Distributed Training of Deep Neural Networks with Spark: The MareNostrum Experience

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***Abstract*—Deployment of a distributed deep learning technology stack on a large parallel system is a very complex process, involving the integration and configuration of several layers of both, general-purpose and custom software. The details of such kind of deployments are rarely described in the literature. This paper presents the experiences observed during the deployment of a technology stack to enable deep learning workloads on MareNostrum, a petascale supercomputer. The components of a layered architecture, based on the usage of Apache Spark, are described and the performance and scalability of the resulting system is evaluated. This is followed by a discussion about the impact of different configurations including parallelism, storage and networking alternatives, and other aspects related to the execution of deep learning workloads on a traditional HPC setup. The derived conclusions should be useful to guide similarly complex deployments in the future.**

I. Introduction

Over the past several years, deep neural networks (DNNs) have proven to be an incredibly effective tool for a variety of problems, from computer vision, speech recognition or natural language processing. Their number of parameters and complexity, and the size of the training datasets, have quickly grown, leading to be a first-class workload for HPC (High-Performance Computing) infrastructures. However, enabling deep learning workloads on a large parallel system is a very complex process, involving the integration and configuration of several layers of both, general-purpose and custom software. The details of such kind of deployments are rarely described in the literature. This paper presents the experiences observed during the deployment of a technology stack to enable deep learning workloads on a real-world, petascale, HPC setup, the MareNostrum supercomputer.

The goal of the deployment is to be able to take profit of the computation resources provided by MareNostrum (almost 50K cores and more than 100TB of aggregated RAM) for training DNNs. Nowadays, the usage of GPUs has proven to be the more efficient alternative to train neural networks, speeding up common operations such as large matrix computations [1], [6]. As their price, performance and energy efficiency improves, GPUs are gaining ground in HPC (both in special-purpose systems and in hybrid general-purpose supercomputers). However, there are still many systems, such as MareNostrum, that continue to use conventional CPUs.

The key element of the deployed layered architecture is Apache Spark [14]. In order to isolate machine-learning applications from the particularities of MareNostrum, Spark is usually used as an intermediate layer (not only in MareNostrum, [11] does the same on a Cray X-series supercomputer). The deployment of Spark-enabled clusters over MareNostrum is not trivial, it has required the development of a specific interoperability layer that we call Spark4MN, which will be explained later. On top of this stack (Marenostrum, Spark4MN and Spark) we place a deep learning specific layer, DL4J. DL4J, that is written in Java and has a direct integration with Spark, enables distributed training of deep neural networks through a synchronous data parallelism method.

These four elements (DL4J, Spark, Spark4MN and MareNostrum) have been integrated enabling to efficiently train deep neural networks. Apart from the deployment details, the challenge is scalability and proper configuration. Simply running on many cores may yield poor benefits or even degraded performance due to overheads. We deal with this issue and we aim to make the first step towards systematic analysis of the several parameters and optimized configuration.

In order to evaluate the performance and scalability of the proposed software stack on MareNostrum, we have experimented with different workloads and different deployment setups (number of nodes, parallelism configuration, etc.). Through the following sections we explain the different components of the deployment in more detail. Then, we discuss the performed experiments and the obtained results, aiming to shed light onto the parameters that have the biggest impact and their effective configuration. We provide insights into how the job configuration on a traditional HPC setup can be optimized to efficiently run this kind of workloads. The derived conclusions should be useful to guide similarly complex deployments in the future.

II. Related Work

Several works have addressed the execution of deep learning workloads on large specific purpose clusters (e.g. [12]), usually involving nodes equipped with GPUs. Deployments over general-purpose HPC systems are less common, and their details are rarely described in the literature. The work described in [3] analyzes the main bottlenecks of synchronous distributed DNNs SGD-based training. The authors conclude that the issue is quickly turning into a vastly communication bound problem which is severely limiting the scalability in most practical scenarios. In [5] authors present a Caffe-based approach to execute deep learning workloads on a contemporary HPC system equipped with Xeon-Phi nodes. They use the Intel distribution of Caffe, that improves Caffe performance when running on CPUs. Authors report to be able, due to a hybrid approach, to overcome the limitations

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of synchronous systems scaling the training of a model up to thousands of nodes. Our approach attempts to overcome the complexity of a direct deployment such as this by relying on an intermediate layer, Apache Spark. In addition to reduce the deployment costs, our approach enables a systematic tuning of the different configuration parameters, both at application level and at infrastructure level. Other works have followed a similar approach but for other kind of workloads. In [7], authors describe a framework to enable Hadoop workloads on a Cray X-series supercomputer. In [11], the performance of Spark on an HPC setup is investigated. This work studies the impact of storage architecture, locality-oriented scheduling and emerging storage devices. In [2], the authors compare the performance of traditional HPC setups against Hadoop-like frameworks over clusters of commodity hardware with respect to the processing of data-intensive workloads.

III. Deep Neural Networks

Deep neural networks (DNNs) are layered compositional models that enable learning representations of data with multiple levels of abstraction. State-of-the-art DNNs include many variants, specialized in different domains (convolutional deep neural networks, recurrent neural networks, etc.). DNNs are usually trained by using iterative, gradient-based optimizers (typically mini-batch SGD) that drive a non-convex cost function to a local minima. In every iteration step, we use information about the gradient ∇E at the current point. In iteration step $[t+1]$ the weight update $\Delta w[t]$ is determined by taking a step (γ is the learning rate) into the direction of the negative gradient at position $w[t]$ such that (in the case of stochastic training):

$$\Delta w[t] = -\gamma \frac{\partial E_n}{\partial w[t]} \tag{1}$$

State-of-the-art networks have a huge number of weights W and the core computation in their training is dominated by dense linear algebra. Usually, in order to improve the efficiency, the training dataset is split into mini-batches of size B (typically chosen between 1 and a few hundreds) and the model is only updated (one iteration) after accumulating the gradients of all the training samples within a mini-batch.

DNNs training on a single node involves several software and hardware layers. At the top of the stack there is normally a deep learning framework such as DL4J, TensorFlow, Torch, etc. (there may be even an upper layer such as Keras). Below, the framework relies on an underlying numerical library such as NVIDIA's cuDNN or Intel's MKL. Finally, the models are usually trained on NVIDIA GPUs or Intel's Xeon Phi processors.

When trained on multiple nodes, one can apply data parallelism (distributing training samples among nodes) and/or model parallelism (distributing model parameters among nodes). In our deployment, we only apply data parallelism, as it is the only supported by DL4J. The B training samples within a min-batch are split into n equal sized sets of size b (with $b = B/n$). The resulting mini-batch-splits are then fed to n nodes holding a complete copy of the model. The results

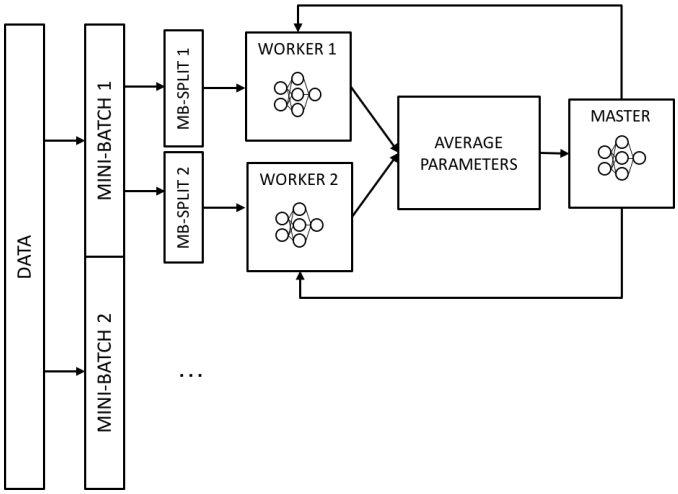

Fig. 1: Parameter averaging in DL4J over Spark (example using two mini-batches).

(gradients) off all nodes are then accumulated and used to update the model.

While DL4J limits us to perform this process synchronously (awaiting all the workers to finish before updating the model), it could be also performed asynchronously (allowing model updates with just a part of nodes results). Asynchronous data parallelism can potentially gain higher throughput, but depending on the infrastructure status we can have the *stale gradient problem*. By the time a slow worker has finished its calculations based on a given state of the model, the model may have been updated a number of times and the outdated update may have a negative impact.

IV. DL4J

DL4J (or Deeplearning4j) is a computing framework written for Java with wide support for deep learning algorithms. DL4J is powered by its own numerical computing library, ND4J, and provides distributed parallel versions (both for GPUs and CPUs) of the algorithms that integrate with Apache Hadoop and Spark. In order to achieve distributed network training over Spark, DL4J performs a version of the synchronous data parallelism mechanism called parameter averaging. Instead of transferring gradients to the master, the nodes perform first a local model update and then they transfer the resulting weights to the master, where they are averaged. With respect to generic parameter averaging, in DL4J the Spark driver and reduction operations take the place of the parameter server (see Figure 1).

There are several parameters that must be adjusted to optimize training time. These include, but are not limited to, mini-batch-split size, averaging frequency (too low averaging periods may imply too networking overhead), prefetching (how many mini-batch-splits a worker must prefetch to avoid waiting for the data to be loaded), and repartitioning strategy (when and how to repartition data to keep the partitions balanced).

V. Apache Spark

As mentioned before, Apache Spark is the key component of the proposed framework. Spark is a distributed system for processing data-intensive workloads. It excels in an efficient memory usage, outperforming Hadoop for many applications [13]. Spark is being used to execute big data workloads on the MareNostrum supercomputer, isolating the applications from the particularities of this HPC infrastructure. Spark is designed to avoid the file system as much as possible, retaining most data resident in distributed memory across phases in the same job. Such memory-resident feature stands to benefit many applications, such as machine learning or clustering, that require extensive reuse of results across multiple iterations. Essentially, Spark is an implementation of the so-called Resilient Distributed Dataset (RDD) abstraction [13], which hides the details of distribution and fault-tolerance for large collections of items.

VI. The Spark4MN Framework

On MareNostrum, batch jobs are executed through IBM's Platform Load Sharing Facility (or simply LSF). The particularities of LSF difficult the tasks of deploying and accessing a Spark cluster on MareNostrum, as the destination nodes for a job are assigned dynamically. To overcome this problem, we have used Spark4MN [10], a framework that, for a given Spark application and requested setup, executes the necessary LSF commands to dynamically deploy a Spark cluster with the requested setup and runs the Spark application over it. In addition, Spark4MN can deploy other necessary resources such as HDFS storage. When the LSF job scheduler decides to execute a Spark4MN job, a set of nodes are first reserved for the Spark cluster. Then, the different Spark services are launched. One disadvantage of Spark4MN is the need to deploy the Spark cluster for each application execution. However, the deployment requires less than 12 seconds and this time is independent of the number of nodes of the cluster. As an advantage, testing different cluster setups (number of nodes, memory size, etc.) with Spark4mn is straightforward. Once the Spark cluster is up and running, the Spark application is executed via a *spark-submit* call.

VII. MareNostrum Supercomputer

All the installations and experiments mentioned in this paper were done over the MareNostrum supercomputer. MareNostrum is the main supercomputer in the Barcelona Supercomputing Center (BSC), the most powerful supercomputer in Spain, and one of most powerful supercomputers of the European infrastructure PRACE (Partnership for Advanced Computing in Europe). MareNostrum has recently (June 2017) been upgraded to its version 4, but the work described in this paper were performed over version 3. The following data correspond to that version. MareNostrum 3 consisted of 3,056 IBM DataPlex DX360M4 compute nodes, each one with 16 Intel Sandy Bridge cores running at 2.6 GHz (two 8-core Intel Xeon processors E5-2670 per node), for a total of 48,896 physical cores. There were 32 GB of memory (2 GB/core) and 500 GB of local disk per core. Nodes had also access to 2 PB of distributed GPFS data storage. Nodes communicated primarily through a high bandwidth, low latency InfiniBand FDR10 network. MareNostrum 3 had a peak performance of 1.1 Petaflops.

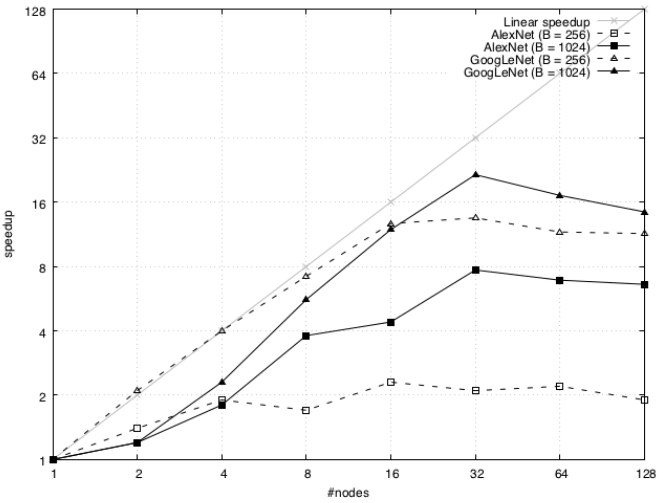

Fig. 2: Speedup results for AlexNet [4] and GoogLeNet [9] with different mini-batch sizes B.

VIII. Experiments and Results

The main goal of the experiments is to evaluate the scalability properties of the proposed deployment. To this end, we have experimented with different workloads and different deployment setups. Regarding the benchmarking workloads, we have chosen two widely used convolutional networks, AlexNet [4] and GoogLeNet [9]. Both networks have been used in other state-of-the-art works (e.g. [3]) and let us compare our results with others. While AlexNet implements a rather shallow network with many parameters, GoogLeNet is a very deep network with many convolutional layers. We apply both networks to dataset of the ImageNet [8] visual recognition challenge. Regarding the deployment setup, we have tested different values for the number of nodes, the number of Spark workers per node, the Spark data partition size, the DL4J mini-bach-split size, the DL4J averaging frequency, prefetching and repartitioning strategy. Figure 2 shows the speedup results obtained with $B = 256$ and $B = 1024$. The results of our evaluation show that DL4J and Spark are able to scale deep learning workloads over MareNostrum. However, the effective scaling stops above 32 nodes with the best configurations. This limitation agrees with the results reported in [3], that studies the theoretic constraints of synchronous data parallelism for DNNs training. The main bottleneck of the synchronous approach is the computation to communication ratio. The synchronous parallelization of DNN training requires the communication of the model w_t and the computed gradients Δw_t between all nodes in every iteration t. Since w has to be synchronous in all nodes and Δw_{t+1} can not be computed before w_t is available, the entire communication has to be completed before the next iteration $t+1$. The problem is that w and Δw have the size of all weights in the neural network, which can be hundreds of megabytes. The compute

times per iteration are rather low and decrease when scaling to more nodes. Depending on the model size and layout, the training problem becomes communication bound after scaling to only few nodes. Shallow networks with many neurons per layer (like AlexNet) scale worse than deep networks with less neurons (like GoogLeNet) where longer compute times meet smaller model sizes.

A second problem of the synchronous approach is that nodes process mini-batch-splits instead of mini-batches, and the size b of these splits depends on the number of nodes n. If b is too small (less than 32 samples in our experiments), there will be a negative impact on the inner parallel computation (within the node), specially in the case of the FullyConnected (FC) layers. One solution would be to increase the mini-batch size in parallel to the number of nodes, but large batch sizes have been shown to cause slowdown in convergence and degrade the generalization properties of the trained model [5]. A third problem is stragglers. The duration of the iteration depends on the slowest node. This effect gets worse with scale.

Asynchronous parallelization, not possible with the current version of DL4J, would solve these problems but, as mentioned before, has the *stale gradient problem*. Some recent works like [5] propose a hybrid approach in which synchronous parallelism just takes place within groups of nodes.

IX. Conclusions

The research work presented in this paper explores the feasibility and efficiency of using Apache Spark and DL4J for deploying deep learning workloads over a real-world, petascale, HPC setup, such as MareNostrum. To this end, we have designed a layered architecture consisting in both, general-purpose (Spark and DL4J) and custom components (Spark4MN). We have evaluated the deployment by training AlexNet and GoogLeNet over the ImageNet dataset. We have tested different deployment setups (number of nodes, number of Spark workers per node, data partition size, mini-batch size, mini-bach-split size, averaging frequency, prefetching and repartitioning strategy).

We conclude that it is feasible to rely on Apache Spark to deploy deep learning workloads over a traditional HPC setup. This approach minimizes deployment costs and enables a systematic tuning of the different configuration parameters, both at application level and at infrastructure level. However, the effective scaling is strongly limited by the synchronous parallelism approach applied by the latest DL4J version. Problems such as the communication overhead, mini-batch-split size and stragglers degrade the scalability beyond 32 nodes. In order to overcome this limitation, it would be necessary to replace the synchronous mechanism by a hybrid approach in which synchronization just takes place within fixed-size node sets.

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