

SWEM: Towards Real-Time Video Object Segmentation with Sequential Weighted Expectation-Maximization

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Abstract

Matching-based methods, especially those based on space-time memory, are significantly ahead of other solutions in semi-supervised video object segmentation (VOS). However, continuously growing and redundant template features lead to an inefficient inference. To alleviate this, we propose a novel Sequential Weighted Expectation-Maximization (SWEM) network to greatly reduce the redundancy of memory features. Different from the previous methods which only detect feature redundancy between frames, SWEM merges both intra-frame and inter-frame similar features by leveraging the sequential weighted EM algorithm. Further, adaptive weights for frame features endow SWEM with the flexibility to represent hard samples, improving the discrimination of templates. Besides, the proposed method maintains a fixed number of template features in memory, which ensures the stable inference complexity of the VOS system. Extensive experiments on commonly used DAVIS and YouTube-VOS datasets verify the high efficiency (36 FPS) and high performance (84.3% \mathcal{J} & \mathcal{F} on DAVIS 2017 validation dataset) of SWEM. Code is available at: <https://github.com/lmm077/SWEM>.

1. Introduction

Semi-supervised video object segmentation (VOS) has seized great interest recent years [3, 6, 10, 16, 18, 21, 25, 28, 32, 34, 38, 39, 43, 44, 48, 50, 52] in the computer vision community. It aims to segment the objects of interest from the background in a video, where only the mask annotation of the first frame is provided during testing. A group of early methods concentrate on on-line fine-tuning [2, 3, 19, 29, 30] with the first annotated frame. However, these method tends

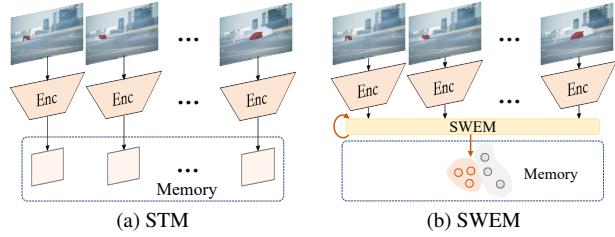


Figure 1. Instead of storing all past frames features as memory, just like STM [32] and following methods [6, 16, 38, 39] do, our SWEM sequentially updates a compact set of bases with a fixed size, greatly reducing the inter-frame and intra-frame redundancy.

to suffer from model degradation caused by target appearance changes as video goes on. Besides, propagation-based methods use masks computed in previous frames to estimate masks in the current frame [7, 34, 46, 49], which is, however, vulnerable to occlusions and rapid motion.

Recently, matching-based VOS methods [5, 6, 16, 17, 25, 28, 38, 39, 43, 44, 50, 53] have achieved striking performance. Such matching-based methods first exploit previous frames to construct target templates, and then calculate the pixel-level correlations between the new coming frame embeddings and the target templates to perform the segmentation. As seen in Figure 1, the Space-Time Memory Network (STM) [32] and the following STM-like methods [6, 16, 38, 39, 50] leverage memory networks to store template features every T frames endlessly, which is prone to missing key-frame information and running out of memory for long-term videos. Besides, given that the inter-frame redundancy of video features would harm the efficiency of matching, another group of methods AFB_URR [25] and Swift [44] take advantage of the similarity of inter-frame features to selectively update partial features. Nonetheless, they all fail to balance the performance and efficiency through a hand-crafted similarity threshold.

Although past efforts have achieved promising results, we argue that both inter-frame redundancy and intra-frame

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one pose the main obstacles that prevent efficient template matching. Here comes to a question that can we achieve a real-time VOS system by considering both the inter-frame and intra-frame redundancy simultaneously? In this paper, we will explore its feasibility.

Inspired by the Expectation-Maximization Attention (EMA) [21], we intend to construct a set of low-rank bases for memory features through Expectation-Maximization (EM) [9] iterations. Here, the number of bases is far less than that of image pixels. Thus, bases can be regarded as a more compact representation, which can greatly reduce the intra-frame redundancy. Instead of applying EM directly, we adopt Weighted Expectation-Maximization (WEM) with the predicted mask as the **fixed** weights to explicitly construct foreground and background bases in each frame. What’s more, we also propose a weighted EM with **adaptive** weights, which give larger weights for hard samples during generating bases. Here, the hard samples refer to those pixels that are not well expressed by bases, but are important for object segmentation.

WEM can deal with the intra-frame redundancy effectively; however, inter-frame one remains unsolved. Applying WEM on a single frame is efficient, but the computation complexity will be dramatically increased if directly applying it to all growing memory features. To further reduce the inter-frame redundancy, we propose the Sequential Weighted Expectation-Maximization (SWEM), where features of only one frame participate in the EM iterations during the memory updating stage. The memory bases will be updated with the new frame features through similarities rather than a simple linear combination. Formally, this updating process is equivalent to a weighted average of all past frame features. As shown in Figure 1, compared with STM [32] which saves all historical frame information as the memory template of objects, our SWEM only updates a more compact set of bases sequentially, thus greatly reducing the inter-frame and intra-frame redundancy.

Our contributions can be summarized as follows:

- We propose a fast and robust matching-based method for VOS, dubbed Sequential Weighted Expectation-Maximization (SWEM) network, where a set of compact bases are constructed and updated sequentially, reducing both the inter- and intra-frame redundancy.
- We introduce an adaptive weights calculation approach for weighted EM, which makes the base features pay more attention to hard samples.
- Without bells and whistles, SWEM reaches a level close to state-of-the-art performance, while maintaining an inference speed of 36 FPS.

2. Related Work

Matching-based Methods for VOS. Recent years have seen a surge of interest in video object segmentation under

the semi-supervised setting. A number of matching-based methods [5, 6, 16, 17, 25, 28, 32, 38, 39, 44, 45, 48, 50] regard the first or intermediate frames as a target template, which is then used to match the pixel-level feature embedding in the new frame. To obtain both long-term and short-term object appearance information, FEELVOS [43] and CFBI [53] match the current frame with both the first frame and the previous frame to obtain both global and local temporal dependencies. Besides, STM [32] and the following methods [6, 16, 38, 39, 50] store multiple memory templates from all previous frames as templates, which is redundant and time-consuming during matching. In contrast, we propose a novel method named SWEM, which only stores a set of low-rank and updated basis features for each target, making the target representation more compact and efficient.

Learning Fast and Robust VOS. Learning a fast and robust model is a common goal since both accuracy and speed are important in practical applications [4, 23, 37, 45, 48, 54]. RANet [48] only uses the first frame as the target template for an acceptable speed. As tracker-based methods, SiamMask [45] and SAT [4] only process the region of interest. TVOS [54] directly propagates target masks according to feature similarity in the embedding space. In general, to achieve fast VOS, the previous methods sacrificed the integrity of the target representation, which substantially degrades segmentation performance. Swift [44] uses a variation-aware trigger module to compute the inter-frame difference to update frames with diverse dynamics. Further, only partial features that are significantly different from memory features will be updated.

In this work, we consider reducing inter- and intra-frame redundancy simultaneously. The proposed weighted EM greatly reduces the intra-frame redundancy by iteratively constructing compact base features for the whole frame. To diminish the inter-frame redundancy, we further extend weighted EM in a sequential manner, which can adaptively update the model without increasing the number of matching templates, thus making our model fast and robust.

3. Preliminaries

3.1. Expectation-Maximization Algorithm

The expectation-maximization (EM) [9] is an iteration-based algorithm, which can be used to estimate parameters of latent variable modes by maximizing the likelihood. The task is defined as estimating model parameters θ based on observation data set \mathbf{X} and corresponding latent variables \mathbf{Z} . Each EM iteration involves two steps, the Expectation step (E step) and the Maximization step (M step). At the r -th iteration, E step finds the posterior $P(\mathbf{Z}|\mathbf{X}, \theta^{r-1})$ and computes the expectation:

$$\mathcal{Q}(\theta, \theta^{r-1}) = \sum P(\mathbf{Z}|\mathbf{X}, \theta^{r-1}) \ln P(\mathbf{X}, \mathbf{Z}|\theta). \quad (1)$$

M step estimates parameters by maximizing the above data likelihood:

$$\theta^r = \arg \max_{\theta} Q(\theta, \theta^{r-1}). \quad (2)$$

The E step and the M step are alternately executed R times to achieve the convergence criterion.

3.2. Expectation-Maximization Attention

Expectation-Maximization Attention (EMA) [21] is proposed to formulate the attention mechanism [47] into an expectation-maximization manner. Specifically, instead of regarding *all pixels* as reconstruction bases, EMA iteratively estimates a much more compact set of bases for each image. EMA consists of three steps, namely *Responsibility Estimation* (RE), *Likelihood Maximization* (LM), and *Data Re-estimation* (DR). Denote $\mathbf{X} = \{\mathbf{x}_n\}_{n=1}^N \in \mathbb{R}^{N \times C}$ as image feature, $\mathcal{M} = \{\boldsymbol{\mu}_k\}_{k=1}^K \in \mathbb{R}^{K \times C}$ as the randomly initialized base features, where N , C , and K indicate the numbers of pixels, channels, and bases. RE estimates the hidden variable $\mathbf{Z} = \{z_{nk}\}_{n=1, k=1}^{N, K} \in \mathbb{R}^{N \times K}$, where the responsibility z_{nk} represents the probability of the n -th pixel belonging to the k -th base:

$$z_{nk} = \frac{\exp(\mathbf{x}_n \boldsymbol{\mu}_k^\top / \tau)}{\sum_{j=1}^K \exp(\mathbf{x}_n \boldsymbol{\mu}_j^\top / \tau)}. \quad (3)$$

Here, τ is a hyper-parameter which controls the shape of distribution \mathbf{Z} . Then, LM updates base features \mathcal{M} by applying the weighted average on feature \mathbf{X} . That is, the k -th base is updated by:

$$\boldsymbol{\mu}_k = \frac{\sum_{n=1}^N z_{nk} \mathbf{x}_n}{\sum_{n=1}^N z_{nk}}. \quad (4)$$

Note that RE and LM are iteratively executed R times until convergence. Finally, DR reconstructs a low-rank version of \mathbf{X} using $\tilde{\mathbf{X}} = \mathbf{Z}\mathcal{M}$. Since K is much less than N , basis set \mathcal{M} can be treated as a compact representation for image feature \mathbf{X} . Inspired by EMA, we consider replacing redundant memory features with more compact base features.

3.3. Redundancy of the Space-time Memory

To get a more intuitive understanding of feature redundancy in videos, we evaluate the inter-frame and intra-frame cosine similarities of video features on the DAVIS 2017 [36] validation set using the image encoder of STM [32] as the feature extractor. For each pixel in the current frame, we first calculate its maximum similarity with all pixels in the previous frame. In this way, N such maximum similarities can be obtained. In Figure 2, we list the histogram of the maximum similarities, where the horizontal coordinate is the similarity range. Most of the similarities are larger than 0.6, and nearly 87% of similarities are larger than 0.9, indicating high inter-frame redundancy

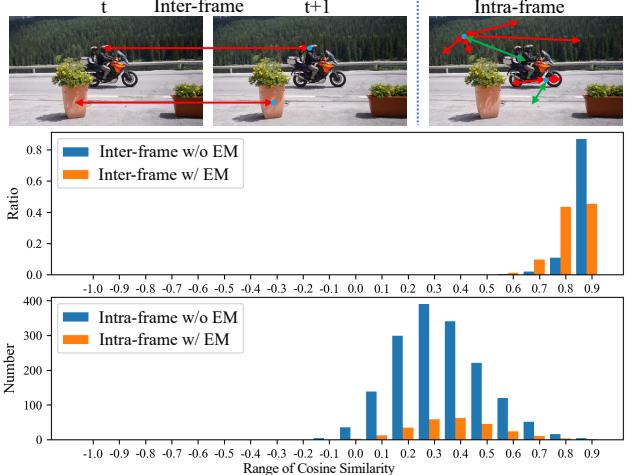


Figure 2. The illustration of inter-frame and intra-frame redundancy of video features.

in video sequences. In contrast, computing the maximum similarity for intra-frame redundancy measurement is not appropriate since spatial continuity would make most maximum similarities exceed 0.9. Thus, we calculate all pairwise similarities and count the average pair number of each frame under different similarities. The third line in Figure 2 shows the statistics. Most of the similarities between the two pixels in an image are positive, and more than 70% of them are larger than 0.3, which demonstrates the ubiquity of intra-frame redundancy.

To verify that the EM algorithm can find a more compact representation for image features and thus restrain the frame redundancy, we calculate the inter-frame and intra-frame similarity with a basis set rather than the entire image feature, where the basis set consists of 256 bases evaluated via EM iterations. Specifically, instead of calculating similarities between inter-frame bases, we calculate the maximum similarity between each frame feature and the base feature of the previous frame. As seen in Figure 2, more than 99% of inter-frame similarities are larger than 0.7. That is, although each frame has only 256 base features, which is far less than pixel number, it still meets the need of inter-frame matching. As for intra-frame similarities, although the similarity distribution is basically the same as that of the whole image feature, the number of large similarities has decreased significantly, which demonstrates the intra-frame redundancy is greatly reduced via EM iterations.

4. Proposed Approach

We first introduce the weighted EM, which leverages the predicted mask as weights to explicitly construct foreground and background bases separately in each frame. Furthermore, the **adaptive** weights make the model pay more attention to hard samples to improve the segmentation performance. Then, the core part of this work, the SWEM

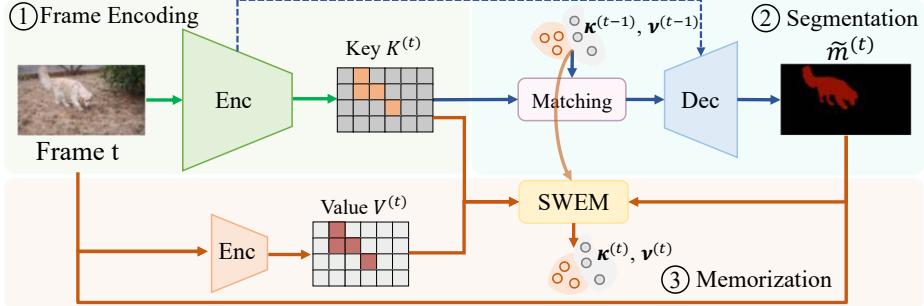


Figure 3. The matching-based pipeline of SWEM. The backbone network receives the t -th frame to capture general image features as **Key** $\mathbf{K}^{(t)}$. The features are used to match with target-specific memories. Through the matching process, the re-aggregated value and similarity map are obtained to be the target features for the final segmentation. Multi-level skip connections help refine the segmentation results for low to high resolution. The predicted mask is then employed with the intermediate image features to update bases via our SWEM.

algorithm is detailed, which shows how to convert **growing** frame features into **fixed-size** bases. Finally, we describe the matching-based pipeline of the proposed SWEM.

4.1. Weighted Expectation-Maximization

Although we have proved that using EM to find a more compact representation can reduce both inter and intra-frame redundancy, we argue that naively employing EM to learn a set of bases for memory features is not a reasonable solution in the VOS system. The reason here is that the memory bases would mix with both the foreground and background, which is unfavorable for object segmentation. Instead, it is desirable to build low-rank foreground and background bases separately. To this end, we leverage Weighted Expectation-Maximization (WEM) [1, 13, 14, 27, 41], which is widely used for weighted data clustering. When using WEM to produce bases for images, Eq. (4) would be modified as:

$$\boldsymbol{\mu}_k = \frac{\sum_{n=1}^N z_{nk} w_n \mathbf{x}_n}{\sum_{n=1}^N z_{nk}}, \quad (5)$$

where w_n is the weight for \mathbf{x}_n . It is equivalent to ‘‘seeing the n -th feature w_n times’’ [14]. Note that WEM makes it possible to construct separate foreground and background bases for template matching, where the object foreground mask and the background mask of each frame can be used as the corresponding *fixed* weights to substitute w_n . In this way, any irregular target region can be represented by a set of bases with a fixed size, which greatly reduces intra-frame redundancy.

The essence of using WEM for compact representation learning is to perform clustering on all pixels in the image, and make different bases to represent each pixel. Because the number of bases is far less than that of pixels, the constructed segmentation target template would be incomplete to some extent and even be faced with the target lost situation. The expression degree of each pixel is different during basis set construction. Some pixels have little contribution

for bases, but are very important for object segmentation, which are so-called hard samples. To ensure that the hard samples could be assigned larger weights during basis set construction, we propose to *adaptively* adjust the weights of pixels rather than directly employing the *fixed* weights calculated via foreground and background masks.

We estimate a confidence score for each pixel by a foreground-background binary classification. Specifically, after the E-step of WEM iteration, each pixel is classified by the foreground or background bases, the classification probability of the n -th pixel can be calculated as:

$$P^{fg}(\mathbf{x}_n) = \frac{\sum_{k=1}^K \mathcal{K}(\mathbf{x}_n, \boldsymbol{\mu}_k^{fg})}{\sum_{k=1}^K [\mathcal{K}(\mathbf{x}_n, \boldsymbol{\mu}_k^{fg}) + \mathcal{K}(\mathbf{x}_n, \boldsymbol{\mu}_k^{bg})]}, \quad (6)$$

$$P^{bg}(\mathbf{x}_n) = 1 - P^{fg}(\mathbf{x}_n),$$

where $\boldsymbol{\mu}_k^{fg}$ and $\boldsymbol{\mu}_k^{bg}$ are foreground and background bases separately. $\mathcal{K}(\cdot)$ is a kernel function for calculating the similarity of two input features. Specifically, $\mathcal{K}(\mathbf{a}, \mathbf{b}) = \exp(\frac{\mathbf{a}\mathbf{b}^\top/\tau}{\|\mathbf{a}\| \cdot \|\mathbf{b}\|})$. Eq. (6) can be treated as a coarse segmentation result, since it provides the result of whether each pixel corresponds to the foreground or the background. Besides, the final segmentation (i.e., the output of the network decoder) can be obtained, which is considered more accurate than the coarse one since it is additionally constrained by ground-truth annotations. If coarse segmentation of a pixel is consistent with the final one, this pixel can be regarded as an easy sample. Otherwise, it would be regarded as a hard sample. We believe that the inconsistency of hard samples is because these pixels are neglected during the base construction process, which makes them struggle to achieve the same result as the final segmentation. Supposing that m_n^{fg} and m_n^{bg} are soft masks of final segmentation, the *adaptive weights* are estimated by:

$$w_n^{fg} = m_n^{fg} P^{bg}(\mathbf{x}_n), \quad w_n^{bg} = m_n^{bg} P^{fg}(\mathbf{x}_n). \quad (7)$$

The more inconsistent the coarse and final segmentation are, the higher weights would be given for base construction.

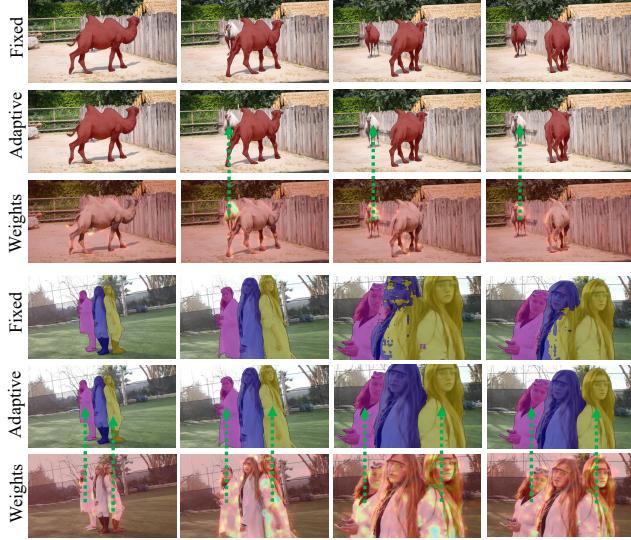


Figure 5. The qualitative comparison between adaptive-weights and fixed-weights. SWEM with fixed weights (first line for each sample) is struggled to distinguish similar objects while the one with adaptive weights (second line) is competent for this problem. Weights are visualized at the third line for each sample, where the brighter the pixel, the harder it is. As for the person in the middle, the corresponding background bases pay more attention to objects (the remaining person) which are similar to the target.

titative comparisons with recent state-of-the-art video segmentation methods on the DAVIS 2016 and 2017 validation sets. Our method achieves the best \mathcal{J} & \mathcal{F} on both datasets among methods without pre-training on image datasets or additional video datasets. In detail, our method outperforms SAT [4], which runs at a similar speed (39 FPS) with ours, with a large margin on DAVIS2017 (+4.9% \mathcal{J} & \mathcal{F} score). Under the setting of using additional training data from YouTube-VOS (+YV), our SWEM surpasses all other top-performing methods. Note that STCN [6] uses a growing memory bank during inference, which harms the long-term segmentation while SWEM keeps the fixed number of bases and has stable computation complexity. SSTVOS [10], AOT [52] and JOINT [31] adopt transformer [42] backbones which are more powerful than ResNet-50. Hierarchical matching used in HMMN [39] also affects the segmentation efficiency deeply. We re-evaluated STM and STCN on our hardware and software environment for reference. Our SWEM is capable of achieving an inference speed of 36 FPS on the V100 GPU and 27 FPS on the 1080ti GPU.

You Tube-VOS 2018. We make a comparison between our SWEM with previous methods on the You Tube-VOS 2018 via the official evaluation server in Table 4. Note that although SWEM leverages the original ResNet-50 backbone and the identical decoder as STM [32], it achieves the 82.8% overall score which is very close to the state-of-the-art results. Besides, we provide more qualitative and quantitative comparisons in the Supplementary Material.

Method	\mathcal{G}	seen		unseen	
		$\mathcal{J}_M \uparrow$	$\mathcal{F}_M \uparrow$	$\mathcal{J}_M \uparrow$	$\mathcal{F}_M \uparrow$
STM [32]	79.4	79.7	84.2	72.8	80.9
AFB-URR [25]	79.6	78.8	83.1	74.1	82.6
EGMN [28]	80.2	80.7	85.1	74.0	80.9
KMN [38]	81.4	81.4	85.6	75.3	83.3
CFBI [53]	81.4	81.1	85.8	75.3	83.4
RMNNet [50]	81.5	82.1	85.7	75.7	82.4
SSTVOS [10]	81.7	81.2	85.9	76.0	83.9
LCM [16]	82.0	82.2	86.7	75.7	83.4
DMN [24]	82.5	82.5	86.9	76.2	84.2
HMMN [39]	82.6	82.1	87.0	76.8	84.6
JOINT [31]	83.1	81.5	85.9	78.7	86.5
AOT [52]	83.7	82.5	87.5	77.9	86.7
SWEM*	82.8	82.4	86.9	77.1	85.0

Table 4. Comparison with state-of-the-art methods on the You Tube-VOS 2018 validation dataset. We report all of the mean Jaccard (\mathcal{J}), the boundary (\mathcal{F}) scores for seen and unseen categories, and the overall scores \mathcal{G} . Besides, we use '*' to indicate those methods with an inference speed > 20 FPS. Note SSTVOS, JOINT and AOT are transformer-based methods.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, we proposed a fast yet robust model for semi-supervised video object segmentation dubbed Sequential Weighted Expectation-Maximum (SWEM) network, which is capable of constructing compact target templates with low redundancy for pixel-wise matching. The weighted EM algorithm is used to construct bases for foreground and background features separately and reduce the intra-frame redundancy. We also proposed to compute adaptive weights instead of fixed weights when generating bases, which forces bases to pay more attention to hard samples, so as to reduce the missing match. We extended the weighted EM to sequential weighted EM to process sequential data and completely reduce the inter-frame redundancy. Overall, our method achieves a performance close to the state-of-the-art on VOS at 36 FPS.

Acknowledgement

This work was supported by NSFC project Grant No.U1833101, SZSTI Grant No.JCYJ20190809172201639 and WDZC20200820200655001, the Joint Research Center of Tencent and Tsinghua.

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Training Data \ Method	DAVIS 2016 val $\mathcal{J} & \mathcal{F}$			DAVIS 2017 val $\mathcal{J} & \mathcal{F}$		
	STM [32]	STCN [6]	SWEM	STM [32]	STCN [6]	SWEM
DAVIS	74.5	84.6	88.1	48.6	71.2	77.2
DAVIS + YTVOS	88.2	89.8	89.5	80.0	81.1	81.9
Image + (DAVIS + YTVOS)	89.8	91.2	91.3	81.6	84.5	84.3

Table 8. Analysis of training on different datasets. We train STM [32], STCN [6] and proposed SWEM under three different conditions: 1) only training on video data DAVIS, 2) training on video datasets DAVIS and YouTube-VOS, and 3) pretraining on image data first and then training on DAVIS and YouTube-VOS.

E. Comparisons on YouTube-VOS 2019

To further evaluate the effectiveness of our method, we also carry out experiments on the YouTube-VOS 2019 dataset. Note that the YouTube-VOS 2019 validation set contains 507 videos, while the 2018 version has 474 videos. Specifically, our SWEM is trained on the YouTube-VOS 2019 training set and evaluated on the validation set through the official evaluation server. We compare SWEM with recent state-of-the-art methods in Table 7, including transformer-based methods SSTVOS [10], JOINT [31] and AOT [52]. SWEM achieves the 82.6% overall score while maintaining the real-time inference speed.

F. Impact of Training Data

Table 8 presents the performance of various models on DAVIS 2016 and DAVIS 2017 validation sets with different training datasets. It can be seen that both pre-training on image data and using additional YouTube-VOS video data can boost performance. Note that our SWEM trained only on DAVIS data outperforms STM [32] and STCN [6] under the same setting with a large margin. Furthermore, STM [32] obtains 48.6% $\mathcal{J} & \mathcal{F}$ on DAVIS 2017 validation set when it is trained only with DAVIS data. Authors claim it is due to the high risk of over-fitting on small datasets. However, STCN gets a much higher overall performance 71.2% $\mathcal{J} & \mathcal{F}$ than STM. We argue the reason for this performance gap is that the features involved in matching in STM come from different feature spaces, whereas those features in STCN and SWEM are from the same feature spaces. Moreover, the direct usage of affinity features also accelerates the convergence of SWEM. SWEM gets similar performance with STCN when adopting additional YouTube-VOS video data or image data. It is worth noting that SWEM stores fixed-size (512) memory features which are much fewer than those in STCN. As an inference, a single frame with a size 480×864 produces 1,620 features.

G. Qualitative Results

We further provide the qualitative comparison between STM [32] and our SWEM on the validation set of the

DAVIS 2017 and YouTube-VOS in Figure 8, which demonstrates the superiority of our SWEM.

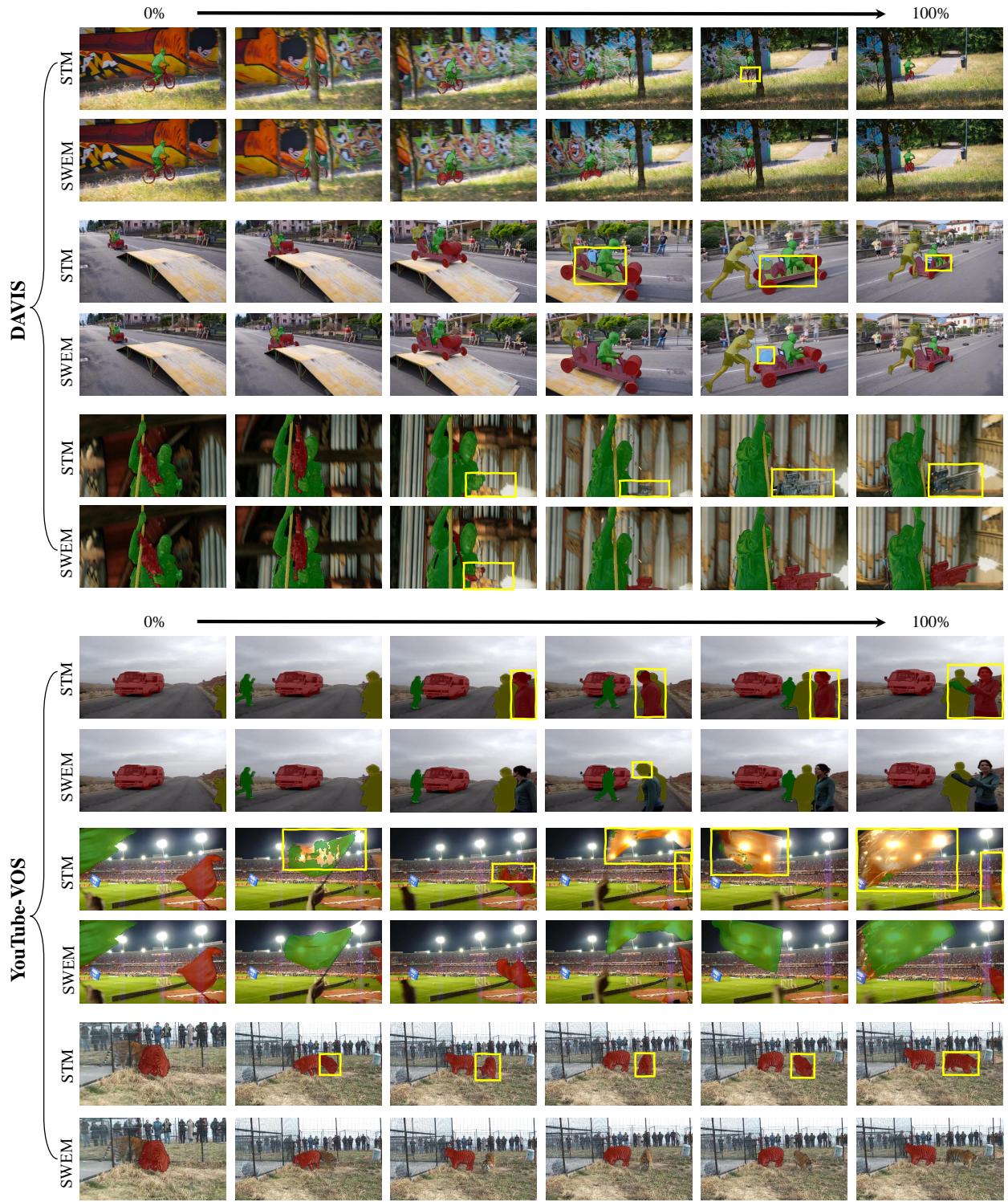


Figure 8. The qualitative comparison between STM [32] and our SWEM on the DAVIS 2017 and YouTube-VOS. The obvious failure segmentation is indicated by yellow bounding boxes. Our SWEM is robust with rapid motion and similar distractors.