

# Multi-Flash Stereopsis: Depth Edge Preserving Stereo with Small Baseline Illumination

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## Abstract

Traditional stereo matching algorithms are limited in their ability to produce accurate results near depth discontinuities, due to partial occlusions and violation of smoothness constraints. In this paper, we use small baseline multi-flash illumination to produce a rich set of feature maps that enable acquisition of discontinuity preserving point correspondences. First, from a single multi-flash camera, we formulate a qualitative depth map using a gradient domain method that encodes object relative distances. Then, in a multiview setup, we exploit shadows created by light sources to compute an occlusion map. Finally, we demonstrate the usefulness of these feature maps by incorporating them into two different dense stereo correspondence algorithms, the first based on local search and the second based on belief propagation. Experimental results show that our enhanced stereo algorithms are able to extract high quality, discontinuity preserving correspondence maps from scenes that are extremely challenging for conventional stereo methods. We also demonstrate that small baseline illumination can be useful to handle specular reflections in stereo imagery. Different from most existing active illumination techniques, our method is simple, inexpensive, compact, and requires no calibration of light sources.

## Index Terms

stereo matching, multi-flash imaging, depth discontinuities

## I. INTRODUCTION

Stereo vision algorithms have been investigated for many years in computer vision in order to infer 3D structure from images captured with different viewpoints. The most challenging problem in stereo reconstruction is the establishment of visual correspondence among images. This is a fundamental operation that is the starting point of most geometric algorithms for 3D shape reconstruction and motion estimation.

Intuitively, a complete solution to the correspondence problem would produce: (1) a mapping between pixels in different images where there is a correspondence, and (2) labels for scene points that are not visible from all views – where there is *no correspondence*.

In the past two decades, intense interest in the correspondence problem has produced many excellent algorithms for solving the first part of the problem. With a few exceptions, most algorithms for dense correspondence do not address occlusions explicitly [1]. The occlusion problem is difficult partly because distinguishing sharp discontinuities in depth (also known as depth edges or occluding contours) from edges caused by reflectance changes remains a fundamental unsolved vision problem [2].

A promising method for addressing the occlusion problem is to use active illumination. In fact, many techniques that make use of lighting changes have been proposed to solve the correspondence problem in stereo reconstruction [3], [4], [5]. In general these techniques offer a tradeoff between accuracy and cost of the equipment, as well as other issues such as compactness, light source calibration, and number of images to be acquired. Other active shape reconstruction approaches such as photometric stereo [6] and shape from shadows [7] avoid the correspondence problem by using multiple images of the scene captured with variable illumination, but fixed viewpoint. A common limitation of these methods is that the light sources must surround the object in order to create sufficient shading and shadow variation from (estimated or known) 3D light positions. This requires a fixed lighting rig, which limits the application of these techniques to laboratory and industrial settings; such a setup is impractical to build into a self-contained camera.

Recently, we have demonstrated a reliable method for detecting depth edges in real world scenes [8]. Our approach is based on a simple and inexpensive modification of the capture setup: a multi-flash camera is used with flashes strategically positioned to cast shadows along depth discontinuities. We have shown the effectiveness of multi-flash imaging in different vision and graphics applications, including non-photorealistic rendering [8], medical imaging [9], specular reflection reduction [10], and visual recognition [11].

In this paper, we propose a stereo framework based on small baseline active illumination, which allows accurate correspondence maps on scenes with high depth complexity and specular reflections. In particular, we show how multi-flash illumination can be used to produce a rich

set of feature maps that are useful in dense 3D reconstruction. Our feature maps are based on important cues, including: (1) depth edges, (2) the sign of the depth edge (which tells the side of the occluding object), and (3) information about object relative distances.

Starting with these cues, we derive a qualitative depth map from a single multi-flash camera. In a multiview setup, we show how binocular half-occluded pixels can be explicitly and reliably labeled, along with depth edges. We demonstrate how the feature maps can be used effectively by incorporating them into two different dense stereo correspondence algorithms, the first based on local search and the second based on belief propagation. Compared to passive stereo techniques, our method offers significant improvements in accuracy, especially in regions near depth discontinuities. Our feature maps could be used to complement existing active lighting approaches and our method offers the advantages of being simple, inexpensive, and compact, while requiring no calibration of light sources.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Section II reviews related work and the basic technique to detect depth edges with multi-flash illumination. Then, a brief overview about the implementation setups used in our work is given in Section III. In Section IV, we formulate a qualitative depth map, followed by the computation of an occlusion map in Section V. The usefulness of these feature maps are demonstrated in local and global stereo algorithms in Section VI. Finally, Section VII discusses pros and cons of our approach and provides comparison with existing techniques.

## II. RELATED WORK

Although significant progress has been made in dense two-frame stereo matching (see [1] for a comprehensive survey), producing accurate results near depth discontinuities remains a challenge. In general, dense stereo techniques can be classified as local or global, depending whether they rely on local window-based computations or the minimization of a global energy function. In local-based methods, the disparity computation at a given point depends only on intensity values within a finite window. Clearly, these techniques assume that all pixels within the window have the same disparity and thus are sensitive near object boundaries. Attempts to

alleviate this problem include the use of adaptive windows [12] and shiftable windows [13].

Occlusion has been modeled explicitly through global optimization approaches based on dynamic programming [14], [15], [16]. Stereo matching is formulated as finding a minimum cost path in the matrix of all pairwise matching costs between two corresponding scanlines. These techniques, however, often show a streaking effect (as scanlines are matched independently) and assume ordering constraints, which may be violated with thin objects in the scene. More recently, global stereo approaches based on Markov Random Fields have received great attention [17], [1]. These methods minimize an energy function (e.g., using belief propagation [18] or graph cuts [19]) that includes a data term and a smoothness term. Although discontinuities and occlusion can be explicitly modeled [19], [20], intensity edges and junctions are generally used as cues for depth discontinuities. Ideally, smoothness constraints should be suppressed only at occluding edges, not at texture or illumination edges.

The correspondence problem can be significantly simplified by using active illumination methods based on structured light [21], [22]. A structured light system is based on the projection of a single pattern or a set of patterns onto the scene which is then viewed by a single camera or a set of cameras. Time-multiplexing or temporal coding [23], [24] is the most common pattern projection technique. The basic idea is to project a set of different patterns successively onto the scene, so that each point viewed by a camera has a specific codeword (formed by the sequence of illumination values across the projected patterns). These methods allow accurate computation of correspondence maps, but are limited to handle dynamic scenes. This issue is addressed by techniques that project a single pattern with pixel coding based on a spatial neighborhood [3]. However, depth discontinuities pose a problem as local smoothness of the measuring surface is assumed in order to correctly decode the pixel neighborhood. Other techniques based on colored patterns [25], and space-time stereo [26], [4] have also been proposed. Overall, compared to passive stereo techniques, structured light methods offer high quality correspondence maps and 3D acquisition, but are in general much more expensive and limited to indoor scenes.

Photometric stereo [27] is a simple, inexpensive active lighting approach that acquires 3D

information without relying on the correspondence problem. Multiple images of the scene are captured under different illumination conditions (but fixed viewpoint) and used to estimate a field of surface normals, which is then integrated to produce a surface. Photometric stereo methods are suitable for reconstructing the shape of objects with uniform albedo, thus complementing conventional stereo, which is best for textured surfaces with varying reflectance. They work well for smooth surfaces, but are unstable near depth discontinuities or rapid surface normal changes. In general, most techniques assume Lambertian surface reflectance, but recent research deals with spatially varying bidirectional reflectance distribution functions (BRDF) [6].

Helmholtz stereo [5] is a technique that combines active lighting with viewpoint variation to estimate both surface normals and depth with arbitrary surface reflectance. The idea behind Helmholtz Stereopsis is to exploit the symmetry of surface reflectance, commonly referred to as Helmholtz reciprocity. The image acquisition proceeds in two simple steps: first, an image is acquired with the object/scene illuminated by a single point light source. Then, the positions of the camera and light source are swapped, and the second image is acquired. By acquiring the images in this manner, they ensure that for all corresponding points in the images, the ratio of the outgoing radiance to the incident irradiance is the same. This is, in general, not true for stereo pairs - unless the surfaces have Lambertian reflectance.

Techniques for shape from shadows (or darkness) [7] build a continuous representation (shadowgram) from a moving light source from which continuous depth estimates are possible. However, it involves a difficult problem of estimating continuous heights and requires accurate detection of start and end of shadows. Shadow carving was proposed by Savarese et al. [28] as a technique to refine shape estimation using shadow consistency checks. Bouguet and Perona [29] proposed a simple and inexpensive system where the user moves a pencil in front of a light source to cast moving shadows on the object. The 3D shape of the object is extracted from the spatial and temporal location of the observed shadow. In general these approaches do not allow compact setups, due to the assumption of light sources surrounding the object. Good reviews of shadow-based shape analysis methods are available in [30], [31].

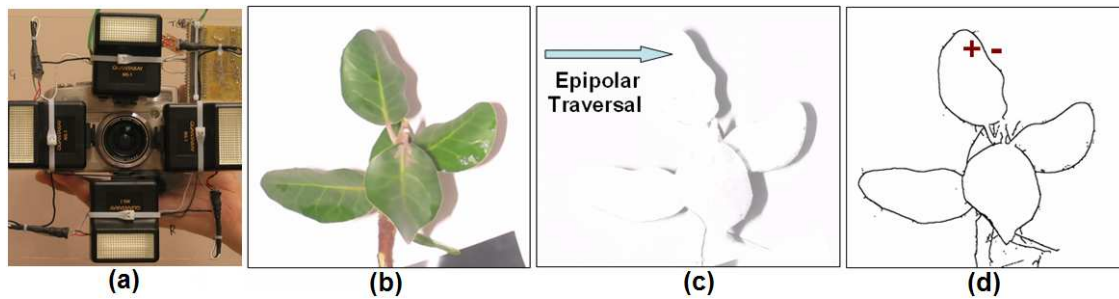


Fig. 1. (a) Multi-flash camera (b) Image taken with left flash. (c) Correspondent ratio image and traversal direction. (d) Computed depth edges. Note that we can obtain the sign of each depth edge pixel, indicating which side of the edge is the foreground.

### A. Depth Edges with Multi-Flash

Before introducing our techniques, we briefly review the basic idea of detecting depth edges with multi-flash imaging [8].

The main observation is that when a flash illuminates a scene during image capture, thin slivers of cast shadow are created at depth discontinuities. Thus, if we can shoot a sequence of images in which different light sources illuminate the subject from various positions, we can use the shadows in each image to assemble a depth edge map using the shadow images.

Shadows are detected by first computing a *shadow-free image*, which can be approximated with the maximum composite image, created by choosing at each pixel the maximum intensity value among the image set. The shadow-free image is then compared with the individual shadowed images. In particular, for each shadowed image, a *ratio image* is computed by performing a pixel-wise division of the intensity of the shadowed image by the intensity of the maximum image. Although the pixels in the ratio image are not constant from one point to another, they are very similar and close to 1.0 for non-shadowed regions, and close to 0.0 for shadowed regions. This allows us to segment shadows very reliably.

The final step is to traverse each ratio image along its epipolar rays (as given by the respective light positions) and mark negative transitions as depth edges. We use an implementation setup with four flashes at left, right, top and bottom positions, which makes the epipolar ray traversal aligned with horizontal and vertical scanlines. Figure 1 illustrates the main idea of the depth edge detection algorithm. Note that the sign of the edge is also obtained, indicating which part is the background and which part is the foreground in a local neighborhood.

### III. MULTI-FLASH IMAGING SETUPS

Throughout this paper, we will investigate different multi-flash imaging setups for obtaining a qualitative depth map of the scene, detecting occlusion pixels in stereo, and computing discontinuity preserving disparity maps. In this section, we briefly discuss the purpose of these different implementation setups.

Figure 2a shows the basic multi-flash camera setup with four flashes, used to detect depth edges, as described in Section II-A. This setup uses a 4-megapixel Canon Powershot G3 (see Figure 1a). A microcontroller board triggers sequentially the four flashes mounted around the camera. The board synchronizes the flashes to the image capture process by sensing the flash trigger signal from the camera hot shoe. We will show in Section IV that this particular setup can also be used to obtain a qualitative depth map of the scene

Different camera-flash configurations may be used to combine small baseline multi-flash illumination with stereo reconstruction. Figure 2b shows a stereo setup with two cameras where each camera has its own set of flashes. This setup is particularly useful to detect occlusions in stereo, as we will show in Section V.

An alternative implementation setup is shown in Figure 2c. In this case, the flashes surround both cameras, and, for each flash, two images are captured simultaneously by the two cameras. This setup would be more appropriate to process dynamic scenes (using lights with different wavelength [44] or triggered in a rapid cyclic sequence). Compared to the setup showed in Figure 2b, it offers advantages in terms of acquisition time, while requiring only four light sources. On the other hand, the top and bottom ratio image traversals for depth edge detection is not aligned with the pixel grid, since the top and bottom flashes are positioned on the upper and lower diagonals of the center of projection of the cameras.

Figure 2d shows an implementation setup that uses only one camera with a stereo adapter. With such adapter, it is possible to obtain the stereo image pair with a single shot, eliminating the need for camera synchronization. Experiments with this implementation setup will be demonstrated in Section VI-C.

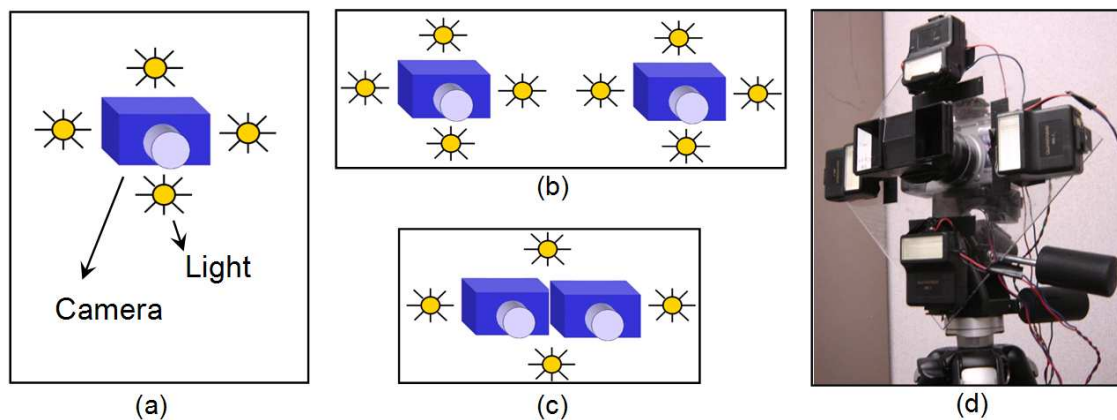


Fig. 2. Different multi-flash implementation setups. (a) Basic setup used for depth edge detection and qualitative depth map estimation. (b) Stereo multi-flash setup where each camera has its own flashes. This setup is useful for occlusion detection in stereo matching. (c) Stereo setup with flashes surrounding both cameras, for faster acquisition. (d) Flashes surrounding only one camera with a Pentax stereo adapter.

#### IV. QUALITATIVE DEPTH MAP

In this section, we use a single multi-flash camera to derive a qualitative depth map based on shadow width information. Our method is related to shape from shadow techniques [7], but differs significantly in methodology. At this point we are not interested in quantitative depth measurements. Rather, we want to segment the scene, while simultaneously establishing object depth-order relations and approximate relative distances. This turns out to be valuable prior information for stereo.

##### A. Shadow Width Estimation

A natural way of extending our depth edge detection method to estimate shadow width is to measure the length of regions delimited by a negative transition (which corresponds to the depth edge) and a positive transition along the epipolar ray in the ratio images. However, finding the positive transition is not an easy task, due to interreflections and the use of non-point light sources.

Figure 3a-c illustrates this problem: note that the intensity profile along the vertical scanline depicted in the ratio image has spurious transitions due to interreflections in the umbra region and a smooth transition near the end of the shadow (in the penumbra region). Estimation of the shadow width based on local-area-based edge filtering leads to unreliable results. In contrast, we take advantage of the global shadow information. We apply the mean-shift segmentation



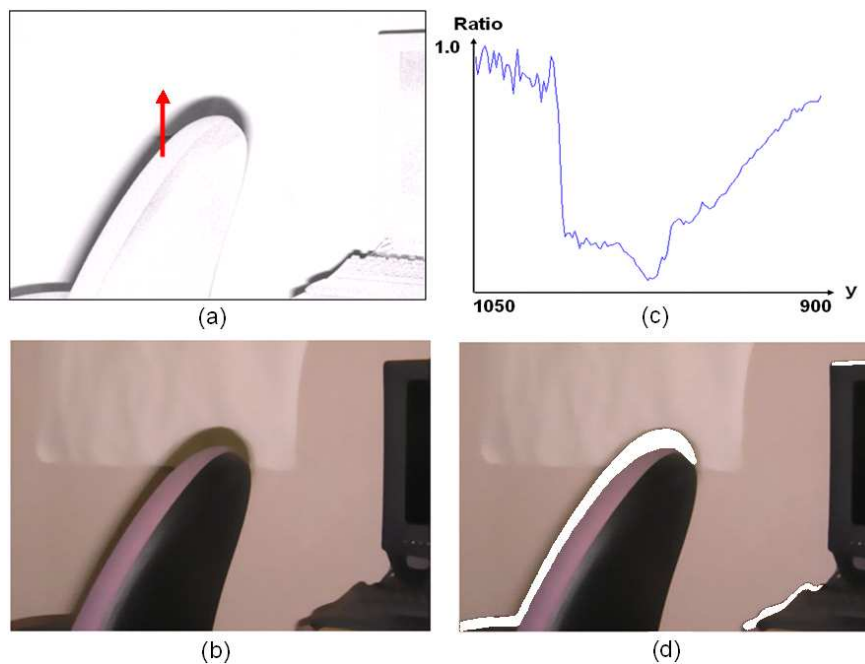


Fig. 3. (a) Ratio Image. (b) Original Image. (c) Intensity plot along the vertical scanline depicted in (a). Note that there is no sharp positive transition. (d) Meanshift segmentation to detect shadow, shown in white color.

algorithm [32] in the ratio image to segment the shadows, allowing accurate shadow width estimation (see Figure 3d). In Figure 3c, the small perturbations of the ratio values along the non-shadowed region occur due to the rounded object surface near the depth edge. However, this is not a problem for segmentation, since the negative transitions due to shadows are much sharper.

### B. Shadows and Relative Depth

We now look at the imaging geometry of the shadows, depicted in Figure 4, assuming a pinhole model. The variables involved are  $f$  (camera focal length),  $B$  (camera-flash baseline),  $z_1$ ,  $z_2$  (depths to the shadowing and shadowed edges),  $D$  (shadow width) and  $d$  (the shadow width in the image plane). Assuming a flat background, we have the relationships  $\frac{d}{f} = \frac{D}{z_2}$  and  $\frac{D}{z_2 - z_1} = \frac{B}{z_1}$ . These relationships hold even if the edge of the object does not lie on the principal axis of the camera. It follows that the shadow width in the image can be computed as:

$$d = \frac{fB(z_2 - z_1)}{z_1 z_2} \quad (1)$$

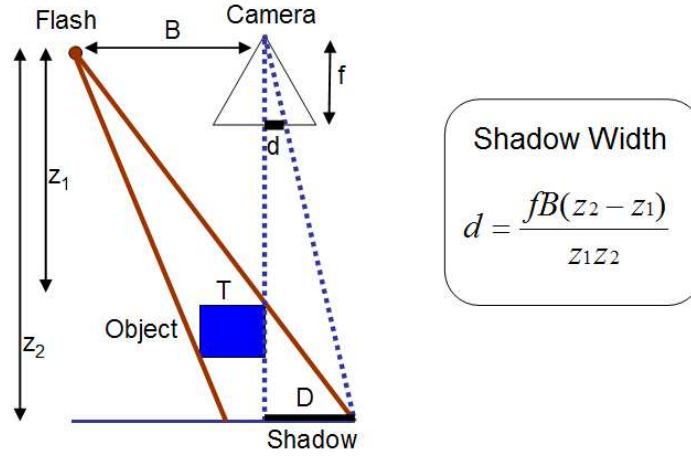


Fig. 4. Imaging geometry showing the relationship of shadows and relative depth.

Working on this equation, we have:

$$\frac{d}{fB} = \frac{1}{z_1} - \frac{1}{z_2} \quad (2)$$

Note that for each depth edge pixel, we can compute the left hand side of equation 2, which encodes the relative object distances (difference of inverse depth magnitudes). This allows us to create a gradient field that encodes sharp depth changes (with gradient zero everywhere except at depth discontinuities) and perform 2D integration of this gradient field to obtain a qualitative depth map of the scene. This idea is described in more detail below.

### C. Gradient Domain Solution

Let  $Z(x, y)$  be the unknown two-dimensional depth map of the scene and  $G = \nabla \frac{1}{Z}$  be the gradient of the inverse depth values. We define the gradient field  $\hat{G}$  to be a modified version of  $G$ , having the same values as  $G$  at depth edge locations, but zero values everywhere else:

$$\begin{aligned} \hat{G}(x, y) &= (0, 0)^T \text{ if } (x, y) \text{ is not a depth edge pixel} \\ \hat{G}(x, y) &= \nabla \frac{1}{Z(x, y)} \text{ otherwise} \end{aligned} \quad (3)$$

We will first show that we can use equation (2) to compute  $\hat{G}$  directly with the shadow width information. Then, we use a Poisson solver to integrate  $\hat{G}$  and obtain the  $\frac{1}{Z}$  field, from which we can obtain the qualitative depth map  $\hat{Z}$ , up to an unknown constant if the focal length and camera-flash baseline are not known.

As shown in equation (2), the quantity  $\frac{d}{fB}$  encodes the gradient of inverse depth values  $\nabla\frac{1}{Z}$  at depth edge locations, and therefore can be used to compute the gradient field  $\hat{G}$  directly. Since  $\hat{G}$  is the gradient of a two-dimensional function, it is specified by two components,  $\hat{G} = (\hat{G}_h, \hat{G}_v)$ , where  $\hat{G}_h$  is the horizontal component and  $\hat{G}_v$  is the vertical component. The shadow width  $d$  is also specified by two components:  $d_h$  corresponds to the width of the shadow along the horizontal direction for a particular depth edge pixel, and  $d_v$  corresponds to the width of the shadow along the vertical direction. The shadows detected by the left and right flash are used to set  $\frac{d_h}{fB}$ , while the shadows detected by the top and bottom flashes are used to set  $\frac{d_v}{fB}$ .

There is still another detail that we need to consider to compute the gradient field  $\hat{G}$ . We need to know the sign of each gradient component at each depth edge pixel. This information can be easily obtained through the sign of the depth edge pixel in each orientation, which tells us which part of the edge is the foreground and which part is the background (see Section II-A). Let  $s_h(x, y)$  be the sign  $(-1, +1)$  of the depth edge pixel  $(x, y)$  along the horizontal direction and  $s_v(x, y)$  be the sign for the vertical direction. We can now compute  $\hat{G} = (\hat{G}_h, \hat{G}_v)$  with  $\hat{G}_h$  being defined as:

$$\begin{aligned}\hat{G}_h(x, y) &= 0 \text{ if } (x, y) \text{ is not a depth edge pixel} \\ &= \frac{d_h(x, y)}{fB} s_h(x, y) \text{ otherwise}\end{aligned}\quad (4)$$

And similarly for the vertical component:

$$\begin{aligned}\hat{G}_v(x, y) &= 0 \text{ if } (x, y) \text{ is not a depth edge pixel} \\ &= \frac{d_v(x, y)}{fB} s_v(x, y) \text{ otherwise}\end{aligned}\quad (5)$$

Our qualitative depth map can be obtained with the following steps:

- Compute the gradient  $\hat{G}(x, y)$  using equations (4) and (5).
- Integrate  $\hat{G}$  by determining  $M$  which minimizes  $|\nabla M - \hat{G}|^2$ .
- Compute the qualitative depth map  $\hat{Z} = \frac{1}{M}$ .

It is important to note that the gradient vector field  $\hat{G}$  may not be integrable. In order to determine the image  $M$ , we use a similar approach as the work of Fattal et al. [33]. The observation is that the optimization problem to minimize  $|\nabla M - \hat{G}|^2$  is equivalent to solving the Poisson differential equation  $\nabla^2 M = \text{div } \hat{G}$ , involving a Laplace and a divergence operator. We solve this partial differential equation using the standard full multi-grid method, which involves discretization and the solution of a linear system in different grid levels. For specifying boundary conditions, we pad the images to square images of size the nearest power of two, and then crop the result image back to the original size. The final qualitative depth map is obtained by  $\frac{1}{M}$ , since  $M$  contains the inverse of the real depth values.

For many applications, the background may be not flat and the focal length and camera-flash baseline unknown. In this case, we can set  $fB$  to 1.0. Now we cannot obtain the absolute distances from the background. Instead we get relative distances proportional to the shadow width and a qualitative depth map with segmented objects. We will show in Section VI-B that this is a very useful prior for stereo matching.

#### *D. Synthetic Example*

Figure 5 shows our qualitative depth map computation using synthetic images. We used as input four images with manually created shadows corresponding to the top, bottom, left and right flashes, as shown on the top of the figure. The resultant qualitative depth map, as well as the correspondent 3D plot, are shown at the bottom of the figure. Note that the elevations of the rectangular areas are proportional to the associated length of shadows in the images.

#### *E. Real Images*

Figure 6 illustrates results obtained for the qualitative depth map computation from real images, using a single multi-flash camera. As we can see, our method effectively segments the scene, encoding object relative distances through the shadow width information. Note that the images have low intensity variation and small depth changes, a challenging scenario for most 3D reconstruction methods.

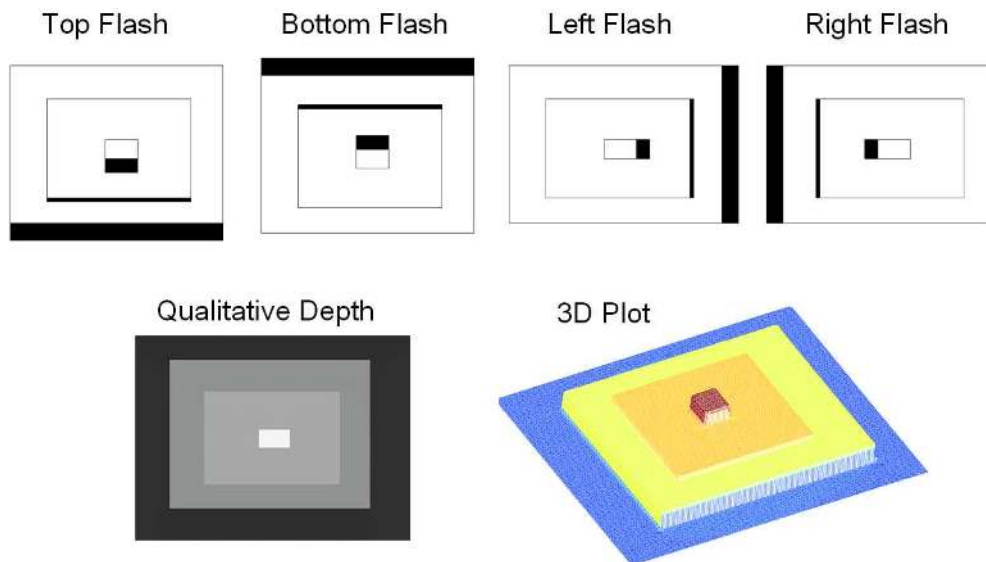


Fig. 5. *Top: Synthetic images with manually created shadows corresponding to the top, bottom, left and right flashes. Bottom: Qualitative depth map and corresponding 3D plot.*

Our qualitative depth map also offers the advantage of creating a slope in intensity when there are gaps in the depth contours. Note in the hand image the smooth transition between the thumb and the palm of the hand. This is a useful property for setting smoothness constraints in stereo matching.

In Figure 7, we show a more complex example. The scene contains many depth discontinuities and specular reflections, which poses a serious problem for most 3D reconstruction methods. We used our previous work [10] to eliminate spurious edges due to specularities in the depth edge map. The qualitative depth map and the 3D plot are shown in Figures 7b-c.

Clearly, our method is not able to handle slanted surfaces or rounded objects, since the depth variation is smooth without a sharp discontinuity. This is not a problem if we use it as a prior for stereo reconstruction.

## V. OCCLUSION DETECTION

Binocular half-occlusion points are those that are visible in only one of the two views provided by a binocular imaging system [34]. They are a major source of error in stereo matching algorithms, due to the fact that half-occluded points have no correspondence in the other view, leading to false disparity estimation.

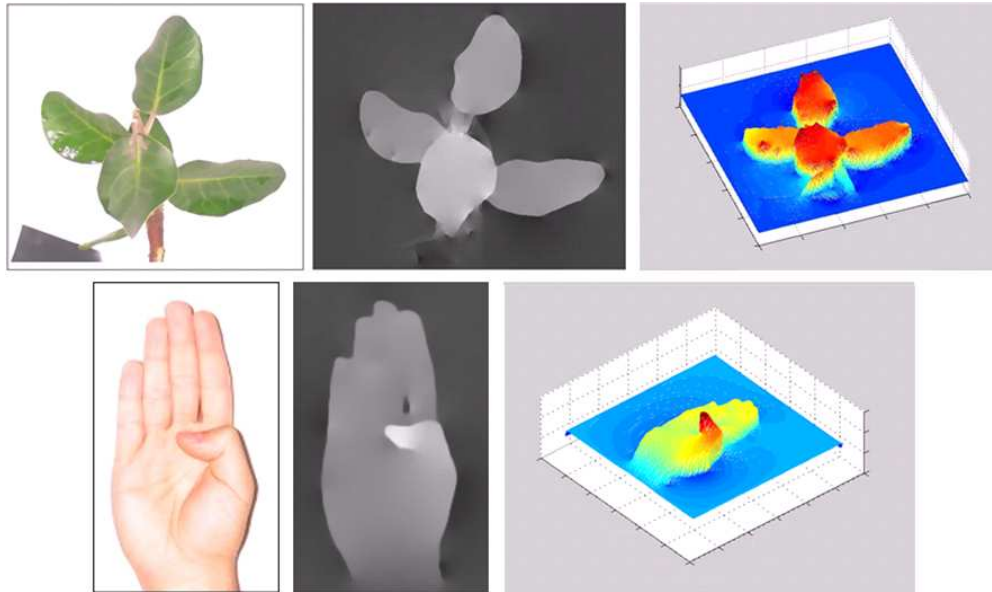


Fig. 6. From left to right: original image, qualitative depth map and the corresponding 3D plot. Note that our method captures small changes in depth and is robust in the presence of low intensity variations across depth contours.

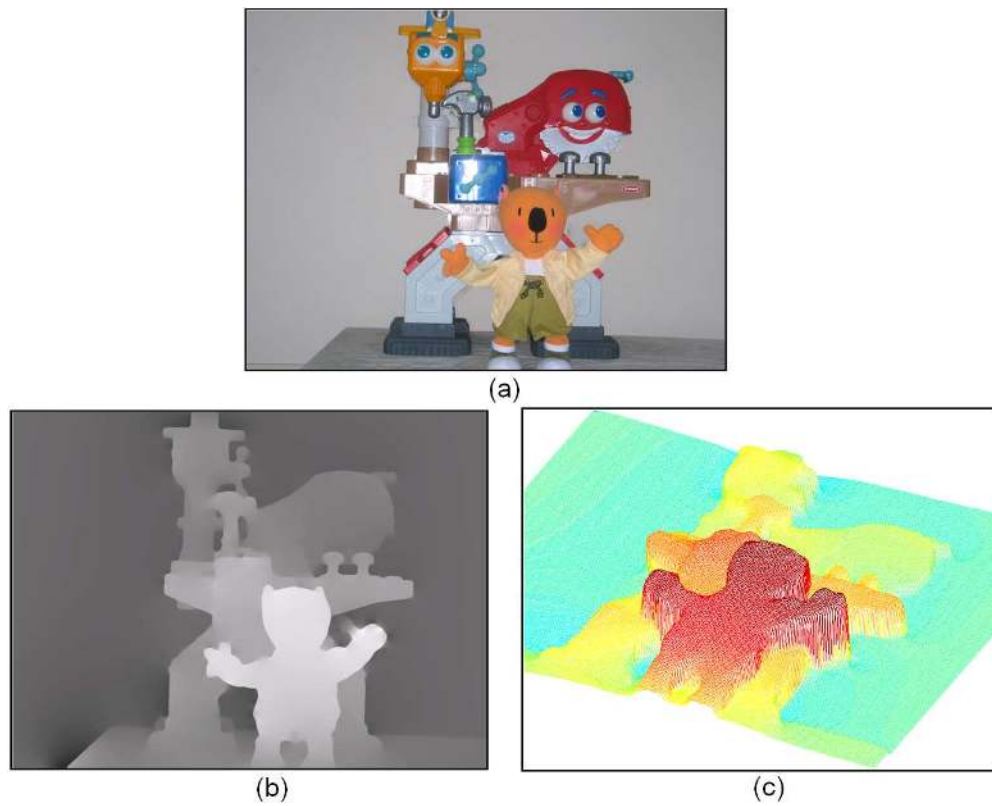


Fig. 7. (a) Complex scene with many depth discontinuities and specular reflections. (b) Qualitative depth map. (c) Corresponding 3D plot.

Current approaches to detect occlusion points are passive (see [34] for a comparison among five different techniques). They rely on the correspondence problem and thus are unable to produce accurate results for many real scenes. In general, these methods report a high rate of false positives and have problems to detect occlusions in areas of the scene dominated by low spatial frequency structure.

#### A. Occlusions Bounded by Shadows

Rather than relying on the hard correspondence problem, we exploit active lighting to detect binocular half-occlusions. Assume we have a stereo pair of multi-flash cameras with horizontal parallax and light sources arranged as Figure 8. By placing the light sources close to the center of projection of each camera, we can use the length of the shadows created by the lights surrounding the other camera to bound the half-occluded regions.

This idea is illustrated in Figure 8. Note that the half-occluded region  $S$  is bounded by the width of the shadows  $S_1$  and  $S_2$ . Observing the figure, let  $I_{L_1}$ ,  $I_{R_1}$  and  $I_{R_2}$  be the images taken by the left camera with light sources  $F_{L_1}$ ,  $F_{R_1}$  and  $F_{R_2}$ , respectively. The width of  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  can be determined by applying the meanshift segmentation algorithm in the ratio images  $\frac{I_{R_1}}{I_{L_1}}$  and  $\frac{I_{R_2}}{I_{L_1}}$  (as described in section IV-A). We then determine the half-occluded region by averaging the shadowed regions:  $S = \frac{B}{B_1+B_2}(S_1 + S_2)$ , where  $B$ ,  $B_1$ , and  $B_2$  are the baselines of the camera and each light source, as shown in the figure.

The occluded region is determined with precision for planar shadowed region and with close approximation for non-planar shadowed region. In the non-planar case, the linear relationship between baseline and shadow width does not hold, but the length of the occluded region is guaranteed to be bounded by the shadows.

We used two Canon G3 cameras with light sources arranged as Figure 8 to test our half-occlusion detection algorithm. Figure 9 demonstrates the reliable performance of our method. The images contain occlusion points in both textured and textureless regions, which is a challenging problem for passive algorithms that rely on pixel correspondence. For quantitative evaluation, we selected a piecewise planar scene (Figure 9a-c), since it is easier to obtain the occlusion ground

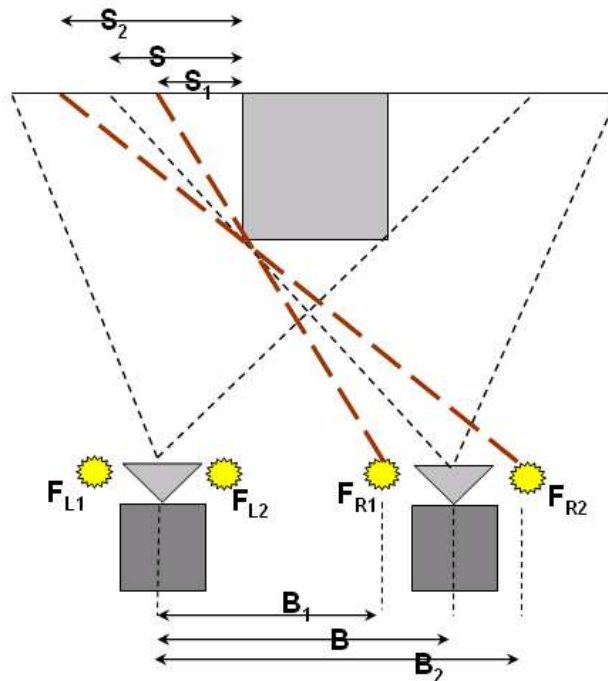


Fig. 8. The length of the half-occluded region  $S$  is bounded by shadows  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  created by flashes surrounding the other camera.

truth (computed from the known disparity map). For this scene, our method reports 0.65% of false positives and 0.12% of false negatives. The false positives rate is given by the number of false alarm occluded pixels divided by the total number of detected occluded pixels. The false negative rate is given by the number of false negative occluded pixels divided by the number of ground truth occluded pixels. For very large depth differences our method may not give a precise estimation (for non-planar shadowed regions, due to larger bounded regions) and it might fail due to detached shadows with thin objects.

## VI. ENHANCED STEREO MATCHING

In this section, we use our feature maps as prior information to enhance stereo matching algorithms. We start by demonstrating an enhanced window-based, local stereo method that takes advantage of depth edges and occlusions to produce disparity maps with very few computations and much more accuracy than traditional correlation-based methods. Then, we show how to incorporate our feature maps into global stereo methods based on Markov random field optimization. We also analyse different stereo implementation setups and scenes with specular



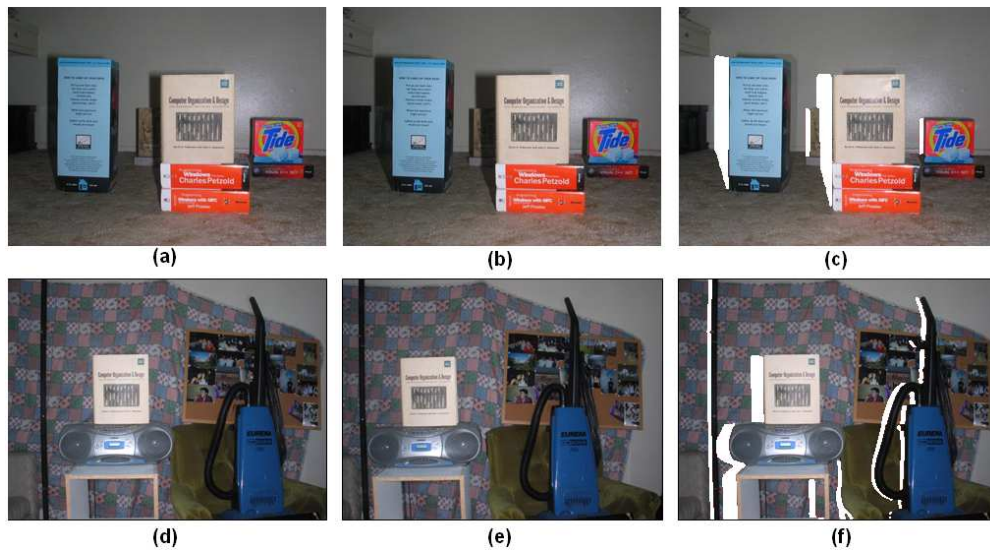


Fig. 9. Detection of binocular half-occlusions in both textured and textureless regions. (a)-(b) Images taken with light sources surrounding the other camera. (c) Our occlusion detection result marked as white pixels. 0.65% false positives and 0.12% false negatives were reported. (d) Left view. (e) Right view. (f) Occlusion detection (white pixels).

reflections. Finally, we discuss limitations of our technique and compare with previous 3D reconstruction approaches.

#### A. Enhanced Local Stereo

A major challenge in local stereo is to produce accurate results near depth discontinuities. In such regions, the main assumption of local methods is violated: the same window (aggregation support) contains pixels that significantly differ in disparity, often causing serious errors in the matching process, due to perspective distortions. In addition, windows that include half-occluded points near depth discontinuities are another source of error, since they do not have correspondence in the other view.

The central problem of local methods is to determine the optimal size, shape, and weight distribution of the aggregation support for each pixel. There is a trade-off in choosing the window size: if the window is too small, a wrong match might be found due to ambiguities and noise. If the window is too large, problems due to foreshortening and depth discontinuities occur, with the result of lost detail and blurring of object boundaries. Previous solutions to this problem include the use of adaptive windows [12] and shiftable windows [13], but producing clean results around depth discontinuities still remains a challenge.

1) *Varying Window Size and Shape:* We adopt a sliding window which varies in shape and size, according to depth edges and occlusion, to perform local correlation. Given the quality of the detection of depth edges and half-occluded points, results are significantly improved.

In order to determine the size and shape of the window for each pixel, we determine the set of pixels that has approximately the same disparity as the center pixel of the window. This is achieved by a region growing algorithm (starting at the center pixel) which uses depth edges and half-occluded points as boundaries.

Only this set of pixels is then used for matching in the other view. The other pixels in the window are not considered, since they correspond to a different disparity.

2) *Experiments:* We first demonstrate the usefulness of depth edges in local stereo using the 640x480 Tsukuba stereo pair of the Middlebury dataset (<http://www.middlebury.edu/stereo>). Figure 10a shows one of the stereo input images. The disparity ground truth for each pixel is shown in Figure 10b and the depth edge map computed from the ground truth is shown in Figure 10c. The results using a traditional correlation-based algorithm are shown in Figure 10d for a window size of 9x9 pixels and Figure 10e for a window size of 31x31 pixels. The trade-off in choosing the window size is clearly shown from these images: a smaller 9x9 window causes noisy results, while a larger 31x31 window causes significant errors near depth discontinuities. In order to verify the importance of depth edges in local stereo, we used our algorithm considering as input the stereo pair and the depth edge map computed from the disparity ground truth. Figures 10f and 10g show our results for 9x9 and 31x31 window sizes, respectively. Clearly, the disparity map results are significantly improved near depth discontinuities. Note that this is a synthetic example to illustrate the effect of depth discontinuities in stereo, since we are assuming we have as input the depth edge map, which is difficult to obtain without active illumination.

Next we evaluate our method in a real scenario, using multi-flash imaging to compute depth edges and occlusions. We used a horizontal slide bar for acquiring stereo images with a multi-flash camera. Occlusions were estimated by moving the flashes properly to the shooting camera positions.

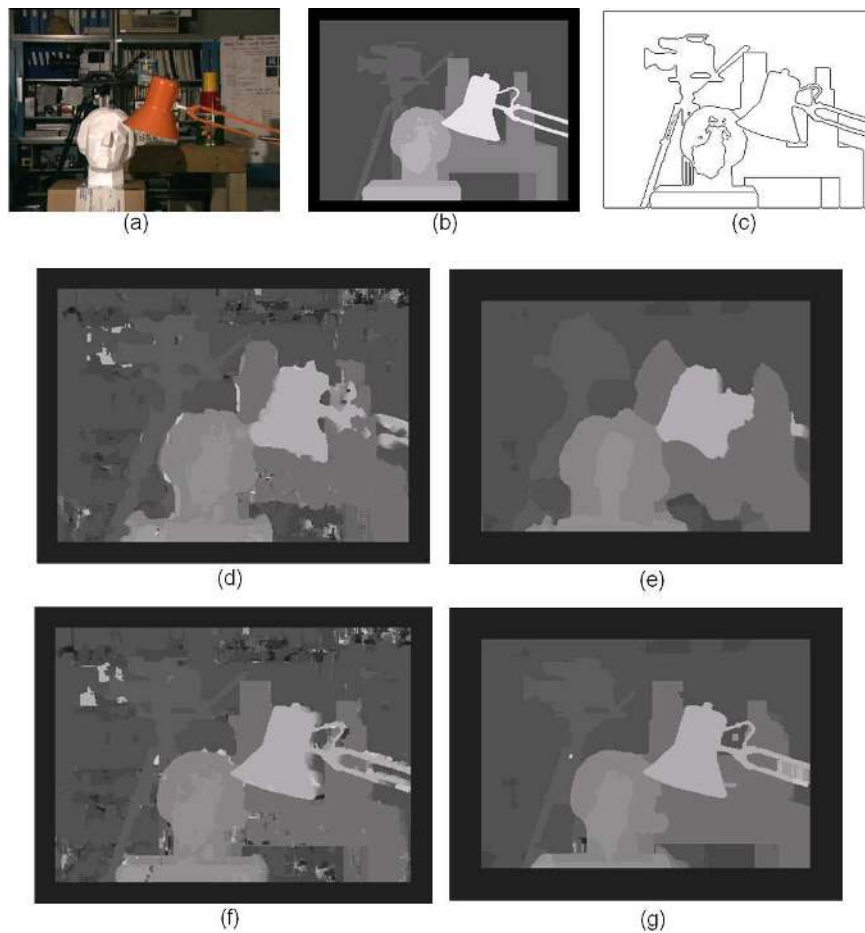


Fig. 10. (a) One image of the stereo pair. (b) Disparity map ground truth. (c) Depth edge map computed from the ground truth. (d) Local correlation result with a  $9 \times 9$  window. (e) Local correlation result with a  $31 \times 31$  window. (f) Our enhanced local stereo result with a  $9 \times 9$  window. (g) Our enhanced local stereo result with a  $31 \times 31$  window.

Figure 11a shows one of the views of a difficult scene we used as input. The image contains textureless regions, ambiguous patterns (e.g., the background close to the book), a geometrically complex object and thin structures. The resolution of the images is  $640 \times 480$ . We rectified them so that epipolar lines are aligned with horizontal scanlines. We adopted a small baseline between the cameras (maximum disparity equals 10), so that we can obtain a hand-labeled disparity ground truth (Figure 11b).

Figure 11c shows our computed depth edges and half-occluded points. Note that some edges do not appear in the ground truth (due to range resolution) and we also have some gaps in the edges due to noise. This data was considered to test our algorithms under noisy conditions.

Traditional local-correlation approaches perform very poorly in this scene, as we show in

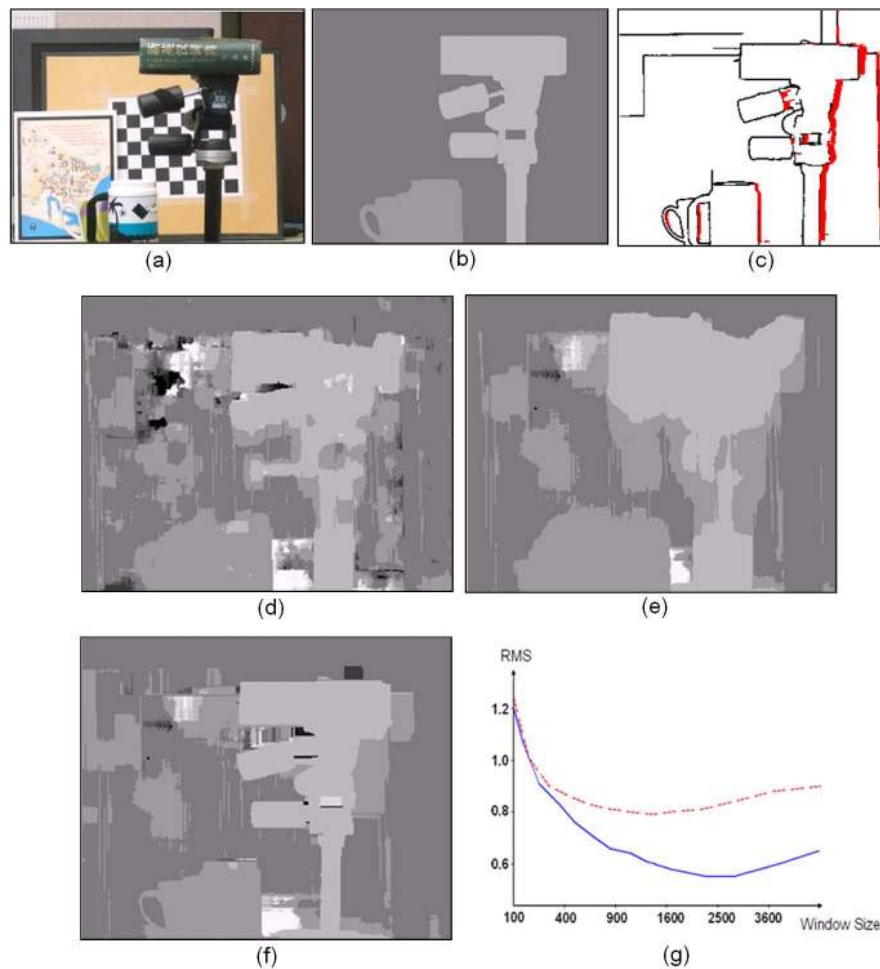


Fig. 11. Enhanced Local Stereo (a) Original image. (b) Hand-labeled ground truth. (c) Detection of depth edges and binocular half-occlusions. (d) Local correlation result with a  $9 \times 9$  window. (e) Local correlation result with a  $31 \times 31$  window. (f) Our multi-flash local stereo result with a  $31 \times 31$  window. (g) Analysis of the root-mean-squared error with respect to window size. The dashed line corresponds to traditional local correlation, while the solid line corresponds to our approach.

Figures 11d and 11e, using windows of size  $9 \times 9$  and  $31 \times 31$ . In addition to noise, there are major problems at depth discontinuities - corners tend to become rounded and thin structures often disappear or expand. In contrast, our method preserve discontinuities with large windows (Figure 11f). We show a quantitative analysis of the two methods with respect to the window size in Figure 11g. The axis of the graph correspond to the root-mean-squared error (RMS) and the window size in pixels. The error decreases significantly as the window grows for our method (solid line). At some point, it will start growing again with larger windows due to gaps in the depth edges. We could use our qualitative depth map here, but this would add an undesirable computational load, since local-based approaches are attractive because of their efficiency.

## B. Enhanced Global Stereo

The best results achieved in stereo matching thus far are given by global stereo methods, particularly those based on belief propagation and graph cuts [19], [18]. These methods formulate the stereo matching problem as a maximum a posteriori Markov Random Field (MRF) problem. In this section, we will describe our enhanced global stereo method, which uses belief propagation for inference in the Markov network.

Some current approaches explicitly model occlusions and discontinuities in the disparity computation [35], [36], but they rely on intensity edges and junctions as cues for depth discontinuities. This poses a problem in low-contrast scenes and in images where object boundaries appear blurred. However, we want to suppress smoothness constraints only at occluding edges, not at texture or illumination edges. Our method makes use of the prior information to circumvent these problems, including the qualitative depth map and the automatically detected binocular half-occlusions described earlier.

1) *Inference by Belief Propagation:* The stereo matching problem can be formulated as a MRF with hidden variables  $\{x_s\}$ , corresponding to the disparity of each pixel, and observed variables  $\{y_s\}$ , corresponding to the matching cost (often based on intensity differences) at specific disparities. By denoting  $X = \{x_s\}$  and  $Y = \{y_s\}$ , the posterior  $P(X|Y)$  can be factorized as:

$$P(X|Y) \propto \prod_s \psi_s(x_s, y_s) \prod_s \prod_{t \in N(s)} \psi_{st}(x_s, x_t) \quad (6)$$

where  $N(s)$  represents a neighborhood of  $s$ ,  $\psi_{st}$  is called the compatibility matrix between nodes  $x_s$  and  $x_t$  (smoothness term), and  $\psi_s(x_s, y_s)$  is called the local evidence for node  $x_s$ , which is the observation probability  $p(y_s|x_s)$  (data term). The belief propagation algorithm gives an efficient approximate solution in this Markov network. We refer the reader to [18] for details about the derivation of equation (6) and the inference based on belief propagation.

2) *Qualitative Depth as Evidence:* We can potentially use our computed depth edges to suppress smoothness constraints during optimization. However, the depth contours may have gaps. Fortunately, our qualitative depth image shows a desirable slope in intensity when gaps

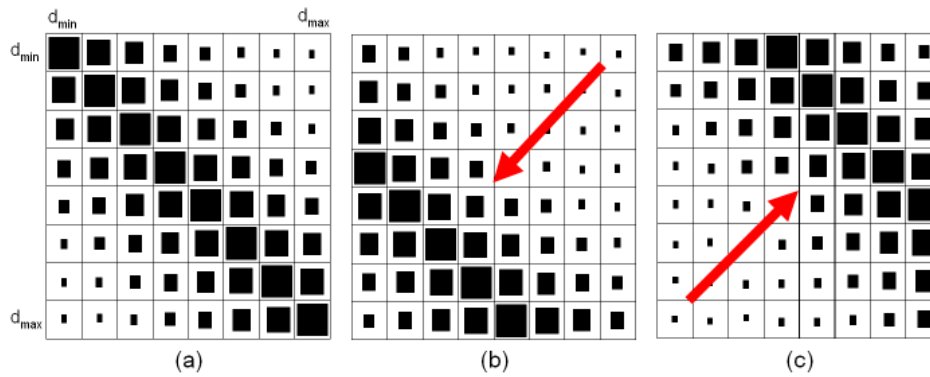


Fig. 12. (a) Compatibility matrix encouraging pixels to have the same disparity. Larger rectangles correspond to larger values. (b) Compatibility matrix encouraging neighboring pixels to have different disparities according to the qualitative depth map. (c) Same as (b), but considering a different sign of the depth edge so that the shift goes on the opposite direction.

occur (as we will show in our experiments), and hence it is a good choice to set the compatibility matrix  $\psi_{st}$ . In addition, the qualitative depth map encodes the object relative distances via the shadow width information, and we use the map to encourage discontinuities at a certain disparity difference.

Consider  $\{d_i\}$ ,  $i = 1..L$  to be the set of possible disparities for all pixels, where  $d_1$  and  $d_L$  correspond to the minimum and maximum allowed disparities, respectively. The compatibility matrix  $\psi_{st}(x_s, x_t)$  is expressed as a  $L \times L$  matrix encoding the disparity relationship between pixels  $s$  and  $t$  [18]. In fact, each entry  $(i, j)$  in the compatibility matrix  $\psi_{st}$  corresponds to the likelihood of pixels  $s$  and  $t$  having disparities  $d_i$  and  $d_j$ , respectively. This means that if the matrix has higher values along its diagonal, neighboring pixels will be encouraged to have the same values, imposing a smoothness constraint, which is commonly adopted in stereo algorithms.

Let  $P$  be the qualitative depth scaled to match the set of possible disparities  $d_i$ ,  $i = 1..L$ . We define the compatibility matrix  $\psi_{st}(x_s, x_t) = C_{L \times L}^{st}$ , where  $C_{ij}^{st}$  is defined as:

$$C_{ij}^{st} = \exp\left(-\frac{|d_i - d_j - \Delta P_{st}|}{F}\right) \quad (7)$$

where  $\Delta P_{st}$  is the intensity difference between pixels  $s$  and  $t$  in the qualitative map (which was scaled to match possible disparities) and  $F$  is a constant scaling factor. Intuitively, if  $\Delta P_{st} = 0$ , there is no sharp discontinuity for neighboring pixels  $s$  and  $t$  and the compatibility matrix will have larger values along its diagonal (see Figure 12a), encouraging neighboring pixels to have



Fig. 13. (a) Standard belief propagation result. (b) Our enhanced global stereo method, given the knowledge of depth discontinuities.

the same disparity. In contrast, if  $\Delta P_{st} \neq 0$ , the larger values will be shifted to the disparity encoded by  $\Delta P_{st}$  (see Figures 12b-c). The direction of this shift depends on the sign of  $\Delta P_{st}$ , which is the sign of the corresponding depth edge.

We have also included the half-occlusion information in our method. Nodes corresponding to pixels that have no match in the other view are eliminated, while a penalty is given for matching a given pixel with an occluded point in the other view.

3) *Experiments:* Figure 13 shows a comparison of our algorithm with traditional global stereo based on belief propagation. As before, we used the input images from the Middlebury dataset with depth edges computed from the disparity map ground truth. For this example, we have not used the information from occlusions and qualitative depth; we just used depth edges to stop smoothness constraints in the energy function. As we can see, results are considerably improved near depth discontinuities.

The computed qualitative map in our challenging stereo example is shown in Figure 14a. The results for the standard belief propagation algorithm and our enhanced method are shown in Figures 14b and 14c, respectively. The passive method fails to preserve discontinuities due to matching ambiguities (we used the implementation available at <http://cat.middlebury.edu/stereo/> with different weight and penalty parameters). Black pixels mean noisy values (zero disparity). Our results clearly show significant improvements with a RMS of 0.4590 compared to 0.9589 for this input. It is important to note that (although we do not show in this scene) our method handles slanted surfaces in exactly the same way as standard global methods. In other words,

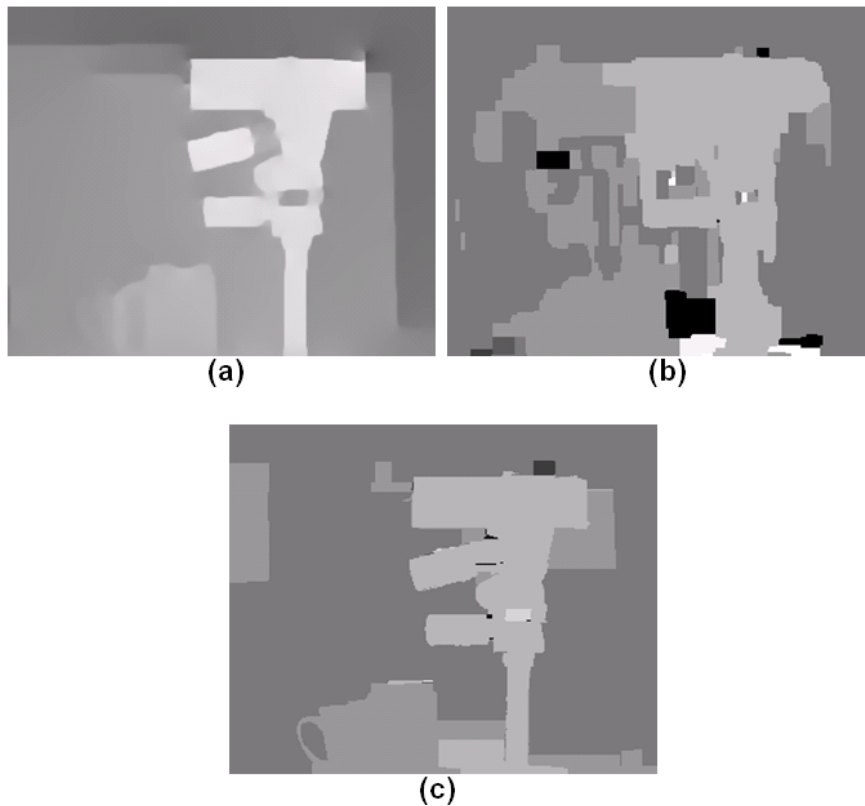


Fig. 14. Enhanced Global Stereo (a) *Qualitative depth map*. (b) *Standard passive belief propagation result (RMS: 0.9589)*. (c) *Our enhanced global stereo method (RMS: 0.4590)*.

we do not sacrifice slanted surfaces to preserve discontinuities as opposed to [16].

### C. Specular Scenes

Specularities pose a problem for stereo matching, since they are viewpoint dependent and can cause large intensity differences at corresponding points. With multi-flash imaging, as shown in our previous work [10], we can significantly reduce the effect of specular reflections in images, thus enhancing stereo correspondence near specular regions.

We used the setup shown in Figure 2d to capture four image pairs of a specular scene under different lighting conditions. Figures 15a and 15b show the stereo pair (left view and right view, respectively), captured with one single shot, using the flash positioned to the right of the camera. Note how specularities are different in the two views.

Using the remaining flash images, we can attenuate the effect of specular reflections with our gradient-domain method described in previous work [10]. The specular-reduced image pair is



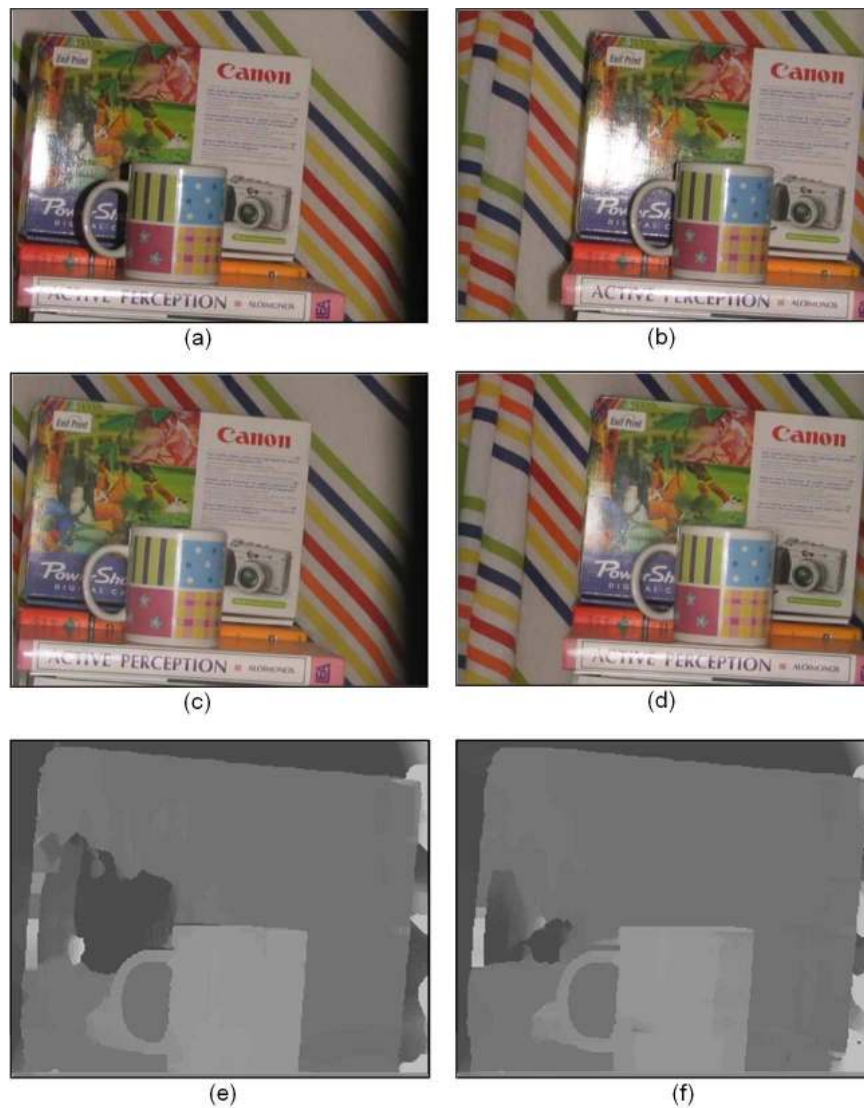


Fig. 15. (a) Left view of a flash image. (b) Right view of a flash image. (c) Left view of our specular-reduced image. (d) Right view of our specular-reduced image. (e) Disparity map for a region of interest using the flash image pair. (f) Disparity map using the specular-reduced image pair.

shown in Figures 15c and 15d.

For stereo matching, we rectified the images and computed depth edges as pre-processing. Our enhanced local stereo matching was applied to both flash and specular-reduced image pairs, using a 31x31 search window. The disparity map results are shown for a region of interest in Figures 15e and 15f. Note that we are able to reduce artifacts due to specularities in the disparity map. The artifacts near the handle of the cup are due to partial occlusions, which were not detected and processed in this experiment.

Our method uses flash images to handle specularities. The detection and attenuation of specular

reflections in ambient (no-flash) images has been recently addressed by Agrawal et al. [37], using flash and no-flash image pairs. The advantage of using flash images is that they are less noisy and more appropriate for dark environments.

When specular boundaries overlap in most images, we are not able to remove specularities. This is the reason why we still have some specular artifacts in Figure 15f.

#### *D. Efficiency*

Our qualitative depth map takes about two seconds to compute on a Pentium IV 1.8 GHz for 640x480 resolution images. Our enhanced local-based stereo algorithm requires very few computations since depth edges can be computed extremely fast [8]. Our enhanced global method computation time is the sum of the time for the qualitative depth map computation plus the time for belief propagation procedure. We refer to [38] for an efficient implementation of the belief propagation algorithm.

## VII. DISCUSSION

In addition to the proposed methods described in the previous section, signed depth edges could also be used as part of the matching cost computation. This would be very useful in low-contrast scenes, where occluding boundaries may not correspond to intensity edges. The disadvantage of matching depth edges is that problems may occur when a depth discontinuity in one view corresponds to a surface normal discontinuity in the other view.

Small baseline multi-flash illumination could be used to enhance multiple view stereo algorithms for 3D object modeling [39], [40], [41]. We refer to the work of Crispell [42] along this direction, which shows the importance of depth edges and multi-flash photography to reconstruct objects with concavities. In our work, we applied our feature maps to aid the establishment of point correspondences between two images acquired with a pair of small baseline cameras.

#### *A. Comparison with other techniques*

Table I shows a comparison of our multi-flash stereopsis approach with other stereo methods. Note that a small baseline flash setup means we do not need a laboratory setup as in photometric

	Recovered Information	Active / Passive	Handles Constant Albedo	Handles Depth Discontinuities	Compact, self-contained	Hardware Complexity / Cost
Structured Light	Depth	Active	Yes	Yes	Difficult	More
Photometric Stereo	Normals	Active	Yes	Limited	No	Less
Helmholtz Stereo	Depth+ Normals	Active	Yes	Limited	No	Less
Multi-Flash Stereo	Depth	Active	No	Yes	Yes	Less
Passive Stereo	Depth	Passive	No	Limited	Yes	Less

TABLE I

*Comparison of our technique with other 3D reconstruction approaches.*

stereo and the cost and complexity of a flash attachment is very low. In addition, for non-intrusive applications, we can use readily available infra-red flash lighting, while projecting high frequency structured patterns requires an infra-red projector.

Below we give a more detailed discussion of the pros and cons of our method compared with stereo techniques:

1) *Passive Stereo*: As we showed in the previous section, our method significantly enhances the establishment of point correspondences near depth discontinuities and specular highlights, when compared to passive stereo methods. Both techniques will fail in large textureless regions. Passive stereo methods are non-intrusive and more suitable for processing dynamic scenes. In outdoor scenarios, when sun light has more intensity than flash light, we can not enhance passive stereo matching.

2) *Stereo Based on Structured Light*: Active stereo techniques based on structured lighting produce more accurate correspondence maps than our approach. On the other hand, our method offers advantages in terms of low cost, simplicity, and portability. In addition, our feature maps could be used to enhance structured light techniques. Even state of the art 3D scanners may

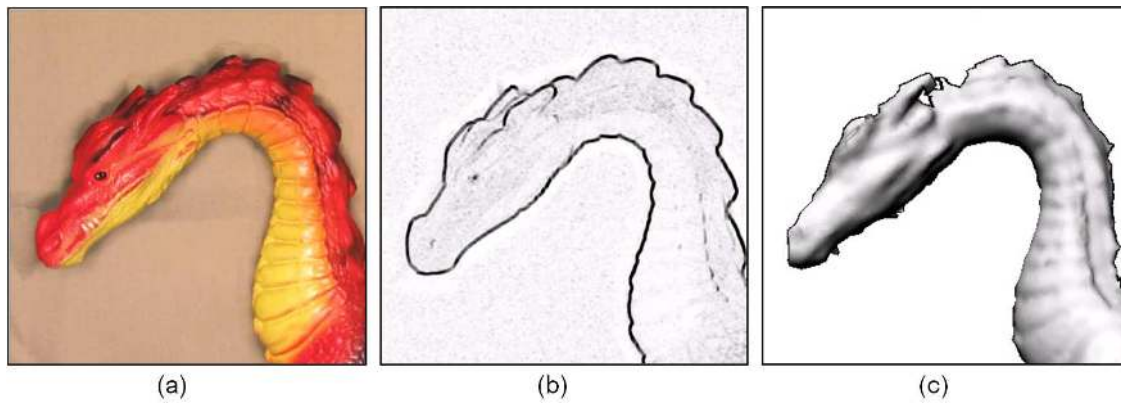


Fig. 16. (a) Original Photo. (b) Our depth edge confidence map. (c) Depth map from active illumination 3Q scanner. Note the jagged edges.

produce jagged edges along depth discontinuities, as shown in Figure 16.

3) *Photometric Stereo*: Photometric stereo techniques require a fixed lighting rig and thus are limited to laboratory and industrial settings, contrasting with our method which can be built into a self-contained camera. They produce excellent results for smooth, Lambertian surfaces, but are unstable near depth discontinuities or rapid surface normal changes [43]. They offer the advantage of handling textureless regions and estimating surface reflectance properties.

4) *Helmholtz Stereo*: Helmholtz stereopsis has the ability to handle surfaces with arbitrary reflectance, in contrast to most previous methods that assume Lambertian reflectance. It also offers the advantage of estimating surface normals in textureless regions. In regions with texture, both depth and normals are estimated. Similarly to photometric stereo, light sources with large baseline are assumed to allow sufficient photometric variation across reciprocal image pairs, so that the normal field can be estimated. Hence, the setup is difficult to be built into a self-contained device. In addition, the camera and light source must be calibrated and moved in a precise and controlled fashion. Although the authors claim that shadows can be used in Helmholtz stereo as a cue for detection of partial occlusions, no experiments are reported for obtaining discontinuity preserving depth maps.

### B. Limitations

Our approach has the following limitations:

- Although we significantly enhance passive stereo matching near discontinuities and specu-

larities, our method suffers from other well-known problems in passive matching, such as handling textureless regions, noise, and non-Lambertian surface reflectance. Some of these problems are addressed by active stereo approaches, as we mentioned in the last section. Our feature maps obtained with small baseline illumination could be used to enhance these active illumination stereo methods as well, as most of them are sensitive near depth discontinuities.

- Our method fails for outdoor scenarios when the sun's illumination is more intense than the flashes. In this case, depth edges and occlusions can not be detected and used as prior information in stereo. For local stereo, our algorithm would be equivalent to traditional correlation-based approaches, since the window shape and size would keep constant along the image. For global stereo, we would have to use intensity edges in addition to the qualitative depth map to set smoothness constraints.
- When thin foreground objects are present in the scene, we may have problems with detached shadows that are separated from the object. In our previous work [44], we have exploited a multi-baseline approach (one camera with multiple flashes covering multiple baselines) to handle this issue. We believe that detached shadows could also be used as a positive source of information. For example, it could be used to handle *ordering constraints* in stereo based on dynamic programming. In fact, the ordering assumption is often violated when thin foreground objects are present in the scene.
- Motion is another cause of failure in our approach, since multiple images are taken sequentially. Without proper image registration, our feature maps can not be computed reliably. A possible solution to this problem is the use of light sources with variable wavelength [44], which can be triggered at the same time to create shadows with different colors.

## VIII. CONCLUSIONS

We have presented a set of techniques based on active lighting for reliable, discontinuity preserving stereo matching. Our methods include the derivation of a qualitative depth map from one single camera, detection of binocular half-occlusions, and enhanced local and global stereo algorithms based on these features.

Our techniques are reliable, simple, and inexpensive; the overall setup can be built into a self-contained device, no larger than existing 3D cameras. In the future, we plan to extend our multi-flash imaging framework to handle the general problem of classification of discontinuities according to their physical origin, i.e, discriminating discontinuities in depth, reflectance, illumination and surface normal.

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