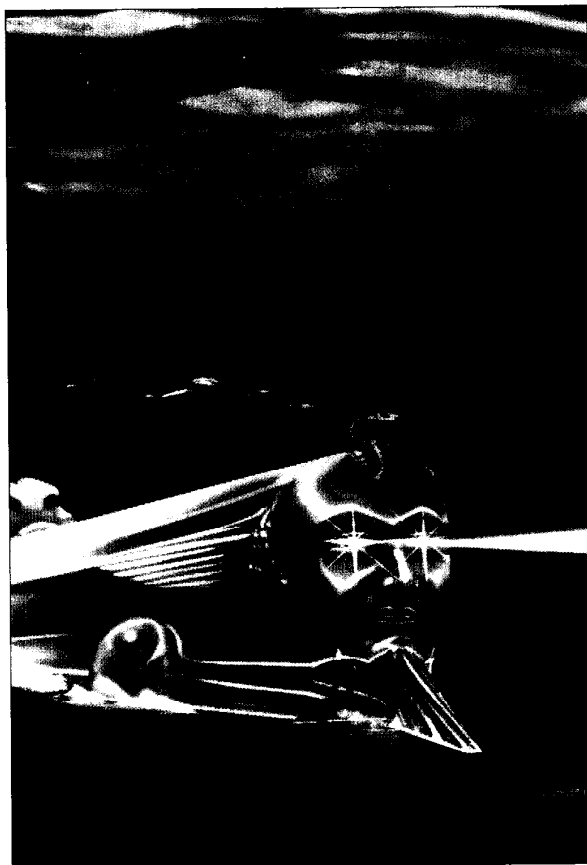


Parallel Processing for Computer Vision and Image Understanding



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Vision has long fascinated researchers from such disciplines as psychology, neural science, computer science, and engineering.¹ What exactly is vision? It has been defined as the process of recognizing objects of interest from images. The word *process* refers to some form of processing performed on the input data, which may be one or more images. The phrase *objects of interest* implies a context within which this processing takes place, as well as the presence of a representation used in this processing. For example, if we were asked, Is there a table in this room? we would compare the representation of a table contained in our minds

with something similar to it in the room. In that process, we would ignore objects that did not look like a table. That is, we start with a model and look for some instance of the model in the room. On the other hand, if we were told, "Describe all the objects in this room," we would scan the room, form representations of the objects, and match them to objects in our "knowledge bases." However, we may or may not know what to expect in the room. Both problems are vision problems.

A general vision problem is considered to be an ill-posed problem from a computational perspective. The ultimate achievement of computer vision will be

to perform the tasks normally performed by human vision.

The role of parallel processing

Problems in computer vision are computationally intensive. Consider a sequence of images at medium resolution (512×512 pixels) and standard frame rate (30 frames per second) in color (3 bytes per pixel).² This represents a rate of almost 24 million bytes of data per second. A simple feature-extraction algorithm may require thousands of basic operations per pixel, and a typical vi-

Levels of processing

Low. This level is normally termed bottom-up processing.² Most image-processing operations fall into this category. Input data includes images or simple transformations of images. Computations in low-level processing are regular, exhibit high spatial parallelism, and mainly involve numeric processing. These computations are well suited for both SIMD (single instruction, multiple data) and MIMD (multiple instruction, multiple data) architectures. Example algorithms include edge detection, filtering operations, and connected component labeling.

Intermediate. This category conveniently bridges bottom-up (low-level) and top-down (high-level) processing.² Computations in this category manipulate symbolic and numeric data. Examples of symbolic data include edges and lines commonly referred to as tokens. Processing on this level attempts to build a coalition of tokens to extract meaningful entities, for example, forming rectangles from lines. Computations are normally data dependent and irregular. They are suitable for medium- to coarse-grain parallelism in MIMD mode, although a subset of computations also can be performed efficiently on SIMD architectures.

High. Tasks on this level are normally top-down (or model-directed). However, processing is not so well defined as on the other two levels. The model of the "world" drives the processing. The world represents a database of objects, their possible poses, and interrelationships in a context. For example, a model of a car has descriptions of wheels, doors, etc., and constraints describing their relationships. Furthermore, processing in this domain may require reexecuting algorithms from the other two levels. Although parallelism on computations at this level is not well understood, it is believed necessary to dynamically schedule computations. The diversity and highly data-dependent nature of computations make this level of processing largely suitable for MIMD parallelism.

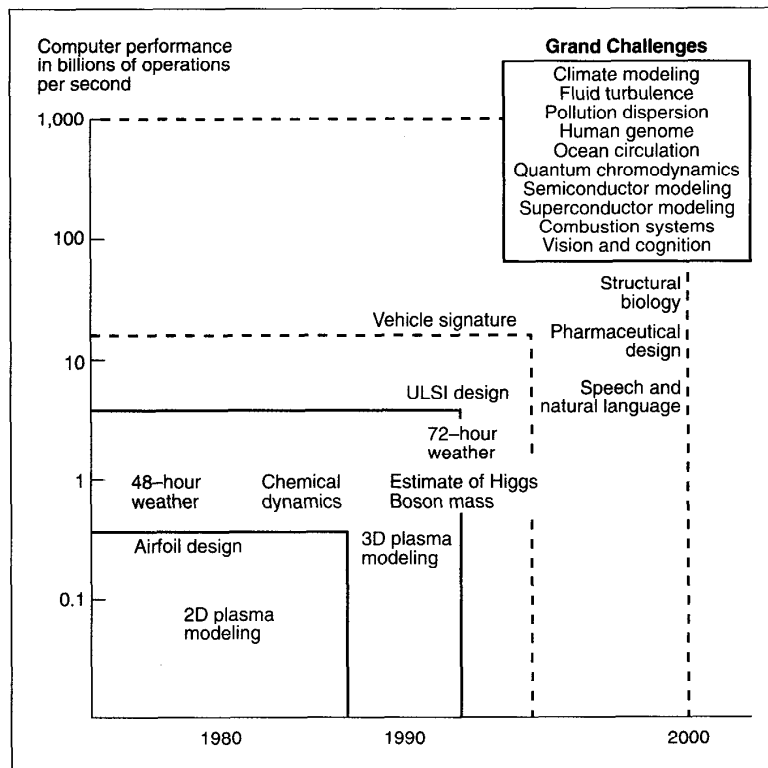


Figure 1. Performance requirements for "Grand Challenge" problems.⁴

sion system requires significantly more complex computations. As you can see, parallel computing is essential to solving such a problem.

In fact, the need to speed up image-processing computations brought parallel processing into the computer vision domain. Most image-processing algorithms are inherently parallel because they involve similar computations for all pixels in an image. This has inspired the development of array processors. For example, NASA Goddard Center's MPP³ has a 128 × 128 processor mesh-connected array specifically built for image processing.

A mesh architecture connects each processor to four neighboring processors: north, south, east, and west. It is suitable for image processing because its structure closely mimics that of a two-dimensional image. It also provides an efficient *local* communication structure.

However, the lack of efficient *global* communication capabilities in a mesh

architecture — and the requirement for fast top-down and bottom-up image processing — led researchers to propose another architecture known as a "pyramid." This architecture normally consists of several levels of meshes in which the top level has one processor and each succeeding level has four times as many processors as its parent array. In addition to the mesh interconnections within each level, each processor is also connected to its four children (except in the bottom layer) and to its parent (except for the root). Therefore, a pyramid architecture maintains several levels of image representations simultaneously. Both mesh and pyramid architectures have contributed significantly to the understanding and development of new algorithms for image analysis and vision, and have considerably influenced the subsequent designs of parallel architectures for vision.

Current status. Parallel processing has taken tremendous strides in the last

decade, enabling scientists to perform very large scientific computations that were impractical a few years ago. But the immense computational challenge presented by vision is still to be met. In fact, compared to the impact of parallel processing in other areas, its impact in the vision domain has been minimal for several reasons.

A typical vision system requires integrating algorithms from diverse areas such as image processing, numerical analysis, graph theory, artificial intelligence, and databases. There is no clear understanding and consensus on how to achieve this. Specific problems in integration can also be attributed to a lack of understanding of the vision process itself, even if the computations and parallelism of some individual components are well understood.

Currently, the dominant approach to characterizing vision computations is to classify the processing requirements into three levels: low, intermediate, and high. The most recent image-understanding benchmark² embodies this characterization. The accompanying sidebar presents a brief overview of each level.

Recent efforts in architectural design and development have embedded architectural components for each level of processing into one integrated architecture (as explained in the sidebar). Compared to the progress in architectural advances in general-purpose parallel processing for other scientific disciplines, however, architectural advances for vision systems are in their infancy.

Future directions

Artificial vision is one of the "Grand Challenges" identified by the federal government's High-Performance Computing and Communication (HPCC) initiative⁴ (see Figure 1). Solving these problems is expected to require raw computational power between 100 and 1,000 billions of operations per second. Besides raw computational needs, other issues must be addressed to efficiently use parallel processing in solving vision problems.

Architectures. As discussed, vision problems span a broad spectrum of computations suitable for different types of architecture (like special-pur-

pose, SIMD, and MIMD). The computations in various stages of processing not only need to execute concurrently in a system but also must interact with each other. Hence, the future entails some form of heterogeneity in an architecture for vision. The challenge for researchers is to capitalize on the advancements in multiprocessor technology and incorporate them optimally into an architecture suitable for vision problems.

System integration. A straightforward integration of different types of architectures into one organization may not be efficient for solving vision problems. The integration must incorporate appropriate control and communication structures suitable for providing the necessary interaction between various parts. It should also reflect the peculiarities of vision systems. In simple terms, an integrated organization should not be visible to a user as a collection of heterogeneous components but should provide a unified view of a machine in which heterogeneity is transparent to the user.

Programming models and software tools. Development of these items has lagged far behind progress made in architectures. Vision-processing requirements present a greater challenge because vision requires programming models and subsequent languages powerful and flexible enough to handle different types of processing while hiding the details of a heterogeneous system.

Software tools are necessary to provide users a friendly platform on which they can develop applications. If users are burdened with the responsibility of learning machine organization intimately in order to use these tools, the gains from parallel processing will be limited. Tools are also important for users to rapidly prototype and experiment with their algorithms. This is critical to developing and testing new techniques to solve problems in the vision domain.

Real-time vision. Examples of real-time vision applications include robotics and autonomous land vehicles. Such applications not only demand high performance but also require predictable performance and a capability to interact with the environment (as in active vision) through efficient interface with

sensors. They also place physical constraints such as size, power consumption, cost, and robustness on a parallel system. Therefore, special-purpose parallel computing may yet have a role in such systems. ■

Acknowledgments

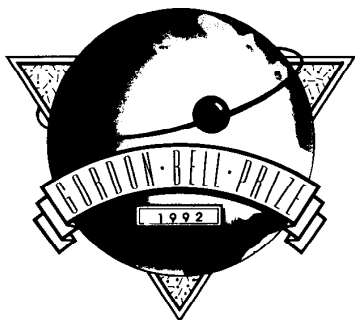
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In total, 25 submissions were received for this special issue of *Computer*. The eight articles selected are of high quality, but unfortunately, many other interesting articles could not be included.

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Further reading

For more information on computer vision and image understanding, consult the following sources.

Journals

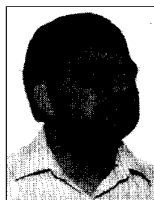
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