Depth Estimation with Simplified Transformer

John Yang, Le An, Anurag Dixit, Jinkyu Koo, Su Inn Park
NVIDIA
{johnyang, lean, anuragd, jinkyuk, joshp}@nvidia.com

Abstract

Transformer and its variants have shown state-of-the-art results in many vision tasks recently, ranging from image classification to dense prediction. Despite of their success, limited work has been reported on improving the model efficiency for deployment in latency-critical applications, such as autonomous driving and robotic navigation. In this paper, we aim at improving upon the existing transformers in vision, and propose a method for self-supervised monocular Depth Estimation with Simplified Transformer (DEST), which is efficient and particularly suitable for deployment on GPU-based platforms. Through strategic design choices, our model leads to significant reduction in model size, complexity, as well as inference latency, while achieving superior accuracy as compared to state-of-the-art. We also show that our design generalize well to other dense prediction task without bells and whistles.

1. Introduction

Accurate depth estimation is an essential capability for geometric perception within a scene. Estimated depth provides rich visual cues for general perception, navigation, planning, and reasoning against occlusions for applications such as robotics [8] and advanced driver-assistance systems (ADAS) [1]. Recently, deep learning based methods [8, 18] have shown that depth can be learned from a single image by using convolutional neural networks (CNN). However, direct supervision requires large amount of ground-truth depth maps, which are expensive to obtain in reality. On the other hand, self-supervised, or sometimes referred to as unsupervised methods can take advantage of geometrical constraints on image sequences as the sole source of supervision. For example, previous work [12, 20, 31] have shown that depth can be learned from a single image by using unsupervised methods.

The key to the self-supervised learning methods is to build a task consistency for training separated CNN networks, where predictions from depth network and pose network are jointly constrained by image reconstruction error [2, 11, 12, 14, 22, 31, 33]. While this structure of paired depth-pose networks has been largely adopted, they are mainly built with CNNs that have evolved towards more complex architectures that are computationally demanding.

On the other hand, inspired by the seminal work on transformer [25], vision transformers have emerged in many applications [7, 19, 24], benefiting from the attention mechanism and simpler network structure. In order to exploit the capacity of vision transformers and self-supervised learning systems [3], in this paper we aim to improve the performance of self-supervised monocular depth estimation in terms of both accuracy and latency for deployment, through improved design choices. To this end, our main contributions are the following:

- Simplified transformer with strategical design choices that are hardware friendly, yielding networks that only consist of very basic operations and operate efficiently
- Transformer-based Depth-Net and Pose-Net with joint attention mechanism for more effective learning

We show that on public benchmark dataset our model is over 85% smaller in model size and complexity, while being significantly faster in terms of latency and more accurate, as compared to previous state-of-the-art. We also show that this architecture can generalize well to other dense prediction tasks such as semantic segmentation.

2. Related Works

Monocular Depth Estimation. With the emergence of learning-based methods, it has been shown that depth can be learned directly from a single image in a supervised manner [8, 18]. To date, self-supervised methods, which take advantage of abundant unlabeled data for training, have drawn great attention. Godard et al. [11] proposed a novel training objective that enforces consistency between disparity produced by left and right images, and this method was further improved in [10] with new choices of loss functions and training strategies. In [12], symmetrical packing and
unpacking blocks are proposed to generate detailed representation using 3D convolutions along with velocity information for better scale-awareness.

**Vision Transformers.** The pioneer work of Vision Transformer (ViT) [7] showed that a pure transformer with sequence of image patches as input works as well as CNNs. To alleviate the need of large amount of pre-training data, Data-efficient image Transformer (DeiT) [24] was proposed with a novel distillation strategy. To address image scale and resolution variation, Swin Transformer, a hierarchical transformer with shifted windows, was invented [19]. Pyramid Vision Transformer (PVT) [28] utilizes a pyramid structure that allows fine-grained inputs for dense prediction tasks in conjunction with progressive shrinking to reduce computations. SegFormer [29] leverages multi-scale features for accurate pixel-level prediction, while positional encoding and complexity in decoder are dropped, resulting in performance boost in both accuracy and latency. Recently, Li et al. proposed STereo TRansformer (STTR) which employs transformer for sequence-to-sequence correspondence modeling for stereo depth estimation [16]. ViT backbone is employed as a encoder along with a convolutional decoder for supervised depth estimation in [21].

**Efficient Transformers.** Some recent efforts focus on reducing the complexity in transformers mainly from a theoretical perspective [4, 27]. For vision tasks, Li et al. [15] introduced a multi-stage efficient transformer (EsViT) in conjunction with sparse self-attention. Jia et al. [13] proposed an efficient fine-grained manifold distillation approach that allows student network to achieve better performance when learning from the more complex teacher transformer. However, in reality the projected speedup may not be realized due to hardware limitations that inherently determine software capability. Different from the scope of the aforementioned approaches, we introduce a simplified design of transformer architecture, which is particular friendly to GPU hardware in order to achieve efficient inference.

### 3. Method

The design of Depth-Net and Pose-Net is shown in Fig. 1. The encoder of Depth-Net and the Pose-Net consist of four transformer blocks. In the training process, the predicted depth map and pose are used for view synthesis, and the photometric loss is used as training objective [12, 33]. Only Depth-Net is needed for inference.

#### 3.1. Simplified Transformer

Each transformer block contains an Overlapping Patch Embedding layer, followed by repetitive sub-blocks of Simplified Attention and Mix-FFN layers, as shown in Fig. 2. **Overlapping Patch Embedding.** To preserve the continuity of local image context, similar to the approach in [29], we employ an overlapping patch embedding block which simply consists of a 2D convolution followed by a batch normalization (BN). The size of input feature map is reduced by half in the beginning of every transformer block. **Simplified Attention.** To reduce the complexity in the attention module, we made several improvements. First, we apply the sequence reduction process [28, 29] with a reduc-
which imposes additional cost at inference time. On the other hand, BN uses the accumulated statistics from training and avoids such computation in the inference, and thus can be more favorable in transformers [23, 30]. Note that simply replacing LN with BN would cause the training to diverge, therefore our LN-free networks are implemented as the following: 1. Two BNs are inserted in the mix-FFN layers as shown in Fig. 4; 2. LNs in the spatial reduction layer [28, 29] are removed, and the attention layers are also free of normalization; 3. A BN layer is placed after every joint transformer block in the Pose-Net, while the transformer blocks in the Depth-Net encoder are not followed by any normalization. Such modifications intend to lessen BN computations during inference while still stabilizing the training, since only Depth-Net is needed for inference.

Progressive Decoder. Inspired by the concept of feature pyramid network (FPN) [17], the decoder in the Depth-Net receives outputs from all transformer blocks in the encoder, and combines them in a progressive manner as shown in Fig. 1. Bilinear interpolation is used to upsample the feature maps, and the size of the output depth map from the decoder is equal to the input size.

Network Composition. To this end, our networks are largely composed of very simple and basic operations, namely convolution, depth-wise convolution, batch normalization, ReLU, max-pooling, and avg-pooling. Our design is driven in such a way since these operations have been well supported and optimized on GPU-based platforms, therefore making our networks hardware-friendly and efficient.

4. Experiments

Implementation Details. Our models are implemented in PyTorch 1.10 and trained with 8 NVIDIA V100 GPUs. Adam optimizer with an initial learning rate of $4 \times 10^{-5}$ is used for training. For Depth-Net, a batch size of one is used, and for Pose-Net, training sequences are generated with a stride of 2, meaning that $I_{t-1}$ and $I_{t+1}$ are concatenated with $I_t$ as an input. The input resolution to our models and benchmark models is $640 \times 192$.

Similar to [29], we implement six variants of DEST models. Specifically, our lightweight models DEST-B0 and B1 have a configuration of (2, 2, 2, 2), each of which indicates the number of attention and mix-FFN layers in a transformer block, as shown in Fig. 2. Those settings are (3, 3, 6, 3) for B2, (3, 6, 8, 3) for B3, (3, 8, 12, 5) for B4, and (3, 10, 16, 5) for the largest model B5. We set the numbers of output feature maps to (32, 64, 160, 256) for B0 and (64, 128, 250, 320) for B1-B5. For Pose-Net, we use B3 in all experiments.

Accuracy. We benchmark on KITTI dataset [9] and report the metrics described in [8]. The quantitative results are summarized in Table 1. Compared to the current state-of-the-art PackNet-SfM [12] with pre-training, our Depth-Net B3 achieves over 85% reduction in the number of parame-
Table 1. Quantitative results on the KITTI dataset [9]. Connectivity refers to the feature sharing between Depth-Net and Pose-Net. The #MParams and #GMACs are from Depth-Net only since Pose-Net is not needed in inference. CS+K and IN+K refer that the given model is pre-trained either with CityScapes [5] or ImageNet [6] data.

| Method                  | Connectivity | Dataset | Abs Rel↓ | Sq Rel↓ | RMSE↓ | RMSE<sub>log</sub>↓ | #MParams | #GMACs↓ |
|-------------------------|--------------|---------|----------|---------|-------|----------------------|----------|---------|
| Monodepth2 [10]         | ConvNet      | No K    | 0.132    | 1.044   | 5.142 | 0.210                | 14.84    | 8.04    |
| Monodepth2 [10]         | ConvNet      | No IN+K | 0.115    | 0.903   | 4.863 | 0.193                | 14.84    | 8.04    |
| PackNet-SfM [12]        | ConvNet      | No K    | 0.111    | 0.800   | 4.576 | 0.189                | 128.29   | 205.49  |
| PackNet-SfM [12]        | ConvNet      | No CS+K | 0.108    | 0.758   | 4.506 | 0.185                | 128.29   | 205.49  |
| SETR-MLA32 [32]         | ConvNet      | No K    | 0.184    | 1.669   | 6.407 | 0.257                | -        | -       |
| SegFormer-B0 [29]       | ConvNet      | No K    | 0.139    | 0.98   | 5.657 | 0.205                | 3.82     | 4.21    |
| SegFormer-B3 [29]       | DEST-B3      | No K    | 0.119    | 0.803   | 5.033 | 0.182                | 47.32    | 35.02   |
| SegFormer-B3 [29]       | DEST-B3      | Yes K   | 0.113    | 0.798   | 4.917 | 0.179                | 47.32    | 35.02   |
| SegFormer-B3 [29]       | DEST-B3      | Yes CS+K| 0.105    | 0.794   | 4.707 | 0.172                | 47.32    | 35.02   |
| DEST-B0                 | DEST-B3      | Yes CS+K| 0.116    | 0.910   | 4.982 | 0.219                | 4.68     | 4.82    |
| DEST-B1                 | DEST-B3      | Yes CS+K| 0.115    | 0.868   | 4.724 | 0.207                | 10.12    | 14.37   |
| DEST-B2                 | DEST-B3      | Yes CS+K| 0.108    | 0.831   | 4.636 | 0.181                | 16.03    | 17.19   |
| DEST-B3                 | DEST-B3      | Yes CS+K| 0.103    | 0.796   | 4.410 | 0.170                | 19.71    | 19.78   |
| DEST-B4                 | DEST-B3      | Yes CS+K| 0.098    | 0.767   | 4.285 | 0.168                | 38.53    | 27.98   |
| DEST-B5                 | DEST-B3      | Yes CS+K| 0.095    | 0.752   | 4.207 | 0.165                | 45.95    | 31.50   |

Table 2. Comparison of end-to-end inference latency in ms using PyTorch and TensorRT with different precisions.

| Method | PyTorch↓ | TensorRT FP32↓ | TensorRT FP16↓ |
|--------|----------|----------------|----------------|
| PackNet-SfM [12] | 64.76 | 42.54 | 20.54 |
| DEST-B3 | 18.31 | 12.36 | 8.87 |

Table 3. Comparisons with SegFormer [29] on the CityScapes dataset [5]. Latency is obtained with FP16 precision.

5. Conclusions

In this paper, we presented a design of simplified transformer for self-supervised depth estimation. The simplifications as well as the proposed joint-attention and connectivity mechanism have shown to be effective with greatly reduced model complexity and inference latency, as compared to other benchmark methods. We also showed that our model can be directly generalized to other dense image prediction tasks such as semantic segmentation with improved accuracy and latency. We hope our design can serve as a practical choice for real-world applications such as autonomous driving and robotics, where both high efficiency and accuracy are demanded at the same time. In the future, we would like to further evaluate our model with quantization-aware training and inference in lower precision for further improved efficiency.
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