

EXPLORATION OF THE FUNDAMENTAL "DAMAGE LIMIT" LIGHT FLUX FOR GRAZING INCIDENCE LIQUID METAL MIRRORS

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ABSTRACT

One definition for the "damage limit" of a liquid metal surface used as a final optic for laser fusion power plants is the maximum energy flux that the liquid metal can withstand without any resulting spallation. Some preliminary calculations were performed by Moir to roughly estimate the damage limit by imposing the restriction of a 200°C surface temperature rise. Here, new 1D calculations that account for hydro-motion on the compressible time scales are presented, along with revised estimates of the damage limits for liquid aluminum, sodium, and mercury. Slow compression time scales (~20 ns) produced negative pressures in the liquid film on the order of MPa, and fast ignition time scales (~10 ps) yielded GPa pressures for the laser energy densities set out by Moir. For Na and Al the peak energy densities normal to the beam on the order of 5 to 10 J/cm² were acceptable for fast ignition when 85° grazing incidence is assumed. Some experimental data on the generation and damping of surface waves resulting from surface ablation recoil is also presented, where large waves are seen to damp out after about 50 ms following the laser pulse.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Grazing Incidence Liquid Metal Mirror (GILMM) is a potentially attractive, but speculative, concept for laser fusion power plants where a slowly moving liquid metal film is used as the reflective surface for grazing incidence final mirrors. For standard Grazing Incidence Metal Mirrors (GIMMs), laser light intercepts the mirror surface at up to 85° from normal. Because reflectivity is increased with the angle of incidence, and also the area of surface that comes into contact with the laser is increased, the amount of absorbed energy is reduced. This enables the mirrors to reflect high-energy beams, since the mirrors only "see" the reduced energy flux. However, small flaws and surface imperfection in the GIMMs can locally see the full normal energy flux, and local melting/solidification, and crack propagation, can occur, resulting in the growth of flaws¹. The idea of the GILMMs, originally proposed and analyzed by Moir², is that liquid surface tension will "heal" any small ripples and surface imperfections so that a very smooth surface is

presented to the incident laser beam in each pulse. If made to work to their potential, the projected life span for a GILMM can be more than 30 years.

Despite the potential advantages of the GILMMs, there are certainly many issues concerning their feasibility. Examined here are issues related to maintaining a smooth liquid surface and limiting macroscopic ejected material, and minimizing surface rippling due to any impulse imparted by the laser beam effects. Differential heating (as a function of depth) and surface ablation from the pulsed laser beam heating can effectively launch pressure waves into the liquid film. These pressure waves can reflect from the liquid free surface to create tension in the liquid – possibly leading to its fracture or *spall*. Additionally, close to the edge of the beam, differential pressurization can generate surface waves, due to the absence of any pressurization of the liquid film outside of the beam area. Both of these phenomena can effectively set a limit on the amount of laser energy that can be absorbed at the liquid surface – what we term here as the "damage limit light flux" or just "damage limit."

II. PRELIMINARY DAMAGE LIMIT CALCULATIONS

The pressure pulses launched into the liquid surface of GILMM during heating by the laser beam can reflect into tensile waves large enough to result in spallation – in 1-D, a planar separation of the liquid from the bulk. The damage limit for a GILMM, based on spallation, is defined by Moir² as the laser energy flux, normal to the beam direction, at which spallation in the liquid metal will occur. The spallation phenomenon in liquids, according to homogeneous nucleation theory, is a result of massive nucleation in the liquid due to large tensile stresses applied at high strain rates ($>10^6 \text{ s}^{-1}$)³. Seen in a different light, spall occurs when the negative pressures exceed the liquid's ability to hold itself together.

Moir² performed calculations to model laser energy deposition in the liquid metals for laser fusion applications. Specifically, he chose a laser wavelength of 0.35 micron operating at 85° grazing incidence. He also chose two representative pulse durations indicative of slower compression (20 ns) and fast ignition (10 ps). His preliminary calculations for surface temperature rise were

performed with the following expression for surface temperature based on solution of the 1D heat conduction equation:

$$\Delta T = \frac{2(1-R)q_{beam}}{k} \sqrt{\frac{\alpha t_p}{\pi}} \quad (1)$$

where α , R , k , t_p and, q_{beam} are respectively the thermal diffusivity, reflectivity, thermal conductivity, and the laser pulse length and power density incident on the liquid surface. In order to get an initial estimate to the damage limit, he assumed a maximum allowable surface temperature rise of 200°C for a variety of liquid metals, of which the top candidates were Al, Na, and Hg (summarized in Table 1). The peak pressure that would occur in the liquid was estimated using the Gruneisen coefficient in the following equation $p = \Gamma E/V$, E is the total deposited energy, V is the volume where energy is deposited and Γ is the Gruneisen coefficient. The calculated peak pressures based on the 200°C surface temperature rise were on the order of hundreds of MPa to GPa – which is in the range of the theoretical spall strength of liquids. But Moir notes that, since the Gruneisen equation was an approximation that neglected hydrodynamic motion, it can be viewed as worst case. Therefore, more analysis will be required to determine whether there is the danger of spallation.

III. ABLATOR CODE ANALYSIS

The ABLATOR code⁴, which stands for Ablation By Lagrangian Transient One-Dimensional Response, was initially developed by Anderson to determine material response to X-rays in IFE chambers. It can model the compressible hydrodynamic motion, due to rapid heating,

and subsequent expansion. The code also has an integrated nucleation model, which can be used to predict liquid spall. For the analysis here, a nucleation rate of 10^6 bubbles/s/m³ was chosen as the threshold rate for spallation, where liquid spall is assumed to occur when the maximum nucleation rate reaches this value. Additional details of the analysis and results reported here are available in Quan⁵.

Three liquid metals, Al, Na and Hg, were analyzed to determine whether Moir’s damage limit estimates would result in spallation via homogeneous nucleation. The absorbed energy flux for Moir’s damage limits were used as the deposited energy input to the code. The damage limits results for both slow compression and fast ignition are summarized in Tables 1 and 2. The peak pressures produced for slow compression were approximately two to three orders of magnitude below Moir’s worst case predictions. In the case of fast ignition, the predicted pressures were approximately the same order of magnitude Moir’s estimates, but still slightly lower. The nucleation rates were not high enough for liquid spall in any of the cases analyzed.

The resulting surface temperature rise for the three liquid metals were approximately 200°C as Moir calculates. Slight differences come from the fact the material properties we found for liquid metals were different than what Moir employed, especially for Al. Also, the code takes into account temperature dependent properties, while the equation Moir used to make his predictions did not. Some input material properties used in the ABLATOR code are summarized in Table 3.

The ABLATOR code was then used to produce a new estimate for damage limit for the two representative pulse lengths. Again, using the threshold nucleation rate

Table 1: Comparison of Moir’s calculations with ABLATOR results for slow compression (20 ns) pulses

Liquid Metal	Method	Absorbed Energy Flux [J/cm ²]	Damage Limit [J/cm ²]	Surface Temperature Rise [K]	Peak Pressure [MPa]
Al	Moir	0.064	106	200	2100
	ABLATOR	0.064	-	316	1.34
Na	Moir	0.025	57	200	160
	ABLATOR	0.025	-	204	0.94
Hg	Moir	0.01	6	200	300
	ABLATOR	0.01	-	187	0.75

Table 2: Comparison of Moir’s calculations with ABLATOR results for fast ignition (10 ps) pulses

Liquid Metal	Method	Absorbed Energy Flux [J/cm ²]	Damage Limit [J/cm ²]	Surface Temperature Rise [K]	Peak Pressure [MPa]
Al	Moir	0.00143	2.36	200	2100
	ABLATOR	0.00143	-	307	480
Na	Moir	0.00057	1.31	200	160
	ABLATOR	0.00057	-	193	110
Hg	Moir	0.000224	0.14	200	300
	ABLATOR	0.000224	-	171	200

of 10^6 bubbles/s/m³, the input energy flux could be increased until the threshold value is reached. This analysis was performed for the three candidate liquids and the results are shown in Table 4 for the fast ignitor pulse. Al exhibited the best performance with approximately 10 J/cm² allowed beam energy in the 10 ps pulse - twice that of Na (example pressure, temperature and nucleation rate profiles depicted in Figure 1) and an order of magnitude better than Hg. If one assumes a total fast ignitor beam energy on the order of 100 KJ⁶, then only 11 m² of mirror area is required for an Al if spallation is the limiting factor.

Spallation in the case of fast ignition occurs as a result of a combination of high local temperature and large tensile stresses leading to massive nucleation. The site of the predicted spall is not actually the depth where the maximum negative pressure occurs, but is instead a site where high temperature lowers the spall strength (increases the nucleation) to the point where spall is indicated. The depth at which spall occurs is quite shallow under these conditions. For the sodium case depicted in Fig. 1, the spall point is around 0.012 micron into the film, only a few hundred atomic layers (casting some doubt on the applicability of these continuum calculations).

The results for slow compression are not shown because no value for damage limit was found. The largest peak negative pressures achieved were not enough to cause significant nucleation. Even as the energy of the beam was increased, there came a point where the peak negative pressure began to decrease. This behavior was seen for all three liquid metals. Although we do not rule out the possibility that this is an artifact of the numerical treatment at the liquid surface, it is hypothesized that this behavior occurs because the pressure at the liquid surface remains high due to rapid surface vaporization (the surface is not truly "free"). And so reflected waves are not completely inverted, but partially transmitted into the gas. This surface effect acts in concert with the rapid relief of pressure due to acoustic wave propagation into the bulk, which occurs over the relatively long slow compression pulse duration. Therefore, it is concluded that the liquid metals will not spall homogeneously for slow compression. Since strain rates for slow compression are on the order of 10^5 - 10^6 s⁻¹, the possibility of liquid spall due to heterogeneous fracture is still present. Another possible mechanism for spallation would be the condition under which the heat deposited in the liquid metal would be sufficient to bring the liquid temperature above the critical point. In this case, a tensile wave of any magnitude would result in liquid spallation. The nucleation model in ABLATOR takes into account this mechanism by assuming spall if the temperature and tensile condition for the critical point are satisfied. For the highest energy slow compression cases analyzed, the critical points for all three liquid metals were not reached.

Table 3: LM material properties of interest at the melting point (temperature dependence⁵ not shown)

		Al	Na	Hg
Thermal conductivity	[W/m-K]	94.03	89.7	6.78
Density	[kg/m ³]	2385	927	13691
Specific heat	[J/kg-K]	1080	1386	142
Sound Speed	[m/s]	4750	2531	1480

Table 4: New damage limit estimates for fast ignition time scale

Liquid Metal	Melting Point [K]	Damage Limit [J/cm ²]	Spall Pressure [GPa]	Spall Temp. [K]
Al	933	10.23	1.47	1720
Na	370	4.91	0.31	792
Hg	234	0.84	0.40	1110

IV. BEAM EDGE EFFECTS

Rapid surface ablation from the laser heating will cause a recoil impulse to be delivered to the liquid surface. Near the edge of the beam, the liquid surface will have a region that is heated sitting very close to an unheated region. The mismatch in the surface pressure during the laser pulse can set up surface waves that can potentially destroy the optical quality of the surface for subsequent laser shots. We call this "edge effect" and it will theoretically have its own associated damage limit light flux. This damage limit will be highly design-dependent, as the size of surface disturbance allowed following the shot will be determined by the damping characteristics of the flow. That beam edge effects can indeed be significant is seen in some preliminary experimental results on liquid Hg, shown in Fig. 2. The absorbed energy density in this experiment is 100 times larger than recommended by Moir, based on a 200°C surface temperature rise, and also the wavelength of the laser is three times longer, causing a more shallow heat deposition and more surface heating. In addition, the ratio of the liquid depth to the beam energy fall-off length is much larger than would be seen in a real laser fusion system. But even in this extreme case, the large wave died out to visual inspection in 50 ms.

V. CONCLUSIONS

In comparing Moir's worst case estimates with ABLATOR code results, it can be concluded that Moir's values were indeed very conservative estimates of damage limit. The new damage limits for Al, Na, and Hg for the fast ignitor pulse were found to be 10.2, 4.91, and

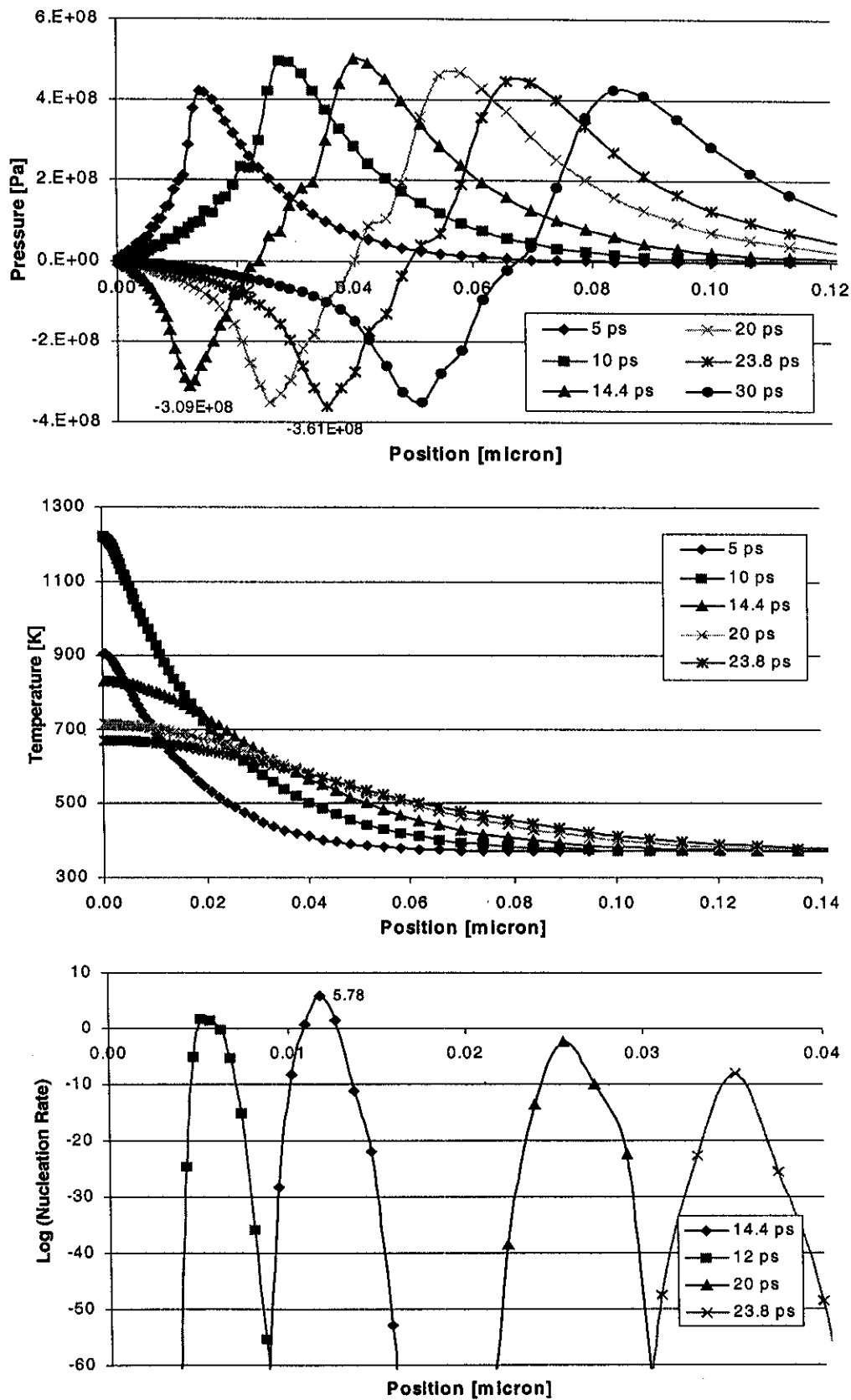


Figure 1: Pressure, temperature and nucleation rate profiles calculated with ABLATOR for a sodium film subjected to a 10 ps laser pulse at 85° from normal incidence and 4.91 J/cm² normal to the beam.

0.84 J/cm², respectively. Although Al has the highest value for damage limit, Na may be a better candidate because it has a significantly lower melting point and oxides tend to be denser than the metal itself, possibly causing them to sink. No specific values for damage limit were found for the slow compression pulse, due to the fact that the time scale was long enough for liquid expansion to relieve the high pressures in the liquid, while surface mass vaporization may have kept surface pressure high. The nucleation rates for this case were not high enough to result in liquid spall, according to the models used in these calculations. Similarly, waves set up from beam edge effects damped rapidly, even for extreme energy density cases.

Additional work on flowing liquid film stability and wave propagation and damping behavior, as well as a serious study of the beam quality of the reflected beam, will be required to fully validate this concept. However, the initial work reported here is encouraging.

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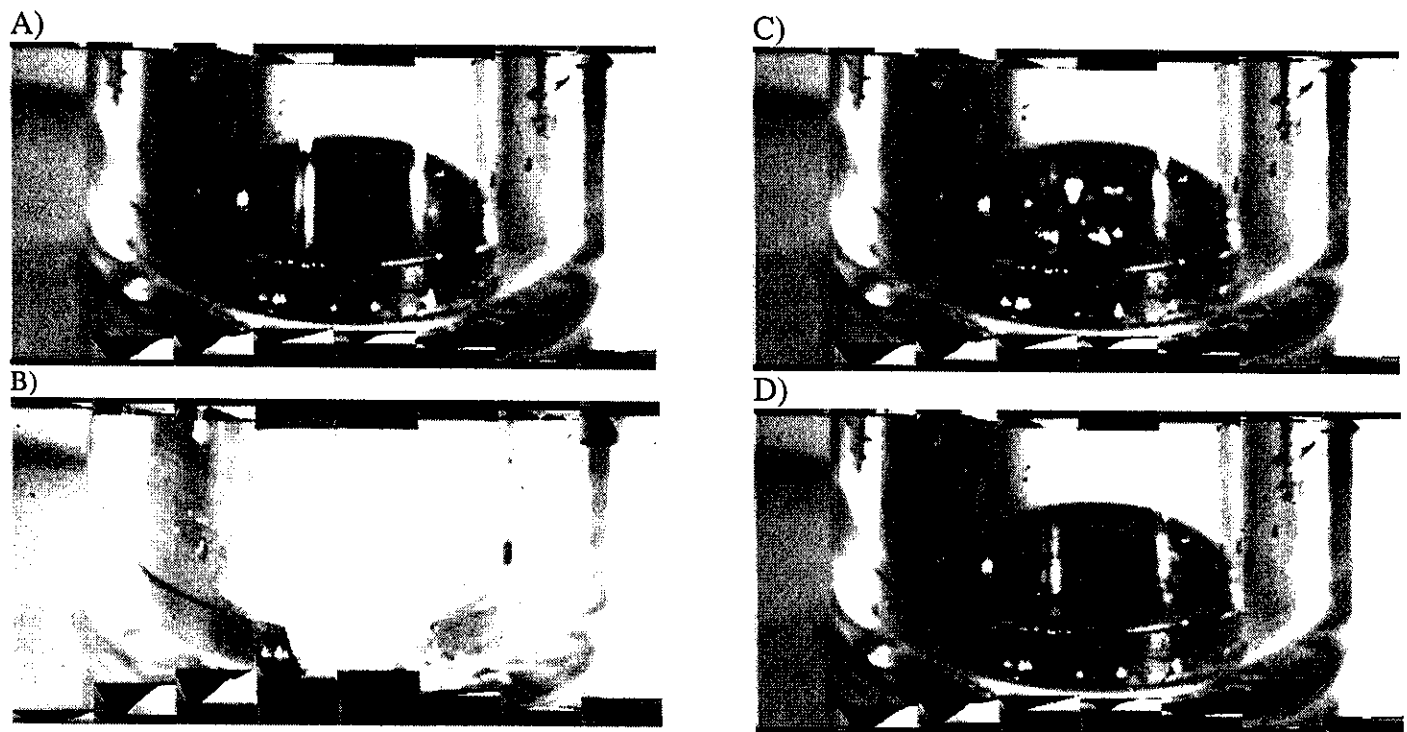


Figure 2: Waves generated by high energy density laser on Hg mirror surface. A) Hg Surface before the laser pulse. Total Hg surface area was 158 mm², thickness of Hg film = 1 mm. B) Hg during laser pulse, strike area was ~9.6 mm², angle of incidence is 14°, laser beam energy is 0.68 J @ 1µm wavelength, energy density normal to beam ~7 J/cm², estimated absorbed energy density ~ 1 J/cm². C) Hg surface 1ms after the laser pulse. Wave amplitude estimate 0.81 mm. D) Hg surface 57 ms after the laser pulse. No motion detectable, but "burn" spot is evident (indicating oxide layer on the surface).