FlowNet3D: Learning Scene Flow in 3D Point Clouds

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Abstract

Many applications in robotics and human-computer interaction can benefit from understanding 3D motion of points in a dynamic environment, widely noted as scene flow. While most previous methods focus on stereo and RGB-D images as input, few try to estimate scene flow directly from point clouds. In this work, we propose a novel deep neural network named FlowNet3D that learns scene flow from point clouds in an end-to-end fashion. Our network simultaneously learns deep hierarchical features of point clouds and flow embeddings that represent point motions, supported by two newly proposed learning layers for point sets. We evaluate the network on both challenging synthetic data from FlyingThings3D and real Lidar scans from KITTI. Trained on synthetic data only, our network successfully generalizes to real scans, outperforming various baselines and showing competitive results to the prior art. We also demonstrate two applications of our scene flow output (scan registration and motion segmentation) to show its potential wide use cases.

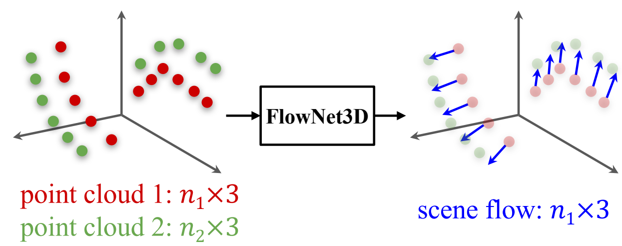

Figure 1: **End-to-end scene flow estimation from point clouds.** Our model directly consumes raw point clouds from two consecutive frames, and outputs dense scene flow (as translation vectors) for all points in the 1st frame.

1. Introduction

Scene flow is the 3D motion field of points in the scene [27]. Its projection to an image plane becomes 2D optical flow. It is a low-level understanding of a dynamic environment, without any assumed knowledge of structure or motion of the scene. With this flexibility, scene flow can serve many higher level applications. For example, it provides motion cues for object segmentation, action recognition, camera pose estimation, or even serve as a regularization for other 3D vision problems.

However, for this *3D* flow estimation problem, most previous works rely on *2D* representations. They extend methods for optical flow estimation to stereo or RGB-D images, and usually estimate optical flow and disparity map separately [33, 28, 16], not directly optimizing for 3D scene flow. These methods cannot be applied to cases where point clouds are the only input.

Very recently, researchers in the robotics community started to study scene flow estimation directly in 3D point clouds (e.g. from Lidar) [7, 25]. But those works did not benefit from deep learning as they built multi-stage systems based on hand-crafted features, with simple models such as logistic regression. There are often many assumptions involved such as assumed scene rigidity or existence of point correspondences, which make it hard to adapt those systems to benefit from deep networks. On the other hand, in the learning domain, Qi et al. [19, 20] recently proposed novel deep architectures that directly consume point clouds for 3D classification and segmentation. However, their work focused on processing static point clouds.

In this work, we connect the above two research frontiers by proposing a deep neural network called *FlowNet3D* that learns scene flow in 3D point clouds end-to-end. As illustrated in Fig. 1, given input point clouds from two consecutive frames (point cloud 1 and point cloud 2), our network estimates a translational flow vector for every point in the first frame to indicate its motion between the two frames. The network, based on the building blocks from [19], is able to simultaneously learn deep hierarchical features of point clouds and *flow embeddings* that represent their motions. While there are no correspondences between the two sampled point clouds, our network learns to associate points from their spatial localities and geometric similarities, through our newly proposed *flow embedding* layer. Each output embedding implicitly represents the 3D motion of a point. From the embeddings, the network further up-samples and refines them in an informed way through another novel *set upconv* layer. Compared to direct feature

* indicates equal contributions.

up-sampling with 3D interpolations, the set upconv layers *learn* to up-sample points based on their spatial and feature relations.

We extensively study the design choices in our model and validate the usefullness of our newly proposed point set learning layers, with a large-scale synthetic dataset (FlyingThings3D). We also evaluate our model on the real LiDAR scans from the KITTI benchmark, where our model shows significantly stronger performance compared to baselines of non-deep learning methods and competitive results to the prior art. More remarkably, we show that our network, even trained on synthetic data, is able to robustly estimate scene flow in point clouds from real scans, showing its great generalizability. With fine tuning on a small set of real data, the network can achieve even better performance.

The key contributions of this paper are as follows[1]:

- We propose a novel architecture called FlowNet3D that estimates scene flow from a pair of consecutive point clouds end-to-end.
- We introduce two new learning layers on point clouds: a flow embedding layer that learns to correlate two point clouds, and a set upconv layer that learns to propagate features from one set of points to the other.
- We show how we can apply the proposed FlowNet3D architecture on real LiDAR scans from KITTI and achieve greatly improved results in 3D scene flow estimation compared with traditional methods.

2. Related Work

Scene flow from RGB or RGB-D images. Vedula et al. [27] first introduced the concept of scene flow, as three-dimensional field of motion vectors in the world. They assumed knowledge of stereo correspondences and combined optical flow and first-order approximations of depth maps to estimate scene flow. Since this seminal work, many others have tried to jointly estimate structure and motion from stereoscopic images [12, 18, 34, 26, 5, 33, 28, 29, 1, 30, 16], mostly in a variational setting with regularizations for smoothness of motion and structure [12, 1, 26], or with assumption of the rigidity of the local structures [29, 16, 30].

With the recent advent of commodity depth sensors, it has become feasible to estimate scene flow from monocular RGB-D images [9], by generalizing variational 2D flow algorithms to 3D [10, 14] and exploiting more geometric cues provided by the depth channel [21, 11, 23]. Our work focuses on learning scene flow directly from *point clouds*, without any dependence on RGB images or assumptions on rigidity and camera motions.

[1]The code is available at https://github.com/xingyul/flownet3d.

Scene flow from point clouds. Recently, Dewan et al. [7] proposed to estimate dense rigid motion fields in 3D LiDAR scans. They formulate the problem as an energy minimization problem of a factor graph, with hand-crafted SHOT [24] descriptors for correspondence search. Later, Ushani et al. [25] presented a different pipeline: They train a logistic classifier to tell whether two columns of occupancy grids correspond and formulate an EM algorithm to estimate a locally rigid and non-deforming flow. Compared to these previous works, our method is an end-to-end solution with deep learned features and no dependency on hard correspondences or assumptions on rigidity.

Concurrent to our work, [2] estimate scene flow as rigid motions of individual objects or background with network that jointly learns to regress ego-motion and detect 3D objects. [22] jointly estimate object rigid motions and segment them based on their motions. A recent work [32] also explored to estimate scene flow with a newly proposed learning network on point clouds but little detail was revealed on its specific implementation.

Related deep learning based methods. FlowNet [8] and FlowNet 2.0 [13] are two seminal works that propose to learn optical flow with convolutional neural networks in an end-to-end fashion, showing competitive performance with great efficiency. [15] extends FlowNet to simultaneously estimating disparity and optical flow. [32] proposed parametric continuous convolution for scene flow in point clouds. Our work is inspired by the success of those deep learning based attempts at optical flow prediction, and can be viewed as the 3D counterpart of them. However, the irregular structure in point clouds (no regular grids as in image) presents new challenges and opportunities for design of novel architectures, which is the focus of this work.

3. Problem Definition

We design deep neural networks that estimate 3D motion flow from consecutive frames of point clouds. Input to our network are two sets of points sampled from a dynamic 3D scene, at two consecutive time frames: $\mathcal{P} = \{x_i | i = 1, \dots, n_1\}$ (point cloud 1) and $\mathcal{Q} = \{y_j | j = 1, \dots, n_2\}$ (point cloud 2), where $x_i, y_j \in \mathbb{R}^3$ are XYZ coordinates of individual points. Note that due to object motion and viewpoint changes, the two point clouds do not necessarily have the same number of points or have any correspondences between their points. It is also possible to include more point features such as color and Lidar intensity. For simplicity we focus on XYZ only.

Now consider the physical point under a sampled point x_i moves to location x'_i at the second frame, then the translational motion vector of the point is $d_i = x'_i - x_i$. Our goal is, given $\mathcal{P}$ and $\mathcal{Q}$, to recover the scene flow for every sampled point in the first frame: $\mathcal{D} = \{d_i | i = 1, \dots, n_1\}$.

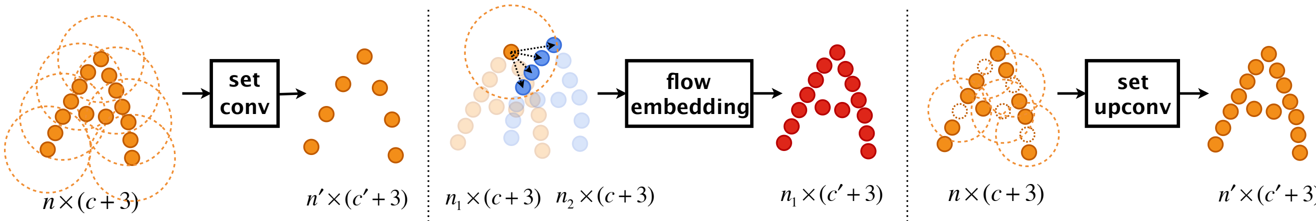

Figure 2: **Three trainable layers for point cloud processing.** *Left:* the *set conv* layer to learn deep point cloud features. *Middle:* the *flow embedding layer* to learn geometric relations between two point clouds to infer motions. *Right:* the *set upconv* layer to up-sample and propagate point features in a learnable way.

4. FlowNet3D Architecture

In this section, we introduce FlowNet3D (Fig. 3), an end-to-end scene flow estimation network on point clouds. The model has three key modules for (1) point feature learning, (2) point mixture, and (3) flow refinement. Under these modules are three key deep point cloud processing layers: *set conv* layer, *flow embedding* layer and *set upconv* layer (Fig. 2). In the following subsections, we describe each modules with their associating layers in details, and specify the final FlowNet3D architecture in Sec. 4.4.

4.1. Hierarchical Point Cloud Feature Learning

Since a point cloud is a *set* of points that is irregular and orderless, traditional convolutions do not fit. We therefore follow a recently proposed PointNet++ architecture [20], a translation-invariant network that learns hierarchical features. Although the set conv layer [2] was designed for 3D classification and segmentation, we find its feature learning layers also powerful for the task of scene flow.

As shown in Fig. 2 (left), a set conv layer takes a point cloud with n points, each point $p_i = \{x_i, f_i\}$ with its XYZ coordinates $x_i \in \mathbb{R}^3$ and its feature $f_i \in \mathbb{R}^c$ $(i = 1, ..., n)$, and outputs a sub-sampled point cloud with n' points, where each point $p'_j = \{x'_j, f'_j\}$ has its XYZ coordinates x'_j and an updated point feature $f'_j \in \mathbb{R}^{c'}$ $(j = 1, ...n')$.

Specifically, as described more closely in [20], the layer firstly samples n' regions from the input points with farthest point sampling (with region centers as x'_j), then for each region (defined by a radius neighborhood specified by radius r), it extracts its local feature with the following symmetric function

$$f'_j = \underset{\{i \mid \|x_i - x'_j\| \leq r\}}{\text{MAX}} \left\{ h(f_i, x_i - x'_j) \right\}. \tag{1}$$

where $h : \mathbb{R}^{c+3} \rightarrow \mathbb{R}^{c'}$ is a non-linear function (realized as a multi-layer perceptron) with concatenated f_i and $x_i - x'_j$ as inputs, and MAX is element-wise max pooling.

[2]Noted as set abstraction layer in [20]. We name it set conv here to emphasize its spatial locality and translation invariance.

4.2. Point Mixture with Flow Embedding Layer

To mix two point clouds we rely on a new *flow embedding* layer (Fig. 2 middle). To inspire our design, imagine a point at frame t, if we know its *corresponding* point in frame $t+1$ then its scene flow is simply their relative displacement. However, in real data, there are often no correspondences between point clouds in two frames, due to viewpoint shift and occlusions. It is still possible to estimate the scene flow though, because we can find multiple softly corresponding points in frame $t+1$ and make a "weighted" decision.

Our *flow embedding* layer learns to aggregate both (geometric) feature similarities and spatial relationships of points to produce embeddings that encode point motions. Compared to the set conv layer that takes in a single point cloud, the flow embedding layer takes a *pair* of point clouds: $\{p_i = (x_i, f_i)\}_{i=1}^{n_1}$ and $\{q_j = (y_j, g_j)\}_{j=1}^{n_2}$ where each point has its XYZ coordinate $x_i, y_j \in \mathbb{R}^3$, and a feature vector $f_i, g_j \in \mathbb{R}^c$. The layer learns a flow embedding for each point in the first frame: $\{e_i\}_{i=1}^{n_1}$ where $e_i \in \mathbb{R}^{c'}$. We also pass the original coordinates x_i of the points in the first frame to the output, thus the final layer output is $\{o_i = (x_i, e_i)\}_{i=1}^{n_1}$.

The underneath operation to compute e_i is similar to the one in set conv layers. However, their physical meanings are vastly different. For a given point p_i in the first frame, the layer firstly finds all the points q_j from the second frame in its radius neighborhood (highlighted blue points). If a particular point $q^* = \{y^*, g^*\}$ corresponded to p_i, then the flow of p_i were simply $y^* - x_i$. Since such case rarely exists, we instead use a neural layer to aggregate flow votes from all the neighboring q_j's

$$e_i = \underset{\{j \mid \|y_j - x_i\| \leq r\}}{\text{MAX}} \left\{ h(f_i, g_j, y_j - x_i) \right\}. \tag{2}$$

where h is a non-linear function with trainable parameters similar to the set conv layer and MAX is the element-wise max pooling. Compared to Eq. (1), we input two point features to h, expecting it to learn to compute the "weights" to aggregate all potential flow vectors $d_{ij} = y_j - x_i$.

An alternative formulation is to explicitly specify how we relate point features, by computing a feature distance

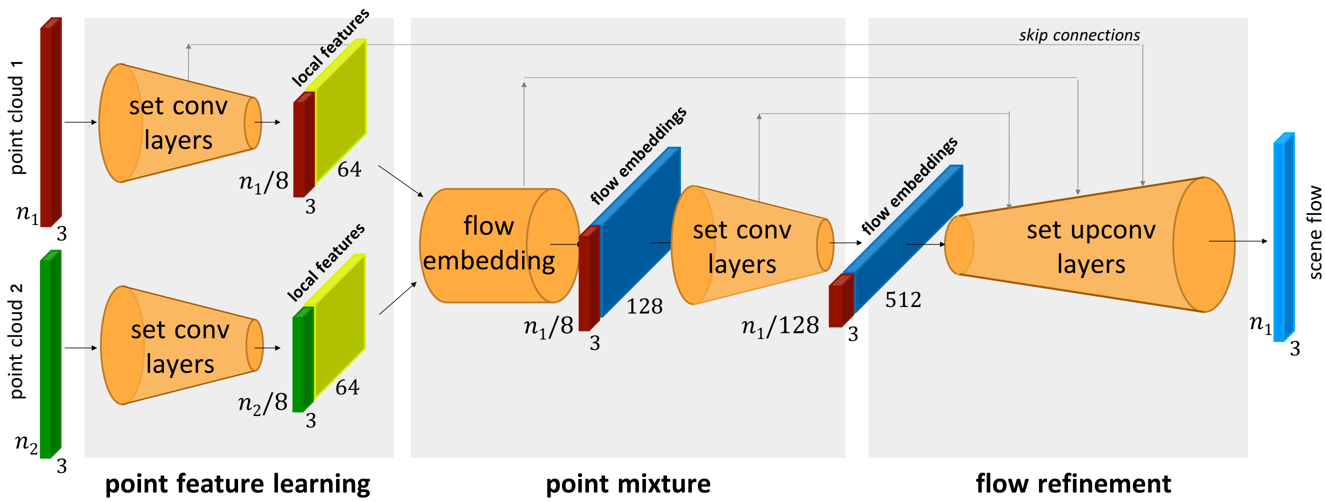

Figure 3: **FlowNet3D architecture.** Given two frames of point clouds, the network learns to predict the scene flow as translational motion vectors for each point of the first frame. See Fig. 2 for illustrations of the layers and Sec. 4.4 for more details on the network architecture.

$dist(f_i, g_j)$. The feature distance is then fed to the non-linear function h (instead directly feeding the f_i and g_j). In ablation studies we show that our formulation in Eq. (2) learns more effective flow embeddings than this alternative.

The computed flow embeddings are further mixed through a few more set conv layers so that we obtain spatial smoothness. This also help resolve ambiguous cases (e.g. points on the surface of a translating table) that require large receptive fields for flow estimation.

4.3. Flow Refinement with Set Upconv Layer

In this module, we up-sample the flow embeddings associated with the intermediate points to the original points, and at the last layer predict flow for all the original points. The up-sampling step is achieved by a learnable new layer – the *set upconv* layer, which learns to propagate and refine the embeddings in an informed way.

Fig. 2 (right) illustrates the process of a set upconv layer. The inputs to the layer are source points $\{p_i = \{x_i, f_i\} | i = 1, \dots, n\}$, and a set of target point coordinates $\{x'_j | j = 1, \dots, n'\}$ which are locations we want to propagate the source point features to. For each target location x'_j the layer outputs its point feature $f'_j \in \mathbb{R}^{c'}$ (propagated flow embedding in our case) by aggregating its neighboring source points' features.

Interestingly, just like in 2D convolutions in images where upconv2D can be implemented through conv2D, our *set upconv* can also be directly achieved with the same *set conv* layer as defined in Eq. (1), but with a different local region sampling strategy. Instead of using farthest point sampling to find x'_j as in the set conv layer, we compute features on *specified* locations by the target points $\{x'_j\}_{j=1}^{n'}$.

Note that although $n' > n$ in our up-sampling case, the *set upconv* layer itself is flexible to take any number of target locations which unnecessarily correspond to any real points. It is a flexible and trainable layer to propagate/summarize features from one point cloud to another.

Compared to an alternative way to up-sample point features – using 3D interpolation ($f'_j = \sum_{\{i | \|x_i - x'_j\| \le r\}} w(x_i, x'_j) f_i$ with w as a normalized inverse-distance weight function [20]), our network learns how to weight the nearby points' features, just as how the flow embedding layer weights displacements. We find that the new set upconv layer shows significant advantages in empirical results.

4.4. Network Architecture

The final FlowNet3D architecture is composed of four set conv layers, one flow embedding layer and four set upconv layers (corresponding to the four set conv layers) and a final linear flow regression layer that outputs the $\mathbb{R}^3$ predicted scene flow. For the set upconv layers we also have skip connections to concatenate set conv output features. Each learnable layer adopts multi-layer perceptrons for the function h with a few Linear-BatchNorm-ReLU layers parameterized by its linear layer width. The detailed layer parameters are as shown in Table 1.

5. Training and Inference wtih FlowNet3D

We take a supervised approach to train the FlowNet3D model with ground truth scene flow supervision. While this dense supervision is hard to acquire in real data, we tap large-scale synthetic dataset (FlyingThings3D) and show that our model trained on synthetic data generalizes well to real Lidar scans (Sec. 6.2).

Layer type	r	Sample rate	MLP width
set conv	0.5	0.5×	[32, 32, 64]
set conv	1.0	0.25×	[64, 64, 128]
flow embedding	5.0	1×	[128, 128, 128]
set conv	2.0	0.25×	[128, 128, 256]
set conv	4.0	0.25×	[256, 256, 512]
set upconv	4.0	4×	[128, 128, 256]
set upconv	2.0	4×	[128, 128, 256]
set upconv	1.0	4×	[128, 128, 128]
set upconv	0.5	2×	[128, 128, 128]
linear	-	-	3^*

Table 1: **FlowNet3D architecture specs.** Note that the last layer is linear thus has no ReLU and batch normalization.

Training loss with cycle-consistency regularization. We use smooth L_1 loss (huber loss) for scene flow supervision, together with a cycle-consistency regularization. Given a point cloud $\mathcal{P} = \{x_i\}_{i=1}^{n_1}$ at frame t and a point cloud $\mathcal{Q} = \{y_j\}_{j=1}^{n_2}$ at frame $t+1$, the network predicts scene flow as $\mathcal{D} = F(\mathcal{P}, \mathcal{Q}; \Theta) = \{d_i\}_{i=1}^{n_1}$ where F is the FlowNet3D model with parameters Θ. With ground truth scene flow $\mathcal{D}^* = \{d_i^*\}_{i=1}^{n_1}$, our loss is defined as in Eq. (3). In the equation, $\|d'_i + d_i\|$ is the *cycle-consistency* term that enforces the *backward flow* $\{d'_i\}_{i=1}^{n_1} = F(\mathcal{P}', \mathcal{P}; \Theta)$ from the shifted point cloud $\mathcal{P}' = \{x_i + d_i\}_{i=1}^{n_1}$ to the original point cloud $\mathcal{P}$ is close to the reverse of the *forward flow*

$$L(\mathcal{P}, \mathcal{Q}, \mathcal{D}^*, \Theta) = \frac{1}{n_1} \sum_{i=1}^{n_1} \left\{ \|d_i - d_i^*\| + \lambda \|d'_i + d_i\| \right\} \quad (3)$$

Inference with random re-sampling. A special challenge with regression problems (such as scene flow) in point clouds is that down-sampling introduces noise in prediction. A simple but effective way to reduce the noise is to randomly re-sample the point clouds for multiple inference runs and average the predicted flow vectors for each point. In the experiments, we will see that this re-sampling and averaging step leads to a slight performance gain.

6. Experiments

In this section, we first evaluate and validate our design choices in Sec. 6.1 with a large-scale synthetic dataset (FlyingThings3D), and then in Sec. 6.2 we show how our model trained on synthetic data can generalize successfully to real Lidar scans from KITTI. Finally, in Sec. 6.3 we demonstrate two applications of scene flow on 3D shape registration and motion segmentation.

6.1. Evaluation and Design Validation on FlyingThings3D

As annotating or acquiring dense scene flow is very expensive on real data, there does not exist any large-scale real dataset with scene flow annotations to the best of our knowledge [3]. Therefore, we turn to a synthetic, yet challenging and large-scale dataset, FlyingThings3D, to train and evaluate our model as well as to validate our design choices.

Method	Input	EPE	ACC (0.05)	ACC (0.1)
FlowNet-C [8]	depth	0.7887	0.20%	1.49%
	RGBD	0.7836	0.25%	1.74%
ICP [3]	points	0.5019	7.62%	21.98%
EM-baseline (ours)	points	0.5807	2.64%	12.21%
LM-baseline (ours)	points	0.7876	0.27%	1.83%
DM-baseline (ours)	points	0.3401	4.87%	21.01%
FlowNet3D (ours)	points	**0.1694**	**25.37%**	**57.85%**

Table 2: **Flow estimation results on the FlyingThings3D dataset.** Metrics are End-point-error (EPE), Acc (<0.05 or 5%, <0.1 or 10%) for scene flow.

FlyingThings3D [15]. The dataset consists of stereo and RGB-D images rendered from scenes with multiple randomly moving objects sampled from ShapeNet [6]. There are in total around 32k stereo images with ground truth disparity and optical flow maps. We randomly sub-sampled 20,000 of them as our training set and 2,000 as our test set. Instead of using RGB images, we preprocess the data by popping up disparity maps to 3D point clouds and optical flow to scene flow. We will release our prepared data.

Evaluation Metrics. We use 3D end point error (EPE) and flow estimation accuracy (ACC) as our metrics. The 3D EPE measures the average L_2 distance between the estimated flow vector to the ground truth flow vector. Flow estimation accuracy measures the portion of estimated flow vectors that are below a specified end point error, among all the points. We report two ACC metrics with different thresholds.

Results. Table 2 reports flow evaluation results on the test set, comparing FlowNet3D to various baselines. Among the baselines, FlowNet-C is a CNN model adapted from [13] that learns to predict scene flow from a pair of depth images or RGB-D images (depth images transformed to XYZ coordinate maps for input), instead of optical flow from RGB images as originally in [13] (more architecture details in supplementary). However, we see that this image-based method has a hard time predicting accurate scene flow probably because of strong occlusions and clutters in the 2D projected views. We also compare with an ICP (iterative

[3] The KITTI dataset we test on in Sec. 6.2 only has 200 frames with annotations. [31] mentioned a larger dataset however it belongs to Uber and is not publicly available.

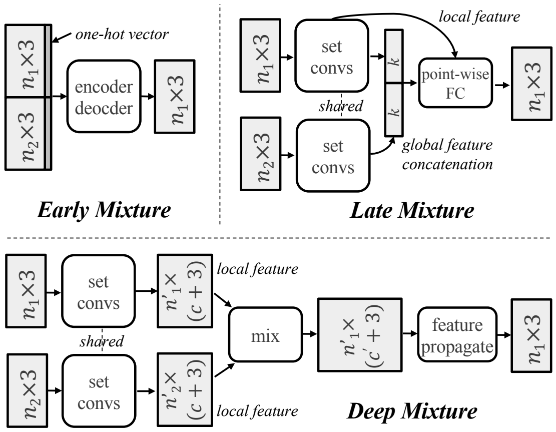

Figure 4: **Three meta-architectures for scene flow network.** FlowNet3D (Fig. 3) belongs to the deep mixture.

closest point) baseline that finds a single rigid transform for the entire scene, which matches large objects in the scene but is unable to adapt to the multiple independently moving objects in our input. Surprisingly, this ICP baseline is still able to get some reasonable numbers (even better than the 2D FlowNet-C one).

We also report results of three baseline deep models that directly consume point clouds (as instantiations of the three meta-architectures in Fig. 4). They mix point clouds of two frames at early, late, or intermediate stages. The EM-baseline combines two point clouds into a single set at input and distinguishes them by appending each point with a one-hot vector of length 2. The LM-baseline firstly computes a global feature for the point cloud from each frame, and then concatenates the global features as a way to mix the points. The DM-baseline is similar in structure to our FlowNet3D (they both belong to the DM meta-architecture) but uses a more naive way to mix two intermediate point clouds (by concatenating all features and point displacements and processing it with fully connected layers), and it uses 3D interpolation instead of set upconv layers to propagate point features. More details are provided in the supplementary.

Compared to those baseline models, our FlowNet3D achieves much lower EPE as well as significantly higher accuracy.

Ablation studies. Table 3 shows the effects of several design choices of FlowNet3D. Comparing the first two rows, we see max pooling has a significant advantage over average pooling, probably because max pooling is more selective in picking "corresponding" point and suffers less from noise. From row 2 to row 4, we compare our design to the alternatives of using feature distance functions (as discussed in Sec. 4.2) with cosine distance and its unnormalized version (dot product). Our approach gets the best performance,

Feature distance	Pooling	Refine	Multiple resample	Cycle-consistency	EPE
dot	avg	interp	✗	✗	0.3163
dot	max	interp	✗	✗	0.2463
cosine	max	interp	✗	✗	0.2600
learned	max	interp	✗	✗	0.2298
learned	max	upconv	✗	✗	0.1835
learned	max	upconv	✓	✗	0.1694
learned	max	upconv	✓	✓	**0.1626**

Table 3: **Ablation studies on the FlyingThings3D dataset.** We study the effects of distance function, type of pooling in h, layers used in flow refinement, as well as effects of re-sampling and cycle-consistency regularization.

Method	Input	EPE (meters)	outliers (0.3m or 5%)	KITTI ranking
LDOF [4]	RGB-D	0.498	12.61%	21
OSF [16]	RGB-D	0.394	8.25%	9
PRSM [30]	RGB-D	0.327	6.06%	3
	RGB stereo	0.729	6.40%	
Dewan et al. [7]	points	0.587	71.74%	-
ICP (global)	points	0.385	42.38%	-
ICP (segmentation)	points	0.215	13.38%	-
FlowNet3D (ours)	points	**0.122**	**5.61%**	-

Table 4: **Scene flow estimation on the KITTI scene flow dataset (w/o ground points).** Metrics are EPE, outlier ratio (>0.3m or 5%). KITTI rankings are the methods' rankings on the KITTI scene flow leaderboard. Our FlowNet3D model is trained on the synthetic FlyingThings3D dataset.

with (*11.6%* error reduction compared to using the cosine distance. Looking at row 4 and row 5, we see that our newly proposed set upconv layer significantly reduces flow error by *20%*. Lastly, we find multiple re-sampling (10 times) during inference (second last row) and training with cycle-consistency regularization (with $\lambda = 0.3$) further boost the performance. The final row represents the final setup of our FlowNet3D.

6.2. Generalization to Real Lidar Scans in KITTI

In this section, we show that our model, trained on the synthetic dataset, can be directly applied to detect scene flow in point clouds from real Lidar scans from KITTI.

Data and setup. We use the KITTI scene flow dataset [17, 16], which is designed for evaluations of RGB stereo based methods. To evaluate point cloud based method, we use its ground truth labels and trace raw point clouds associated to the frames. Since no point cloud is provided for the

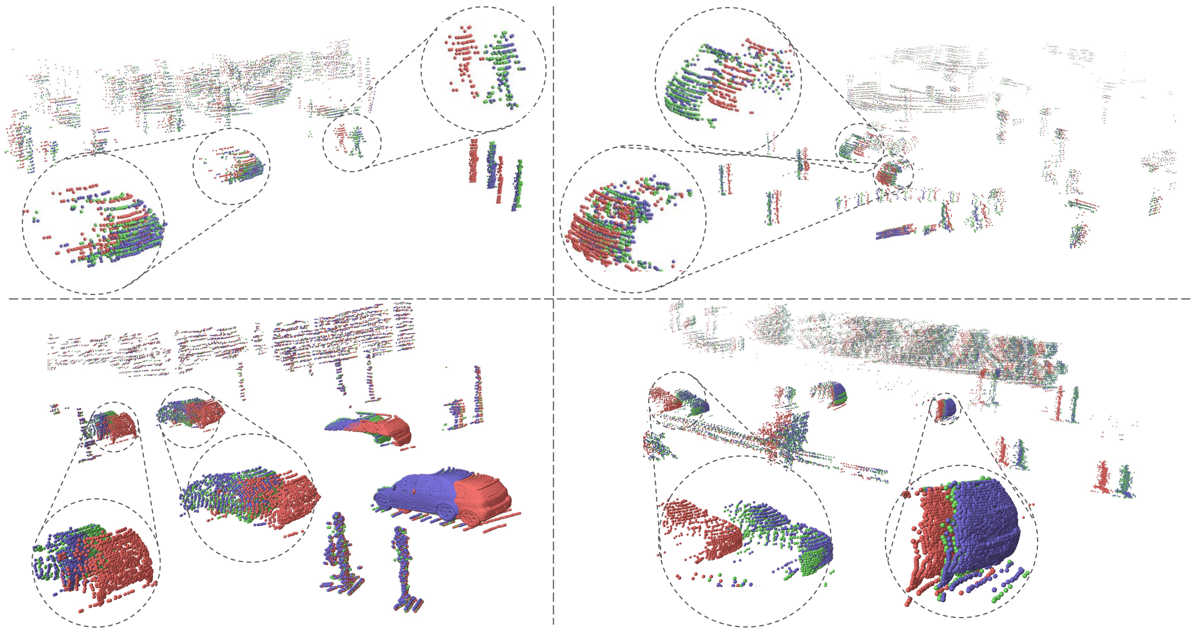

Figure 5: **Scene flow on KITTI point clouds.** We show scene flow predicted by FlowNet3D on four KITTI scans. Lidar points are colored to indicate points as from frame 1, frame 2 or as translated points (point cloud 1 + scene flow).

Method	PRSM [30] (RGB stereo)	PRSM [30] (RGB-D)	ICP (global)	FlowNet3D (without finetune)	FlowNet3D + ICP (without finetune)	FlowNet3D (with finetune)
3D EPE	0.668	0.368	0.281	0.211	0.195	**0.144**
3D outliers	6.42%	**6.06%**	24.29%	20.71%	13.41%	9.52%

Table 5: **Scene flow estimation on the KITTI sceneflow dataset (w/ ground points).** The first 100 frames are used to finetune our model. All methods are evaluated on the rest 50 frames.

test set (and part of the train set), we evaluate on all 150 out of 200 frames from the *train set* with available point clouds. Furthermore, to keep comparison fair with the previous method [7], we firstly evaluation our model on Lidar scans with removed grounds [4] (see supplementary for details) in Table 4. We then report another set of results with the full Lidar scans including the ground points in Table 5.

Baselines. LDOF+depth [4] uses a variational model to solve optical flow and treats depth as an extra feature dimension. OSF [16] uses discrete-continuous CRF on superpixels with the assumption of rigid motion of objects. PRSM [30] uses energy minimization on rigidly moving segments and jointly estimates multiple attributes together including rigid motion. Since the three RGB-D image based methods do not output scene flow directly (but optical flow and disparity separately), we either use estimated disparity (fourth row) or pixel depth change (first three rows) to compute depth-wise flow displacements.

ICP (global) estimates a single rigid motion for the entire scene. ICP (segmentation) is a stronger baseline that first computes connected components on Lidar points after ground removal and then estimates rigid motions for each individual segment of point clouds.

Results. In Table 4, we compare FlowNet3D with prior arts optimized for 2D optical flow as well as the two ICP baselines on point clouds. Compared to 2D-image based methods [4, 16, 30], our method shows great advantages on scene flow estimation – achieving significantly lower 3D end-point error (*63% relative error reduction* from [30]) and 3D outlier ratios. Our method also outperforms the two ICP baselines that rely more on rigidity of global scene or correctness of segmentation. Additionally, we conclude that our model, although only trained on synthetic data, remarkably generalizes well to the real Lidar point clouds.

Fig. 5 visualizes our scene flow prediction. We can see

[4]The ground is a large piece of flat geometry that provides little cue to its motion but at the same time occupies a large portion of points, which biases the evaluation results.

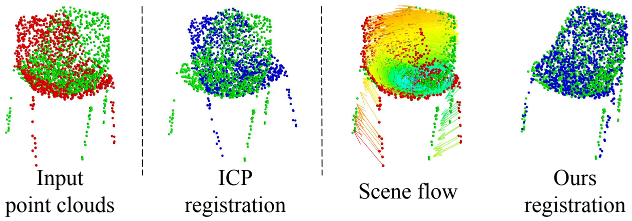

Figure 6: **Partial scan registration of two chair scans.** The goal is to register point cloud 1 (red) to point cloud 2 (green). The transformed point cloud 1 is in blue. We show a case where ICP fails to align the chair while our method grounded by dense scene flow succeeds.

	ICP	Scene flow (SF)	SF + Rigid motion
EPE	0.384	0.220	0.125

Table 6: Point cloud warping errors.

our model can accurately estimate flows for dynamic objects, such as moving vehicles and pedestrians.

In Table 5 we report results on the full Lidar scans with ground point clouds. We also split the data to use 100 frames to finetune our FlowNet3D model on Lidar scans, and use the rest 50 for testing. We see that including ground points negatively impacted all methods. But our method still outperforms the ICP baseline. By adopting ICP estimated flow on the segmented grounds and net estimated flow for the rest of points (FlowNet3D+ICP), our method can also beat the prior art (PRSM) in EPE. The PRSM leads in outlier ratio because flow estimation for grounds is more friendly with methods taking images input. By finetuning FlowNet3D on the Lidar scans, our model even achieves better results (the last column).

6.3. Applications

While scene flow itself is a low-level signal in understanding motions, it can provide useful cues for many higher level applications as shown below (more details on the demo and datasets are included in supplementary).

6.3.1 3D Scan Registration

Point cloud registration algorithms (e.g. ICP) often rely on finding correspondences between the two point sets. However due to scan partiality, there are often no direct correspondences. In this demo, we explore in using the dense scene flow predicted from FlowNet3D for scan registration. The point cloud 1 shifted by our predicted scene flow has a natural correspondence to the original point cloud 1 and thus can be used to estimate a rigid motion between them. We show in Fig. 6 that in partial scans our scene flow based registration can be more robust than the ICP method in cases when ICP stucks at a local minimum. Table 6 quantitatively compares the 3D warping error (the EPE from warped points to ground truth points) of ICP, directly using our scene flow and using scene flow followed by a rigid motion estimation.

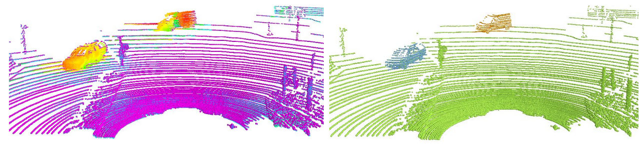

Figure 7: **Motion segmentation of a Lidar point cloud.** *Left:* Lidar points and estimated scene flow in colored quiver vectors. *Right:* motion segmented objects and regions.

6.3.2 Motion Segmentation

Our estimated scene flow in Lidar point clouds can also be used for motion segmentation of the scene – segmenting the scene into different objects or regions depending on their motions. In Fig. 7, we demonstrate motion segmentation results in a KITTI scene, where we clustered Lidar points based on their coordinates and estimated scene flow vectors. We see that different moving cars, grounds, and static objects are clearly segmented from each other. Recently, [22] also tried to jointly estimate scene flow and motion segmentation from RGB-D input. It is interesting to augment our pipeline for similar tasks in point clouds in the future.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, we have presented a novel deep neural network architecture that estimates scene flow directly from 3D point clouds, as arguablely the first work that shows success in solving the problem end-to-end with point clouds. To support FlowNet3D, we have proposed a novel flow embedding layer that learns to aggregate geometric similarities and spatial relations of points for motion encoding, as well as a new set upconv layer for trainable set feature propagation. On both challenging synthetic dataset and real Lidar point clouds, we validated our network design and showed its competitive or better results to various baselines and prior arts. We have also demonstrated two example applications of using scene flow estimated from our model.

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