Response to reviewers

Dear Reviewers,
Dear Topical Editor and Editor-in-Chief CharLotte Krawczyk,

We sincerely thank both reviewers for their fair and constructive reviews, which greatly improved our manuscript. We appreciate the feedback given on the manuscript and carefully incorporated all points risen. Please find below our answers for each comment in green coloured text.

Kind regards,
Yueyang Xia on behalf of all co-authors

Comment: During the review process we first corrected the sticky notes from the PDF-Version and then started the main correction and reorganised the manuscript.

We realized that the calculation of the depth errors from the NRM displacement field needed more explanation (both reviewers).
To avoid an incomplete description, we are explaining the application by mathematic formulas, illustrated the additional individual steps, and added an online repository with the programming scripts and data examples.

New Chapters:
2.1.1 NRM synthetic data example
2.1.2 Depth variant alignment from relative displacement correction
2.1.3 RMO automatic picking by tracking through NRM displacement field
2.1.4 Effective RMO selection based on semblance analysis

This part increased the length of the manuscript significantly.

Referee 2: César R. Ranero

The Geomar group in this manuscript present a new approach to produce the macro velocity field necessary for PSDM which is in fact the most critical and arguably complicated step towards producing high-quality PSDM images. The scope of the manuscript is focused on providing the evidence of the superior performance of the NRM as an automatized method to iteratively produce a final model and the resulting images are little discussed in terms of the geological significance of the structures.
I think the work is a valuable contribution that should be published, but it requires a number of revisions and clarifications before it can be accepted.

1. There seems to be a misunderstanding in terms of the resolution of the technologies available to build macro-velocity models:
It is stated in Line 61 "The starting velocity model is normally retrieved from seismic data semblance velocity analysis (Neidell and Taner, 1971) of either non-migrated CMP gathers, pre-stack time migrated CIP analyses, wide-angle travel-time tomography, or fullwaveform inversions if no additional in situ information is available (Gras et al., 2019; Górszczyk et al., 2019)"
In reality, the uncertainty intrinsic to define the reflector position and velocity above makes reflection-based travel time tomography a method with undefined accuracy that may be improved by using body

waves. Further, full-waveform inversions (FWI) is not used to build initial models, but to increase the resolution of models created by some form of travel time tomography, potentially including those obtained from inversion of body waves or the method described in this manuscript.

We fully agree, that just a list of possible initial velocity building methods is not appropriate to cover the complex topic of initial velocity building, especially to the strategy we applied. We removed unnecessary information from the introduction and included examples of strategies by including also wide-angle information (lines 58-68). This is linking to the strategy we also applied by including the wide-angle OBS tomography results.
Where we do not fully agree is that reflection tomography will not contribute to the resolution of a model from the full waveform inversion of body waves, as shown by Górszczyk et al., 2019. Large to intermediate crustal units can be identified by a high-resolution FWI velocity model whereas short-wavelength reflectivity and AVO variations only from an MCS dataset. Additionally, the complementary information of horizontal and vertical wave propagations offers a window to analyse anisotropic velocity information.

2. In line with my comment 1, the statement in Line 73 “The precision may be improved by setting a smaller vertical and lateral picking interval to maximize the reliability of the tomography. On the other hand, accuracy is strongly limited by signal interference, background noise, side echoes, and accurate depth error information “and the statement in Line 77 “we improve the accuracy and precision of the depth error estimation without any hyperbolic assumption or predefined depth horizons of the subsurface structure” fall in the same category. This is that apparently the overall message collectively conveyed in the introduction of the manuscript is that reflection tomography provides the highest possible resolution for velocity determination, which is incorrect. My comment is not in detriment of the work presented, but an introduction should necessarily place the scope of the work in the right technological perspective.
   Yes, we agree, it is removed.
3. Section 2. "Non-rigid and warping matching techniques” describes several different NRM technologies but it is unclear the advantages of some of them over others, and which one they finally choose and why. In particular, the last 2 paragraphs (lines 116-130) could be recast to clarify their choice.
   We included a small paragraph (lines 150-160).

4. In Fig 2. “(d) Residual move-out picks calculated by recursive summation of the relative depth errors (b) at predefined depths to get the cumulative depth error. “
   I may have gotten it wrong, but should not the vertical axis have a scale that is not the same km of a) and c)
   Yes, they should have the same vertical axis. We moved the figures close together and annotated only on the left and right sides to reduce the figure width.

5. Line 153-154. “An application of the NRM field to flatten the synthetic gather requires a recursive depth variant correction. “
   Since the manuscript deals with the method it would be great that the application is somewhat further detailed.
   Thanks, we fully agree that this method part should be presented in more detail.
   To avoid an incomplete description, we are explaining the application by mathematic formulas, illustrated the additional individual steps, and added an online repository with the programming scripts and data examples.

   New Chapters:
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6. Line 171. “Of importance for tomography is not the waveform, but only a correct depth error estimation along reflected events. “
This is again related to my comment 1 and 2, clarify that this is travel time inversion based on near vertical reflections-only.
Here we are not sure. It is right that the reflection arrival times must be preserved during an update, so it is a balance between depth change and velocity change at many depth levels. We included a new chapter “2.2 Methodology of the ray-based grid tomography with CIP depth errors” with the theory of grid-based tomography and CIP error updates.

In fact, the authors may want to explore the potential of Vp uncertainty estimation. Since they have developed a method that largely automatizes velocity picking they could design for instance a Monte Carlo based strategy to evaluate the quality of the inversion solution.
In the current manuscript the initial model is only briefly described and there is no information how much influence the choice of an initial model may have in the performance of NRM and thus on the final velocity model.
In the discussion, we included Chapter “4.2 Model uncertainties by tomography” of a Monte Carlo strategy, sensitivity and resolution tests to improve a tomography. But an application of this new strategy needs a separate independent study.

7. The following two sentences in the manuscript link to my previous comment 5 on initial models.
Line 207-210. “. The initial velocity model for the reflection depth tomography was merged from a velocity tomographic inversion of a collocated 2-D refraction seismic line covered by 46 ocean bottom seismometers (OBS) with a spacing of 6 km (Planert et al., 2010) and a manually estimated velocity model for the near seafloor structure.”
What is a manually estimated velocity?
We included a new Chapter “3.2 Initial velocity building from wide-angle tomography” for the initial velocity building. We called it just “manually” because the OBS model was offline to reflection profile and in the trench axis a gap of three OBS stations which reduced the accuracy significantly. The original OBS model and the “modified” initial model are compared.

Line 213-214 “. As a consequence, the approximated velocity at shallow depth was additionally smoothed before merging with the wide-angle velocity model and was used as the initial velocity for the NRM-tomography. “
What is the approximated velocity?
See comment above.

I think it would be good to introduce the initial model earlier in the manuscript and to explore its significance. In their example offshore Indonesia, the seismic line had been previously intensely studied and a good quality model obtained from ocean bottom seismometers

existed, which is not typically the case for most streamer lines. What would be the approach then?
Thank you for the advice. I included the new chapter 3.2 at the beginning:
The OBS model was not as good as we thought and we could only improve it up to a depth of 3 km below the seafloor due to the limited streamer length. The OBS model had problems in the trench axis and the shallow sediment layers and was more focused on the crustal structures (Pg phases). Additionally, the OBS survey was a separate cruise leg apart from the MCS acquisition. The shot spacing/shot time interval was increased to have a better signal /noise ratio for the deeper events but makes the shallow reflected/refracted events difficult to correlate because of missing continuity.
As an alternative approach to get an initial velocity we used for other projects (e.g. Hikurangi example) a pre-stack time migration of coarsely spaced velocity analysis by CIP gather semblance picking and depth converted the velocity model. The goal is to produce a vertically and laterally smooth velocity field without interpretation biased structures.

To obtain an initial model by another approach?
See comment above.

or can NRM work with a simple 1D initial model?
For marine sedimentary data, a hybrid model with predefined seafloor in depth would be enough. It will not be efficient due to the high number of iterations needed. The tomography behaves better than the classical 1D depth focusing analyses because it accounts for dipping layers, and is smooth internally based on the redundancy of picks. Not recommended is to start with a too high velocity because over migration will disturb shallower reflections. Problematic are high-velocity gradients (see the crossing synthetic example).

would this method work for land data where the initial model may be much more complex?
No experience. Problems could be inaccurate statics, different receiver coupling with waveform changes, and surface wave related noise.

8. Fig 4. Water Vp of 1590 m/s appears unusually large. In apparent accordance, the CIP gathers in Fig 5 (a) and (b) show un-flattened seafloor reflections. Is that Vp realistic? it is relevant because affects raytracing from across the water layer.
   The contour 1590 m/s was not representing the water velocity. We changed the contours in the figures. The water velocity was spatially constant but depth variant (see Table 2).
   Most of the CIP shows a flat seafloor reflection, but areas of un-flattened correlate with steep seafloor dips and rough seafloor, especially seen in the trench area on the bathymetric map. To flatten the seafloor reflection for each CIP would result in an unrealistic spatial variable water velocity column which would produce artificial undulations to seafloor depth.

9. If they need to condense material to include new or expanded sections I would recommend removing one example offshore Java, or possibly the line from Hikurangi which I imagine that was collected with 6 or 8 km streamer, but the effect of a different acquisition is not discussed and the geology is also rather briefly described.
   We removed the Hikurangi example.

Also, sections 3.2 and 3.3 descriptions might be condensed without harming the manuscript scope.
We would like to keep the three examples because they show the results from simple, moderate to more complex/chaotic layering.

I summary I recommend that the manuscript may be accepted after some clarifications are made, so that the scope and the description of the methodology, which is the core of the contribution, are further explained, and that the role of the initial model is integrated in the discussion.
Done.