom-up or top-down processes. Indeed, our results show that streamwise elongated streaky structures can dynamically self-sustain by drawing energy directly from the mean flow and therefore they do not necessarily need to be forced or generated by structures at smaller or larger scales as previously assumed.

The line of investigation we have presented is in no way closed. Many important questions need further investigation, for instance: (i) Can the continuum of self-sustained processes be deduced from direct numerical simulation or experimental data by a suitable combination of filtering and conditional averaging? (ii) Is it possible to build a consistent low-dimensional dynamical system capturing the dynamics of each independent process at each single scale? (iii) Can this understanding be used to build better predictive models, e.g. of Reynolds shear stresses in wall-bounded turbulent flows? (iv) Can this improved understanding be used to better control wall-bounded turbulence? These are important questions which are under active investigation.

Future work will also certainly aim at establishing a relationship between the self-sustaining streaky motions and the specific shapes of attached eddies used in previous studies (e.g. [12,15]). Another sensitive issue will also be to establish the type and level of energy transfers between attached eddies of different sizes. These energy transfers were, through Smagorinsky’s model, reduced to a pure dissipative flux oriented from larger to smaller scale structures. Even if it has been shown that each single self-sustaining motion is, in principle, able to sustain itself by drawing energy uniquely from the mean flow, quantitative improvements can certainly be obtained by using more advanced subgrid-scale models better able to reproduce scale-to-scale energy transfers. Concerning the large-eddy invariant solutions (LECSs), active work is underway to find more of these solutions, to understand if and how they are connected to the Navier–Stokes invariant solutions (ECSs) and to understand their relevance to the dynamics of the attached eddies at each single scale. An important issue is to understand how many of these steady, travelling-wave or periodic LECSs are necessary to capture the first- and second-order turbulent flow statistics at least at each single scale of motion.

Authors’ contributions. C.C. wrote the manuscript with feedback from Y.H., except §5, which was written by Y.H. with feedback from C.C. Both authors read and approved the manuscript.
Competing interests. We declare we have no competing interests.
Funding. C.C. has benefited from financial support from École polytechnique, PSA-Automobiles, PRES Université de Toulouse and Région Midi-Pyrénées. Y.H. is supported by the Engineering and Physical Science Research Council (EPSRC) in the UK through EP/N019342/1.
Acknowledgements. Many of the results summarized in this paper have been obtained in collaboration with Y. Bengana, S. Depardon, J. Park, G. Pujals, S. Rawat, F. Rincon and A.P. Willis. The use of the diablo, peanuts and channelflow codes is kindly acknowledged.

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