

Cross-View Variance Correlation in Path-Traced Stereo: A Hidden Shortcut in Synthetic Training Data

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Abstract—Path-traced synthetic stereo data underlie a large fraction of modern disparity-estimation training pipelines. We report a previously unrecognised property of such data: while the Monte Carlo (MC) noise streams of the two cameras are statistically independent, the underlying *variance fields*—deterministic per-pixel functions of the rendering integrand—are highly correlated once aligned by the ground-truth disparity warp. Across 20 scenes rendered with Mitsuba 3, the warped Pearson correlation reaches $\rho=0.754\pm0.016$, and remains essentially invariant ($\rho=0.778\pm0.001$) over a $16\times$ range of samples per pixel. The effect is strongest in Lambertian regions ($\rho\approx0.78$) and substantially weaker in glass ($\rho\approx0.30$), as predicted by an integrand decomposition into view-independent and view-dependent components. Because real binocular sensors carry independent thermal and shot-noise streams, the correlation is unique to MC-rendered data: it constitutes a learnable shortcut for stereo networks and a previously unrecognised mechanism of the sim-to-real gap that affects the entire image, not only complex materials.

Index Terms—Stereo matching, Monte Carlo rendering, synthetic data, sim-to-real, variance analysis, path tracing.

I. INTRODUCTION

A large fraction of modern stereo-matching networks [1]–[3] are trained, at least in part, on synthetic data generated by physically-based path tracing [4]–[6]. The attraction is practical: ground-truth disparity is free at render time, and modern path tracers produce images whose first-order statistics closely match real photographs. The implicit assumption underlying this practice is that the residual Monte Carlo (MC) noise behaves as an additive i.i.d. perturbation of an otherwise clean stereo pair; in particular, that the noise streams in the left and right views are statistically independent.

This assumption holds at the level of individual samples: the random number generators driving the two cameras are seeded independently, and the per-sample radiance estimates are uncorrelated across views by construction. However, deep stereo networks do not consume samples, they consume images, and the matching cues they learn are computed from *aggregated* pixel intensities. A natural object to consider is therefore the per-pixel variance field $\sigma^2(x, y)$ obtained from N independent renders of the same scene—a deterministic function of the rendering integrand, distinct from the noise itself.

In this letter we report that the variance fields of the two views, while constructed from independent samples, are highly correlated once aligned by the ground-truth disparity warp (Fig. 1). Across 20 scenes rendered with Mitsuba 3 [7],

the warped Pearson correlation reaches $\rho=0.754\pm0.016$, and remains essentially unchanged ($\rho=0.778\pm0.001$) over a $16\times$ range of samples per pixel. Counter-intuitively, the effect is strongest in Lambertian regions ($\rho\approx0.78$) and substantially weaker in glass ($\rho\approx0.30$). Because real binocular sensors carry independent thermal and shot-noise streams, the cross-view variance signal is unique to MC-rendered data; we argue it constitutes a learnable shortcut available only on synthetic training inputs and a previously unrecognised contributor to the sim-to-real gap of stereo networks [8], [9].

Contributions.

- We identify and quantify the cross-view correlation of MC variance fields in path-traced stereo (Sec. II, III-B).
- We show this correlation is essentially invariant over a $16\times$ SPP range (Sec. III-C), indicating it is a deterministic property of the scene rather than an artefact of finite-sample estimation.
- We give a material-conditioned breakdown showing that the correlation is driven by view-independent integrands, and discuss its implication as a sim-to-real shortcut for stereo networks (Sec. III-D, IV).

II. METHOD

A. Variance estimation

For each rectified stereo scene we render N independent images per camera using a path tracer, driven by N independent random-number-generator seeds. Let $I_L^{(n)}(x, y)$ and $I_R^{(n)}(x, y)$, $n = 1, \dots, N$, denote the resulting per-pixel radiance estimates. The left- and right-view per-pixel MC variance fields are

$$\sigma_V^2(x, y) = \frac{1}{N} \sum_{n=1}^N (I_V^{(n)}(x, y) - \bar{I}_V(x, y))^2, \quad V \in \{L, R\}, \quad (1)$$

with \bar{I}_V the seed mean; for colour images we average (1) over RGB channels. Each σ_V^2 is a deterministic function of the rendering integrand and the scene/camera configuration; the finite-sample estimate (1) converges to that function at rate $O(1/\sqrt{N})$ as N grows [10], [11].

B. Cross-view alignment

Given the ground-truth disparity $d(x, y)$ supplied by the renderer, we warp σ_R^2 into left-view coordinates,

$$\hat{\sigma}_{R \rightarrow L}^2(x, y) = \sigma_R^2(x + d(x, y), y), \quad (2)$$

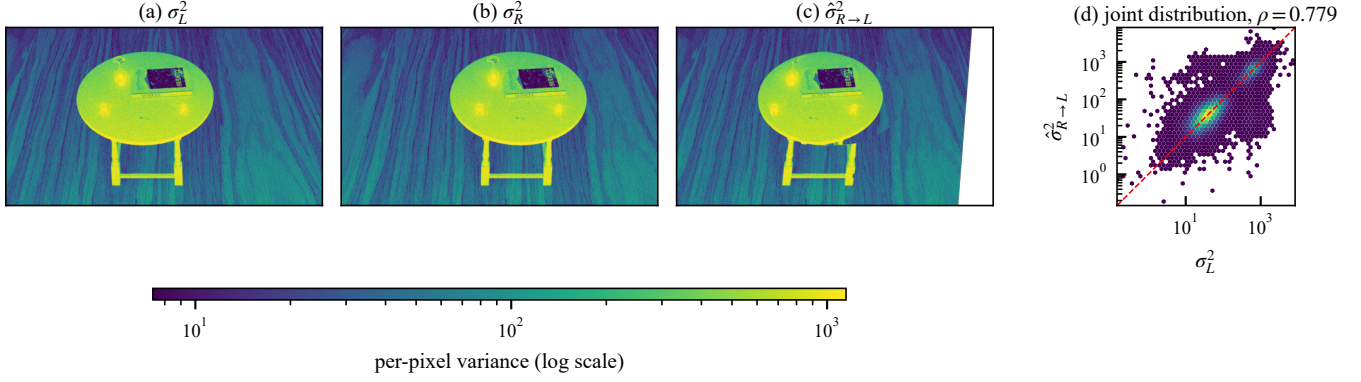


Fig. 1. Cross-view variance correlation in path-traced stereo on a representative scene. (a) and (b): per-pixel Monte Carlo variance σ_L^2 and σ_R^2 estimated from $N=30$ independent seeds at SPP=512. (c): the right-view field warped into left-view coordinates by the ground-truth disparity, $\hat{\sigma}_{R \rightarrow L}^2$. (d): joint distribution of (a) and (c) over the valid-pixel set Ω , with the diagonal $y=x$ line in red. Although the noise streams in the two views are statistically independent, the underlying variance fields are tightly aligned once the geometric transform is applied.

implemented by bilinear interpolation along the x axis. We mask pixels for which $x+d(x,y)$ falls outside the right image, d is non-positive, or d is non-finite, leaving a valid-pixel set Ω . The map (2) is the same alignment used implicitly by every cost-volume-based stereo matcher [12]: any cross-view feature consumed by such a network has been brought into a common coordinate frame via this warp.

C. Correlation measure

We quantify the cross-view variance correlation by the Pearson coefficient over Ω ,

$$\rho = \text{corr}(\sigma_L^2, \hat{\sigma}_{R \rightarrow L}^2) \big|_{\Omega}. \quad (3)$$

Pearson is scale-invariant in both arguments, which is essential here: σ_V^2 scales as $1/\text{SPP}$ [10], so a magnitude-sensitive metric would conflate sample-budget changes with structural similarity. For the material-conditioned analysis of Sec. III-D we restrict Ω to glass pixels or to non-glass pixels using the ground-truth material mask supplied by the renderer.

III. EXPERIMENTS

A. Setup

We render 20 indoor scenes with Mitsuba 3 [7] at 1280×720 resolution and a stereo baseline of 26 mm. Each scene is rendered $N=30$ times per camera with independent random-number-generator seeds, at SPP=512 by default; for the sample-budget experiment of Sec. III-C a representative scene is additionally rendered at SPP $\in \{128, 256, 512, 1024, 2048\}$. Ground-truth disparity and a per-pixel material mask (with a dedicated glass channel) are produced by the renderer. After the validity masking of Sec. II-B, each scene contributes approximately 9.2×10^5 pixels to Ω , so all correlations reported below are significant at $p < 10^{-100}$ under the standard Fisher z test.

TABLE I
CROSS-SCENE CORRELATION AT SPP=512 OVER 20 SCENES, WITH Ω RESTRICTED BY THE GROUND-TRUTH MATERIAL MASK.

Region	mean ρ	std	range
All pixels	0.754	0.016	0.735–0.784
Non-glass	0.779	0.011	0.758–0.797
Glass	0.301	0.102	0.140–0.473

B. Cross-scene correlation

Across the 20 scenes, the warped Pearson correlation of (3) reaches

$$\rho = 0.754 \pm 0.016 \quad (\text{range } 0.735\text{--}0.784),$$

a coefficient of variation of 2.1% that establishes the effect as a structural property of path-traced stereo rather than a per-scene anomaly. Computing Pearson without any warp gives only $\rho_{\text{no-warp}} \approx 0.36$ over the same 20 scenes: alignment via the disparity warp roughly doubles the measured correlation, confirming that the cross-view structure being measured is the same one that any cost-volume-based matcher would attempt to exploit. Material-conditioned numbers are reported in Table I and discussed in Sec. III-D.

C. SPP invariance

We test whether ρ is a residue of the finite-sample estimator (1) by sweeping the sample budget over $\{128, 256, 512, 1024, 2048\}$ on a representative scene. The mean per-pixel variance $\bar{\sigma}_L^2$ scales as $1/\text{SPP}$, dropping by a factor of 16 across the sweep (Table II, Fig. 2); the correlation is essentially unchanged:

$$\rho_{\text{all}} = 0.7783 \pm 0.0012, \quad \rho_{\text{-glass}} = 0.7860 \pm 0.0009.$$

The relative variation of $\rho_{\text{-glass}}$ across the $16\times$ SPP range is 0.12%, an order of magnitude smaller even than the per-scene variation of Sec. III-B. This rules out the hypothesis that the cross-view correlation is a finite-sample artefact that would vanish in the high-SPP limit: it persists into that limit.

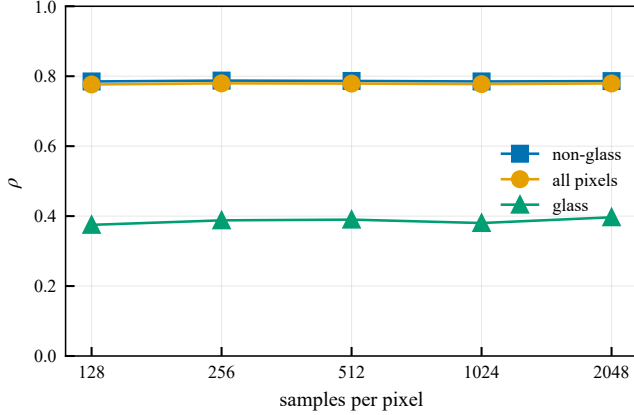


Fig. 2. Cross-view variance correlation ρ as a function of samples per pixel on a representative scene, for all valid pixels, non-glass only, and glass only. The non-glass curve varies by 0.12% across a $16\times$ range of sample budgets, ruling out a finite-sample explanation of the effect.

TABLE II

SPP SWEEP ON A REPRESENTATIVE SCENE. $\bar{\sigma}_L^2$ IS THE MEAN OVER Ω WITHIN THE INDICATED MATERIAL REGION. ACROSS THE $16\times$ SAMPLE-BUDGET RANGE, ρ IS INVARIANT TO WITHIN 0.2%.

SPP	$\bar{\sigma}_L^2 _{\text{glass}}$	$\bar{\sigma}_L^2 _{\neg\text{glass}}$	ρ_{all}	ρ_{glass}	$\rho_{\neg\text{glass}}$
128	17239	2447	0.776	0.375	0.785
256	8627	1224	0.780	0.388	0.788
512	4323	612	0.779	0.390	0.786
1024	2164	306	0.778	0.380	0.785
2048	1072	153	0.779	0.397	0.786

D. Material breakdown

Restricting Ω to glass and non-glass pixels separately (Table I, Fig. 3) reveals the most surprising aspect of the phenomenon:

$$\rho_{\text{glass}} = 0.301 \pm 0.102, \quad \rho_{\neg\text{glass}} = 0.779 \pm 0.011.$$

Non-glass regions are more than twice as cross-view correlated as glass regions, and an order of magnitude more stable across scenes (relative variation 1.4% versus 33.9%). Yet glass pixels dominate the absolute noise level: at SPP=512 we measure $\bar{\sigma}_L^2|_{\text{glass}} \approx 4.3 \times 10^3$ versus $\bar{\sigma}_L^2|_{\neg\text{glass}} \approx 6.1 \times 10^2$, a $7\times$ ratio. The cross-view structure is therefore *inversely* related to the magnitude of the variance: pixels with the most MC noise carry the least cross-view alignment. The physical mechanism behind this inversion is the subject of Sec. IV.

IV. DISCUSSION

Variance integrand decomposition: The radiance integrand at a surface point P viewed from direction ω admits the decomposition

$$f(P; \omega) = f_{\text{ind}}(P) + f_{\text{dep}}(P, \omega), \quad (4)$$

where f_{ind} collects view-independent contributions—direct shadowing from area lights, indirect illumination, caustic projection onto diffuse surfaces, and colour bleeding—and f_{dep} collects view-dependent contributions from Fresnel reflectance, specular and glossy lobes, and refraction [10], [13].

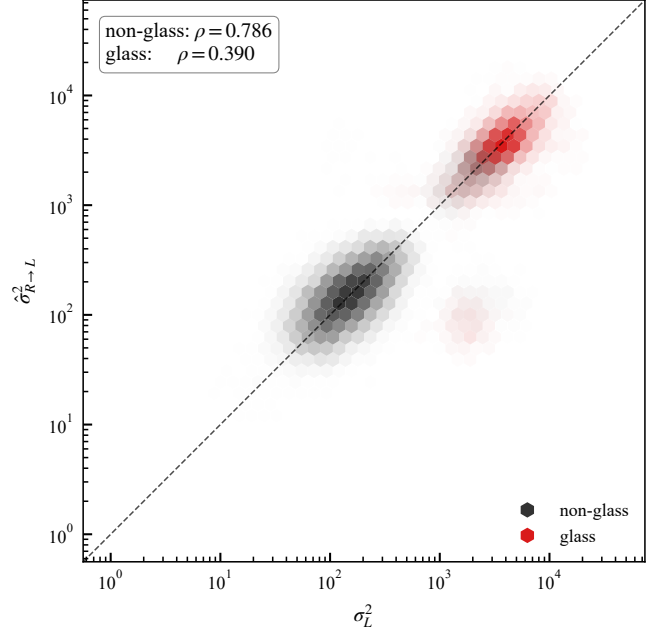


Fig. 3. Joint distribution of $(\sigma_L^2, \sigma_{R \rightarrow L}^2)$ on the same representative scene as Fig. 1, at SPP=512, separated by material. Non-glass pixels (gray) cluster tightly along the diagonal at $\rho \approx 0.78$; glass pixels (red) disperse off-diagonal at $\rho \approx 0.30$, even though they carry the larger absolute variance. The off-diagonal red cloud in the lower-right corresponds to refracted backgrounds whose right-view light path differs structurally from the left, so the warped variance no longer aligns. The cross-view structure is inversely related to variance magnitude—the opposite of what a magnitude-driven intuition would predict.

Under MC integration the per-pixel variance field inherits the same split. After warping the right view to left coordinates by ground-truth disparity, both pixels sample the same P ; the warped variance fields therefore agree to the extent that f_{ind} dominates and disagree to the extent that f_{dep} does.

Why Lambertian outranks glass: This decomposition predicts the observed ordering $\rho_{\text{Lamb}} \gg \rho_{\text{glass}}$. In Lambertian regions the variance is governed almost entirely by f_{ind} —ambient occlusion edges, indirect-bounce structure, and caustic spots projected from glass elsewhere in the scene—none of which depend on the viewing direction. The warped fields then align down to the noise floor of the finite-seed estimator. Specular and refractive materials behave oppositely: their variance is driven by Fresnel-modulated reflection and refraction-path geometry, both of which differ between left and right views even after correct geometric alignment. The intuition that “complex transparent materials carry more cross-view structure” inverts the actual ordering.

A shortcut absent from real sensors: Modern stereo networks form cost volumes from cross-view spatial similarity [1]–[3]. A near-deterministic, scene-wide variance signal that aligns under the correct disparity is precisely the feature these architectures are designed to amplify. The same signal is absent from real binocular captures: two physical sensors have independent thermal and shot-noise streams, so cross-view variance correlation in real data is $\rho \approx 0$. Networks trained on path-traced data may therefore learn a matching cue

that does not survive deployment, contributing a previously unrecognised component of the sim-to-real gap that affects the entire image rather than only complex materials [8], [9]. Crucially, the component is invariant to sample budget (Sec. III-C) and to scene composition (Sec. III-B), which rules out simply rendering at higher SPP as a remedy.

Limitations: Our experiments use a single renderer; the mechanism is generic to MC path tracing, but cross-renderer confirmation is left for future work. The warp assumes rectified stereo with known ground-truth disparity, which hold by construction for synthetic data. We establish the existence and structure of the shortcut, not its quantitative effect on a particular stereo network; isolating that effect and designing mitigations—e.g. variance equalisation—is the natural next step.

V. CONCLUSION

Path-traced synthetic stereo carries a near-deterministic cross-view structure that real binocular sensors lack: although the MC noise streams are independent, the per-pixel variance fields of the two views agree to $\rho \approx 0.78$ in Lambertian regions and persist unchanged over a $16\times$ sample-budget range. The signal is dominated by view-independent integrand contributions, and is therefore most pronounced precisely where the variance itself is smallest. Because this is exactly the cue cost-volume-based stereo networks are designed to extract, identifying it—and ultimately neutralising it—appears to be a prerequisite for closing the synthetic-to-real gap of stereo learning.

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