

面向遥感应用的飞秒激光脉冲超长距离传输的研究进展

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摘要 强飞秒激光在空气中传输时,其传输距离会远远超越衍射极限,产生高强度光丝和低密度等离子体,并伴随超连续白光的辐射,这为远距离遥感探测大气污染物提供了一种有效的技术途径。面向天基遥感应用,概述了强飞秒激光长距离传输的研究进展,包括光丝传输的基本研究方法、产生长距离光丝的方法、调控光丝特性的手段以及飞秒激光光丝超长距离的传输,并对光丝在大气遥感应用中的优越特性和需要解决的基础科学问题进行了总结。

关键词 非线性光学; 超快激光; 光丝; 超连续谱; 遥感探测

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1 引言

激光技术的飞速发展,为光与物质相互作用提供了新的契机。强飞秒激光在空气中传输,会产生衍射、色散、克尔自聚焦、多光子电离等线性效应和非线性效应。其中,克尔自聚焦会使激光脉冲的强度不断增强,导致空气分子电离,从而产生一定浓度的等离子体,这些等离子体对激光脉冲起着散焦的作用。当克尔自聚焦效应和等离子体散焦效应达到动态平衡时,就会形成高强度的“光丝”。在光丝传输的过程中,会产生如锥角辐射、超连续波谱、高次谐波以及太赫兹辐射等丰富的非线性光学现象^[1-4]。这不仅对于基础研究有着重要的意义,而且在激光诱导闪电^[5]、远程遥感和大气污染物监测^[6-8]、宽谱太赫兹 (THz) 辐射源^[9-10]、激光诱导产生水凝物^[11-12]等众多领域中有着巨大的应用潜力。要实现这些应用,飞秒光丝长距离传输仍然是一个研究热点,许多深层次的物理问题还需要不断探索。

1995年, Braun等^[13]首次在实验中观察到飞秒激光成丝的现象。能量为 50 mJ、脉宽为 200 fs、中心波长为 775 nm 的飞秒脉冲在空气中传输,最终形成了长度为 20 m、直径为 80 μm 的等离子体通道,其强度高达 $7 \times 10^{13} \text{ W/cm}^2$, 此类型的传播被称为光丝传播或自引导传播。这种新颖的物理现象迅速吸引了众多课题组的研究兴趣,1996年,法国应用光学实验室观察到长度约为 50 m 的激光成丝现象,并伴有超连续白光的产生^[14]。1999年,加拿大 La Fontaine等^[15]得到了水平

方向传输的光丝,长度提高到几百米的量级。2004年, Méchain等^[16]获得了沿水平方向传输 2 km 的光丝。同时,法国与德国联合成立的 Teramobile 小组利用在大气中垂直传输的高功率太瓦 (10^{12} W) 激光,用天文望远镜记录背向散射光,结果在海拔 9 km 处观察到光丝^[17]。

国内最早开展飞秒激光成丝研究的是 2002 年中国科学院物理研究所的科研小组,他们采用在空气中传输的 XL-II 飞秒激光脉冲,获得了长的细丝^[18]。随后,他们对光丝产生的基本物理机制、基本物理现象等方面开展了大量的研究^[19-25]。Xi等^[21]研究了双丝之间的相互作用,发现具有不同相位差和交叉角的两光丝在相互作用过程中出现吸引、融合、排斥和螺旋传播等有趣的现象。Hao等^[24-25]研究了多丝的空间演化,并在实验中观察到细丝的分裂、融合和扩散等复杂的作用过程,并通过控制光束不同区域的波前曲率,实现了对光束背景能量的有效利用。南开大学刘伟伟等^[26]也在超快激光成丝现象及其应用方面开展了大量系统的研究工作。提出了背景能量池理论,采用孔径为 220 μm 的小孔截断光丝周围的背景能量,结果显示光丝会迅速消失,进而验证了光丝的远程传输正是背景能量池与光丝之间的动态能量交换的结果。通过改变激光束的椭圆率或偏振态可实现多丝空间的有序分布^[27],并通过减小光束直径及改变聚焦透镜,可有效地抑制多丝的产生,避免多丝之间的能量竞争,从而提高光丝的鲁棒性,延长光丝的长度^[28-29]。研究者提出了一系列光丝特性表征和基本参数测量的实验技术^[26,30-34],并在

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光纤产生 THz 辐射这一领域中取得了很多突出的成果,如 THz 成像及 THz 波在光纤内的强空间束缚效应等^[35-36]。另外,飞秒激光在真实大气环境中传输时会受到温度、湿度、气压、湍流以及云、雾和降水等复杂多变的因素的影响,同时,利用飞秒激光成丝也可对天气进行人工干预。国防科技大学的研究小组开展了飞秒激光脉冲在不同散射介质中传输的研究,提出了云雾环境中飞秒激光传输成丝热沉积特征参量的数值计算方法,分析了大气湍流和粒子散射等不同的大气扰动类型对光纤传输的动态影响过程^[37-46]。中国科学院上海光学精密机械研究所的课题组围绕飞秒激光成丝诱导光氧化副产物、气溶胶、冰晶粒子、水凝结及降雪等开展了大量的研究,揭示了光纤热沉积效应对气流扰动和过冷水冻结的重要影响机制^[12,42,47-57]。在最新的研究中,该小组在实验中观察到气流涡旋中过冷水滴的冻结和增长特征,证实了光纤诱导气流扰动对微物理过程的重要作用^[51]。研究者测量了飞秒激光穿过饱和云室前后脉冲能量的衰减量,结果显示,光纤的热沉积能量越多,产生的等离子体密度也越高,热沉积效应增加了云凝结核,增强了气流运动,进而加速了不同温度潮湿气体的混合以及冰晶液滴的碰撞,促进了降雪的产生^[57-58]。

强飞秒激光在大气中传输所经历的复杂的物理过程是这一领域的研究热点。由于飞秒激光成丝具有广阔的应用前景^[8,59-61],因此光纤的长距离传输问题以及在此过程中产生的非线性特性是值得探索的关键的基础科学问题。本文面向遥感应应用,概述了强飞秒激光长距离传输的研究进展。首先,介绍了强飞秒激光在空气中成丝传输的基本研究方法;其次,阐述了产生长距离光纤的方法和对光纤特性的调控手段;然后,从实验和理论两方面简要概述了飞秒激光光纤超长距离传输的研究进展;最后,对光纤长距离传输产生的超连续白光在远程遥感探测中所具有的优越特性以及需要解决的基础科学问题进行了总结。

2 基本研究方法

2.1 实验研究方法

在实验中,强飞秒激光在空气中的成丝传输研究主要是测量激光系统参数、空气分子的电离特性以及成丝动力学过程等。由于光纤内光的强度高达 $10^{13} \sim 10^{14} \text{ W/cm}^2$,无法对光纤特性进行直接测量,通常采用的方法是根据细丝所表现出来的各种现象对其进行间接测量。这里简要介绍几种测量等离子体密度和激光光强两个重要物理量的方法。

2.1.1 等离子体密度的测量

在光纤产生的过程中,空气中的原子、分子经过多光子电离或隧穿电离会形成大量的等离子体。因此,获得等离子体密度的相关信息对于激光成丝过程的研究是非常重要的。测量等离子体密度的方法有很多,如

声学测量、电阻测量、纵向干涉和阴影成像等,下面简要介绍几种。

电导率法^[62-64]主要是基于等离子体的导电性,等离子体细丝内的电子密度越大,导电性就越好。若在等离子体细丝周围施加一个直流电压,光纤中的自由电子在外加电场的作用下会形成电流,这可以近似认为等离子体细丝是具有一定电导率的电阻。在室温下,光纤中的电子碰撞率与其中的电子密度呈正相关,因此,用电导率法可以间接获取等离子体密度的信息。激光脉冲电离空气时产生冲击波,该冲击波会衰变成等离子体声波,声学测量法^[65-66]通过测量声波来间接表征细丝内的激光强度,进而得到细丝内的电子密度分布。在等离子体丝附近放置一个灵敏度高、噪声低的麦克风,记录声波经过时的声音信号,利用不同位置处声音信号的变化,就可得到等离子体丝的直径和长度、等离子体密度及其在传播方向上的演化等信息。然而,这种方法也只能定性分析等离子体密度分布。阴影成像法、干涉法及纵向衍射法都采用的是泵浦-探测技术。阴影成像法^[67]是通过调节探测光束的延迟时间来采集不同时刻等离子体细丝的阴影图,进而观察等离子体细丝的时间演化。干涉法^[68]和纵向衍射法^[33,69]都是利用穿过电离区域的低能量探测光,获取等离子体产生引起的相位变化,进一步计算出等离子体密度的准确值^[70-71]。另外,利用原子和离子特征谱线的宽度也可简单获得电子密度的值^[34,72],利用外差法测量等离子体通道辐射的亚太赫兹波段的信号可以获得等离子体密度的信息^[73]。

2.1.2 激光强度的测量

一般情况下,在实验上获取激光强度是比较困难的,将相纸或铝箔等感光材料置于激光脉冲的传播方向上,在单个脉冲的作用下,这些感光材料就会产生烧蚀图样,利用显微镜便可观察到光束尺寸和光斑形状等信息,然后间接地推断出激光的强弱,但无法得到激光的强度具体数值^[74-75]。目前,普遍采用的方法是通过测量等离子体光谱来获得激光光强。在等离子体成丝过程中,处于高激发态的粒子向低能态跃迁时,会辐射出荧光,其光谱线主要集中在 300~460 nm 区间,其中两条谱线(如氮分子 337 nm 谱线和氮分子离子的 391 nm 谱线)的强度随着激光强度的增加出现明显的差异,因此可以通过氮荧光谱线之间的比值对激光强度进行定标^[76-78]。此方法可获得等离子体细丝内光强、电子温度以及等离子体密度分布等重要信息,利用该方法对光谱特性进行研究还有助于了解成丝的过程。

总之,这些实验方法都比较好地从不同侧面研究了光纤和等离子体通道的特征,在研究中针对具体物理问题采取不同的实验手段,可以更为完备地表征光纤和等离子体通道的演化。

2.2 理论研究方法

理论研究方法有解析法和数值模拟法。解析研究飞秒激光在空气中传输的方法比较有限。一种方法是通过将激光光束直径的演化类比成势阱中运动的粒子来进行分析。另一种方法是通过引入简化的非线性薛定谔方程(NLSE)来推导光场的哈密顿量,利用哈密顿量来分析激光光场的演化。但理论解析方法有很大的局限性,通常都采用了很多近似以处理非线性效应,得到的结果不够准确,只能在某些情况下定性地研究物理问题。由于强飞秒激光在大气中传输会产生多种线性效应和非线性效应,其时空维数多、光学过程复杂,再加上复杂大气环境条件,如大气湍流会给空气折射率带来随机扰动,大气组分和高度廓线、气溶胶组分、粒度分布等都会影响激光的传输特性,因此,数值模拟方法仍然是该理论研究唯一的解决途径。其传输方程大致分为两类:傍轴传输方程和非傍轴传输方程(UPPE)。

2.2.1 傍轴传输方程和数值方法

强飞秒激光在大气中传输会产生多种线性效应和非线性效应,一般可采用傍轴包络模型的非线性薛定谔方程来描述。(3D+1)维的NLSE给出了激光光场的全时空分布,在慢变包络近似下可写为

$$\frac{\partial}{\partial z} \epsilon(x, y, z, t) = iD_s \nabla_{\perp}^2 \epsilon(x, y, z, t) + iD_t \epsilon(x, y, z, t) + f[\epsilon(x, y, z, t)], \quad (1)$$

式中: $\epsilon(x, y, z, t)$ 代表激光脉冲的电场包络;算符 D_s 代表衍射项; D_t 代表群速度色散项; $f[\epsilon(x, y, z, t)]$ 代表非线性项(包含非线性折射、电子密度和多光子电离)。式(1)是一个典型的二阶非线性偏微分方程,解偏微分方程的数值模拟方法有很多,如时域有限差分法、有限元法、伪频谱法等。该方程较为复杂,涉及到了时间域和空间域两个部分,如果利用时域有限差分法进行计算,网格剖分数量巨大,长距离激光传输问题的计算效率会非常低。

人们一般采用Crank-Nicolson差分法和傅里叶变换法分别对式(1)的空间域和时间域进行处理。要求径向空间的分辨率在10 μm以内,时间的分辨率为1~3 fs。但利用此数值方法求解(3D+1)维的NLSE,进而模拟宽口径、长脉宽的飞秒激光脉冲传输,计算量也非常大。而采用柱坐标的形式可以将NLSE从(3D+1)维简化为(2D+1)维^[79]。尽管这种模拟只局限于激光光强的分布是轴对称的情形,但在飞秒激光长距离传输的计算中,大大地缩短了时间。后来,Xi等^[80]在研究强飞秒激光脉冲传输时,又提出了在径向空间采用非均匀的网格剖分的技术,这样径向格点数就会大幅减小,从而减少计算耗时。另外,在径向格点处理中,还有一种有效的方法就是在激光脉冲的高频部分插值去零,这将使光束压缩一半,在保证

光束信息不变(即保持光束包络形状不变)的前提下,分辨率会提高2倍。这种方法在处理光丝超长距离(几百千米)传输时是非常重要的^[81],但利用计算机单核计算千米量级的传输数据仍然需要数周的时间。随着计算机硬件的发展,计算机处理器的核心数目越来越多,为多核并行技术提供了硬件支持。目前采用较多且程序语言也较为简单的就是OpenMP多核并行技术^[82-83],计算速度提高了几倍甚至几十倍^[84],这将使理论研究强飞秒激光在空气中的超长距离传输成为了可能。另外,可移植操作系统接口(POSIX)多线程并行^[85]以及图形处理器(GPU)加速^[86]也是提高计算效率的有效方法。

2.2.2 非傍轴传输方程和数值方法

非傍轴传输方程是从麦克斯韦方程出发,没有作慢变包络近似,方程包含了非傍轴项和场的矢量效应,是研究激光脉冲传输的更一般的方程,形式为

$$\frac{\partial}{\partial z} \tilde{E}(k_{\perp}, \omega, z) = iK_z(\omega, k_{\perp}) \tilde{E}(k_{\perp}, \omega, z) + i \frac{\omega^2}{2K_z(\omega, k_{\perp})c^2} \tilde{P}_{nl}(k_{\perp}, \omega, z), \quad (2)$$

式中: $K_z(\omega, k_{\perp}) = \sqrt{k^2(\omega) - k_{\perp}^2}$,其中 k 为波数; k_{\perp} 为横向波数; ω 为光场频率; z 为传输距离。式(2)对激光电场 $E(x, y, t, z)$ 和非线性电极化强度 $P_{nl}(x, y, t, z)$ 的空间变量 x, y 和时间变量 t 同时进行傅里叶变换,得到时空频域里的形式 $\tilde{E}(k_{\perp}, \omega, z)$ 和 $\tilde{P}_{nl}(k_{\perp}, \omega, z)$ 。在时空频域里直接对式(2)进行数值求解,此时式(2)变为仅关于 z 的一阶常微分方程,求解该常微分方程,对其解 $\tilde{E}(k_{\perp}, \omega, z)$ 作傅里叶逆变换,可得时空频域里的解 $E(x, y, t, z)$ 。关于强飞秒激光脉冲在非线性介质中传输的基本理论和数值计算方法的详细介绍还可以参考文献^[87-88]。

3 长距离光丝的产生及调控

面向遥感应用的强飞秒激光传输,在空气中所产生的等离子体通道的长度远超过瑞利长度,并且能实现稳定的远程传输。2004年,Rodriguez等^[17]研究发现,飞秒激光在空气中自由传输的距离已经从几十米扩展到了几千米,甚至几十千米,但所产生的等离子体密度却很低(约 $10^{13}/\text{cm}^3$)。因此,发展产生长距离光丝的方法并对光丝的特性进行调控是非常重要的。

3.1 系统参数及外部条件对光丝的调控

对光丝特性(如成丝起点位置、光丝的长度、光丝的稳定性和等离子体密度的大小等)的调制,可以通过调节系统参数(如激光功率、光束直径、光束曲率以及脉冲宽度等)来实现,这是最一般且简便的方法,但在增加光丝长度方面有局限性。例如通过单一地增加输入功率可以很好地增加光丝的长度,然而当入射功率超过临界功率一个量级时,很快就会在空间中形成

许多小尺度的光丝,即产生多光丝,它在时间和空间上都是很不稳定的^[89]。通过引入一些外部条件就可以较好地优化光丝的特性。实验上采用 π 相位板、空间光调制器等相位整形器件,通过改变光束相位进行分束以减小“热点”周围的能量,这样单个热点不能成丝,可达到延长光丝的目的。Hao等^[25]在实验中使激光

束通过一个直径可变的孔径光阑,通过消除光丝外围能量扰动的影响,抑制了多丝的数目和模式,这种方法不仅可以有效地延长光丝的长度,还可以提高光丝的空间稳定性。Luo等^[28-29]也通过减小光束直径和采用锥透镜聚焦(图1)来有效地抑制多丝的产生以延长光丝。

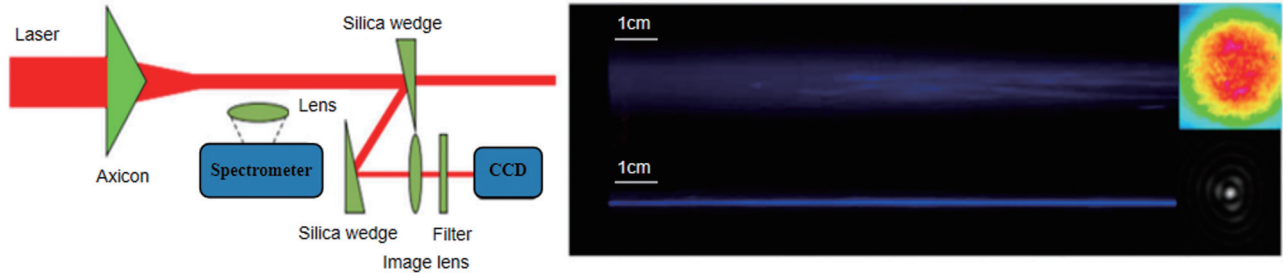


图1 利用锥透镜聚焦抑制多丝的产生^[29]

Fig. 1 Suppressing formation of multiple filaments by focusing with conical lens^[29]

产生长距离光丝的另一有效的方法就是引入各种透镜聚焦激光束,本质上是通过对空间相位的调制来改变光丝的特性。最简单的是采用凸透镜聚焦,若透镜的焦距缩短,光丝的钳制强度会增大^[90],光丝的直径和等离子体密度依赖于聚焦条件。Chin小组利用两组不同焦距($f=10\text{ cm}$ 和 $f=380\text{ cm}$)的透镜得到的等离子体密度,前者比后者高出约3个量级^[33]。尽管紧聚焦透镜会增大光丝的中心强度,进而有效地增强遥感探测信号强度,但光丝的长度却会由于光束聚焦很快而大大地缩短,而且光丝的起点位置也会接近光源,从而限制了远距离成丝在大气遥感中的应用,因此在研究光丝长距离传输时也常采用长焦距透镜^[91-92]。另外,利用透镜组合也是延长光丝长度、改善光丝特性的一种有效方法。Liu等^[93]在实验中采用望远镜系统来聚焦激光束,如图2(a)所示,通过调节正透镜和负透镜的距离来控制光丝的位置和长度,在此实验装置中还加入了收集光丝背向荧光信号的雷达装置,最终得到光丝的荧光信号强度,如图2(b)所示。可以看出,由于光丝钳制强度效应,不同光丝长度下的荧光信号强度几乎不变。

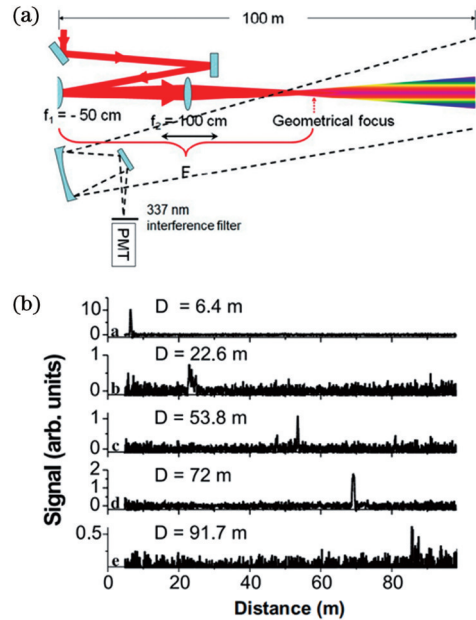


图2 利用望远镜系统调制光丝的特性^[93]。(a)实验装置;(b)不同位置处的荧光信号

Fig. 2 Controlling characteristics of filaments by telescope system^[93]. (a) Experimental setup; (b) fluorescence signals at different positions

在激光脉冲中引入时间啁啾也是改变光丝强度和长度的一种重要方法。由于激光脉冲在大气中传输时,大气色散会给激光脉冲带来很大的啁啾,从而降低激光的强度,因此在激光脉冲进入大气之前通过预先加入一个负啁啾量来弥补介质中的群速度色散,从而控制光丝的特性。实验上是通过改变光栅对之间的距离来控制激光脉冲的啁啾特性^[94-96]。初始负啁啾的引入将会使激光脉冲压缩,提高激光脉冲的峰值功率,进而增加光丝的强度,而且改变初始啁啾还可以有效地调控光丝的起点位置,进而实现远距离成丝。Chang等^[97]还在实验中使用光谱仪测量了光丝区域的超连续辐射,测量结果如图3所示。另外,调控飞秒激光成丝

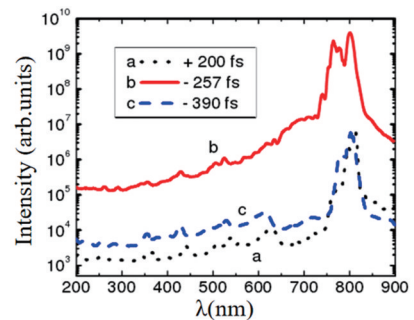


图3 不同初始啁啾下超连续辐射的光谱^[97]

Fig. 3 Spectra of supercontinuum radiation under different initial chirps^[97]

的特性还有许多方法,如改变激光脉冲的发散角^[98]、光束像散、中心波长以及大气压强等^[99-101]。

在理论研究中,Roskey等^[102]利用锥透镜聚焦激光束,预言了伴随着激光束有长的等离子体丝的产生。Milián等^[103]通过数值模拟,发现初始脉冲啁啾对能量沉积和等离子体分布都有重要的影响。Feng等^[104]利用锥透镜和凹透镜组合聚焦一束飞秒环形高斯光,并引入能量沉积优化光学参数,进一步调控等离子体丝的产生。结果显示,在最大能量沉积附近调节透镜参

数可获得长距离光丝,如图 4(a)所示。研究者利用能量沉积解释了其中的成丝机制。在相同初始激光强度条件下调控光束束腰宽度和环形光束半径,发现前者得到的等离子体通道的长度和稳定性更具优势,如图 4(b)所示。另外,环形高斯光束在空气中产生的超连续辐射也具有非常优越的特性^[105]。与相同初始条件下高斯光丝的波谱展宽相比,环形高斯光丝在第一个聚焦周期内产生的光滑超连续谱覆盖了整个可见光的频率范围,如图 5 所示。研究者分析了其中的展宽

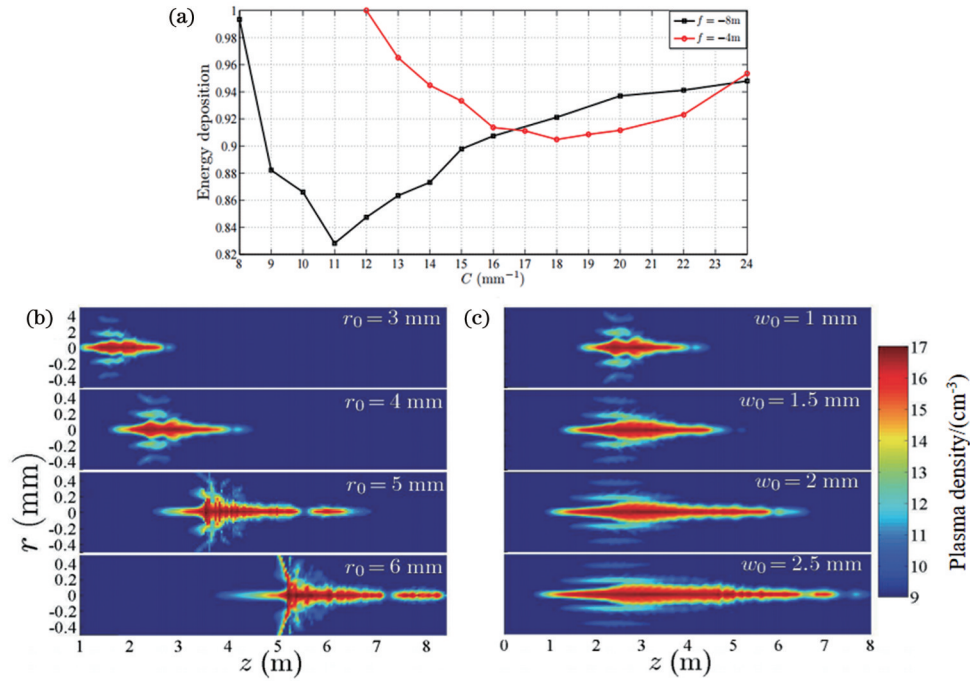


图 4 激光系统参数对光丝的调制效应^[104]。(a)几何聚焦参数对能量沉积的调制;(b)环形光束半径和(c)束腰宽度对光丝的调制
Fig. 4 Modulation effects of laser system parameters on optical filament^[104]. (a) Modulation of energy deposition by geometric focusing parameters; modulation of optical filament by (b) annular beam radius and (c) beam waist width

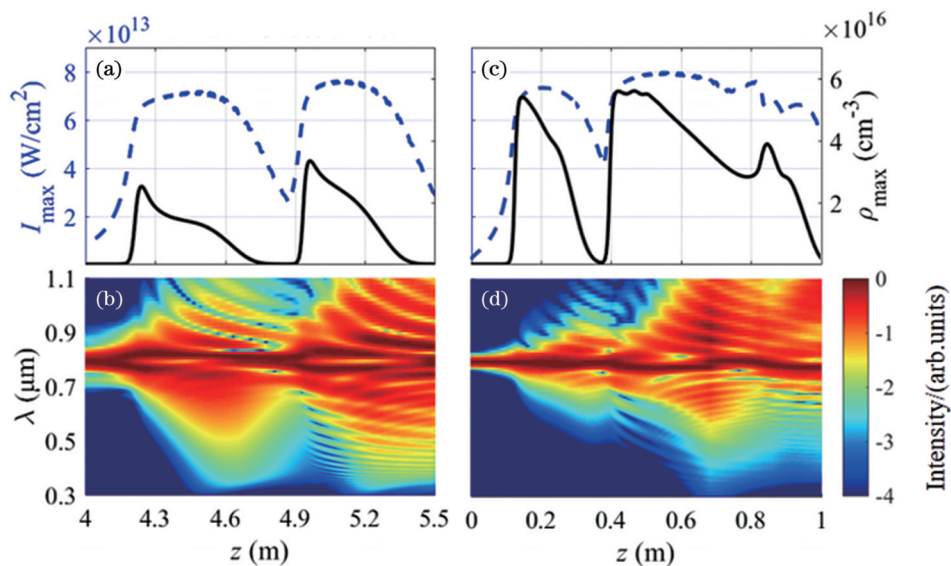


图 5 环形高斯光束和高斯光束产生的光丝(第一行)和超连续谱(第二行)^[105]。(a)(b)环形高斯光束;(c)(d)高斯光束
Fig. 5 Optical filaments (first row) and supercontinuum spectra (second row) generated by ring Gaussian beam and Gaussian beam^[105]. (a)(b) ring Gaussian beam; (c)(d) Gaussian beam

机制,即在光丝的起始位置处,电离诱导的频率转移起着主导作用,而在波谱向短波方向展宽到最宽时,光强诱导的频率转移起着主导作用。讨论了凸透镜和锥透镜对超连续辐射的调控^[106]。发现透镜聚焦能力减弱

导致成丝起点延后,光丝变长且不稳定,但有利于波谱在短波方向上的展宽。锥透镜聚焦所产生的超连续波谱会更加光滑,在传播方向上的作用区域也更大,如图 6 所示。

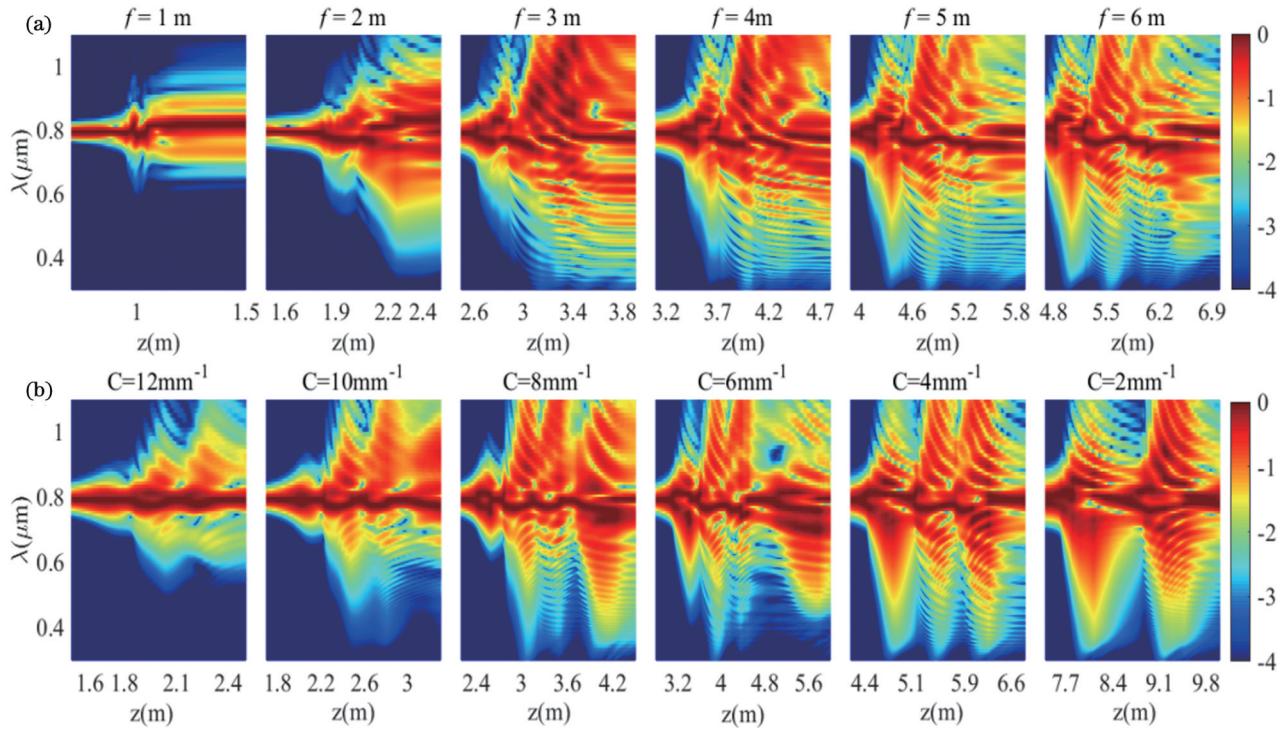


图 6 环形高斯光束的强度波谱图^[106]。(a)在不同凸透镜焦距下的波谱演化;(b)在不同空间啁啾系数下的波谱演化

Fig. 6 Intensity spectra of annular Gaussian beam^[106]. (a) Spectrum evolutions under different focal lengths of convex lenses; (b) spectrum evolutions under different spatial chirp coefficients

3.2 调控初始光束波前形状

我们知道,一个稳定的单光丝可以用一个凸透镜聚焦来产生,但光丝的长度仅会达到几十个厘米或米的量级^[33,107]。改变输入脉冲的形状是一种延长光丝长度的有效方法。目前实验上常用 π 相位板^[108]、空间光

调制器^[109-110]和轴锥透镜^[29,64,111]等光学元器件来改变波前相位,将高斯光束变为贝塞尔光束、涡旋光束、同心环光束以及艾里光束等。Polynkin等^[64,111]利用锥透镜聚焦高斯型激光束产生非衍射的贝塞尔光束,经过空间啁啾补偿,可将光丝的长度延长 2 倍,如图 7 所示。

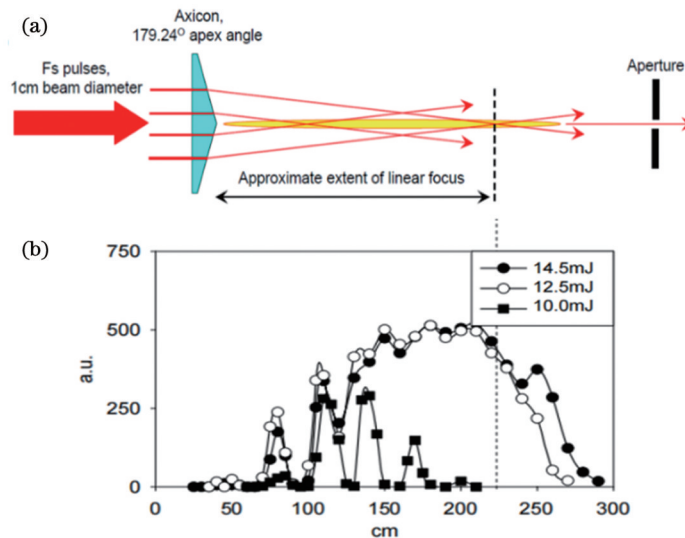


图 7 利用非衍射的贝塞尔光束产生光丝。(a)飞秒激光脉冲包络的整形示意图^[111];(b)三个不同能量脉冲的等离子体密度图^[64]

Fig. 7 Generating optical filaments using non-diffracted Bessel beam. (a) Schematic of shaping femtosecond laser pulse envelope^[111]; (b) plasma density diagram of three pulses with different energy values^[64]

利用空间光调制器产生同心环光束也可以延长光丝的长度^[110]。另外,北京工业大学宋海英等^[112]在实验中首先使飞秒激光经过一个石英光阑,然后利用透镜聚焦形成光丝,并在侧面透镜的辅助下得到光丝,如图 8(a)所示。图 8(b)给出了石英光阑调制前后光斑的分布,可以看出此方法也是改变光束的波前相位,使高斯光

束变为同心环光束,从而延长光丝的长度,如图 8(c)所示。在改变光束横向模的实验技术中,光束的能量均重新分配,如将高斯光束变为贝塞尔光束,是环状区域线性地向中心区域补充能量,而将高斯光束变为同心环光束,是外环影响内环成丝的能量池,使得光丝左右两侧整体延长。

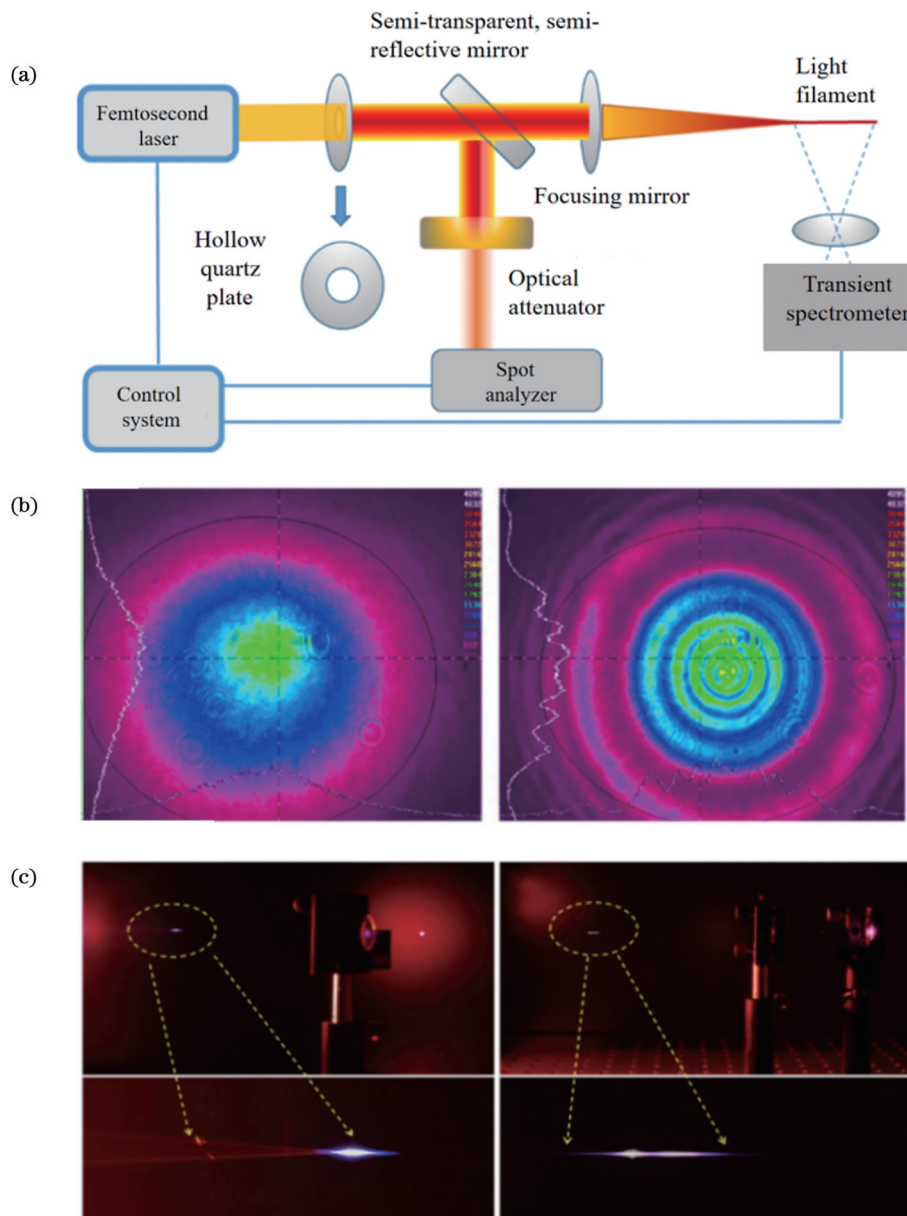


图 8 利用飞秒激光产生光丝^[112]。(a)实验装置;(b)中空石英光阑调制前后的光斑分布;(c)利用石英光阑延长光丝长度
Fig. 8 Generating filaments using femtosecond laser^[112]. (a) Experimental setup; (b) spot distributions before and after modulation by hollow quartz diaphragm; (c) extending length of filament using quartz diaphragm

最近几年,由于空心光束在等离子体、原子光学以及现代光学等^[113-116]领域中的潜在应用价值,这些非传统光束如中空高斯光^[117]、艾里光^[118]等在非线性介质中的传播已引起人们的关注。Feng等^[119]从理论上研究了飞秒环形高斯光束在空气中的传输,发现形成了长距离稳定的单光丝,如图 9(a)、(b)所示。通过与传统的高斯光束相比,从传输动力学特性角度分析了环形

高斯光成丝的物理机制。结果显示,当强飞秒环形光束在空气中传输时,在形成光丝之前,环形高斯光脉冲的特殊横向空间分布导致了脉冲在时间上的劈裂,从而使脉冲的能量重新分布,这是光丝长度延长的主要原因,如图 9(c)、(d)所示。另外,由于涡旋光束具有携带轨道角动量(OAM)的优越特性,研究者也开展了飞秒涡旋激光成丝控制传输的研究,发现通过调控激

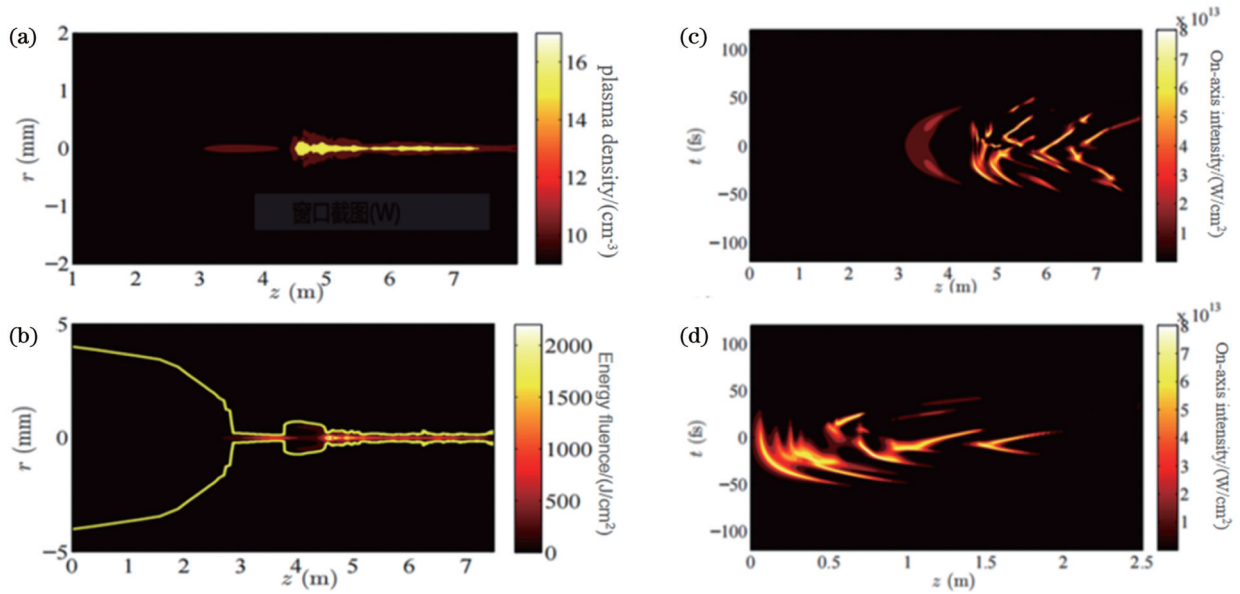


图9 利用飞秒环形高斯光束在空气中产生光丝^[119]。(a)空间等离子体密度分布随传播距离的演化;(b)光束的能量通量分布的演化;(c)环形高斯光和(d)高斯光轴上强度的时间分布随传播距离的变化

Fig. 9 Generating filaments using femtosecond ring Gaussian beam in air^[119]. (a) Spatial plasma density versus propagation distance; (b) evolution of energy fluence distribution of beam; temporal distribution of on-axis intensity as a function of propagation distance for (c) ring Gaussian beam and (d) Gaussian beam

光脉冲延迟和能量以及双光束的拓扑荷数,可获得任意数目的多丝,当改变激光之间的相位差时,可以自由控制光丝的旋转角度。

3.3 能量补偿法

实际上非衍射贝塞尔光束和环形高斯光束都具有环形结构的特点。随着激光脉冲的传输,储存在环内的能量都可以补充到光丝中心,从而延长光丝的长度。2013年,中国科学院安徽光学精密机械研究所的

Wang等^[120]理论研究了同轴双光束的传输特性,并指出在光束传输的过程中,半径大的光束起到能量池的作用,可以很好地为半径小的光束提供能量。同年,Mills等^[121]使一束低强度环形高斯缀饰光束和一束高强度高斯光束同时在空气中传输,光丝的长度延长了一个量级以上,如图10所示。该课题组的Scheller等^[122]还从实验和理论上证实了低强度的环形光在传播过程中起着能量库的作用,不断为主激光光丝补充

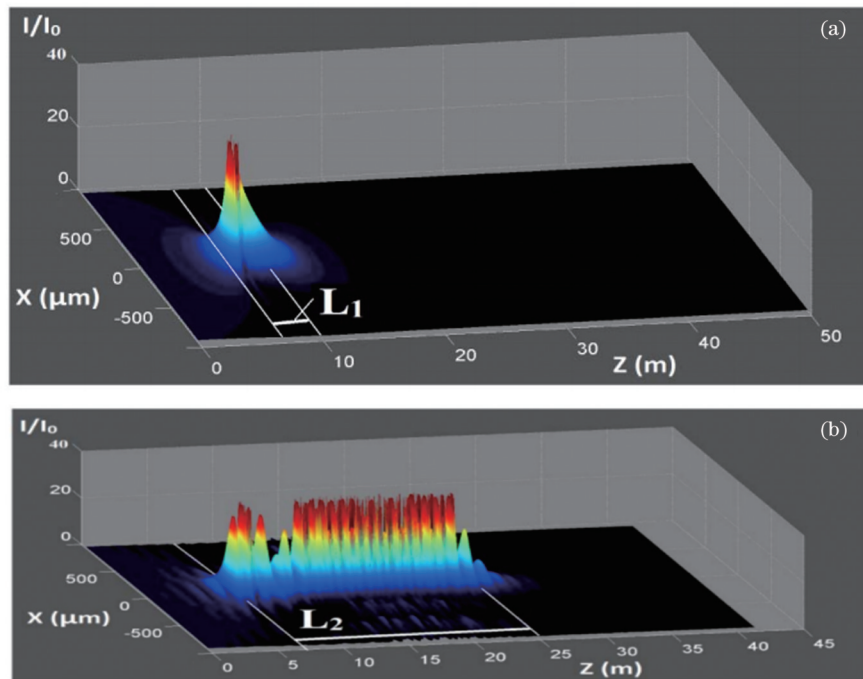


图10 轴上激光强度截面图^[121]。(a)单高斯光丝;(b)缀饰光丝

Fig. 10 Cross section diagrams of laser intensity on axis^[121]. (a) Single Gaussian filament; (b) dressed filament

能量,从而大大延长光丝的长度。如图 11 所示,波长为 800 nm、脉宽为 40 fs、输入能量为 0.87 mJ 激光脉冲在空气中产生了 220 cm 长的光丝,当光丝快要结束

时,另一束低强度、能量为 3.5 mJ 的环形光束不断地为光丝补充能量,从而使光丝的长度增加了 11 倍。因此,能量补偿法是产生长距离光丝的有效方法。

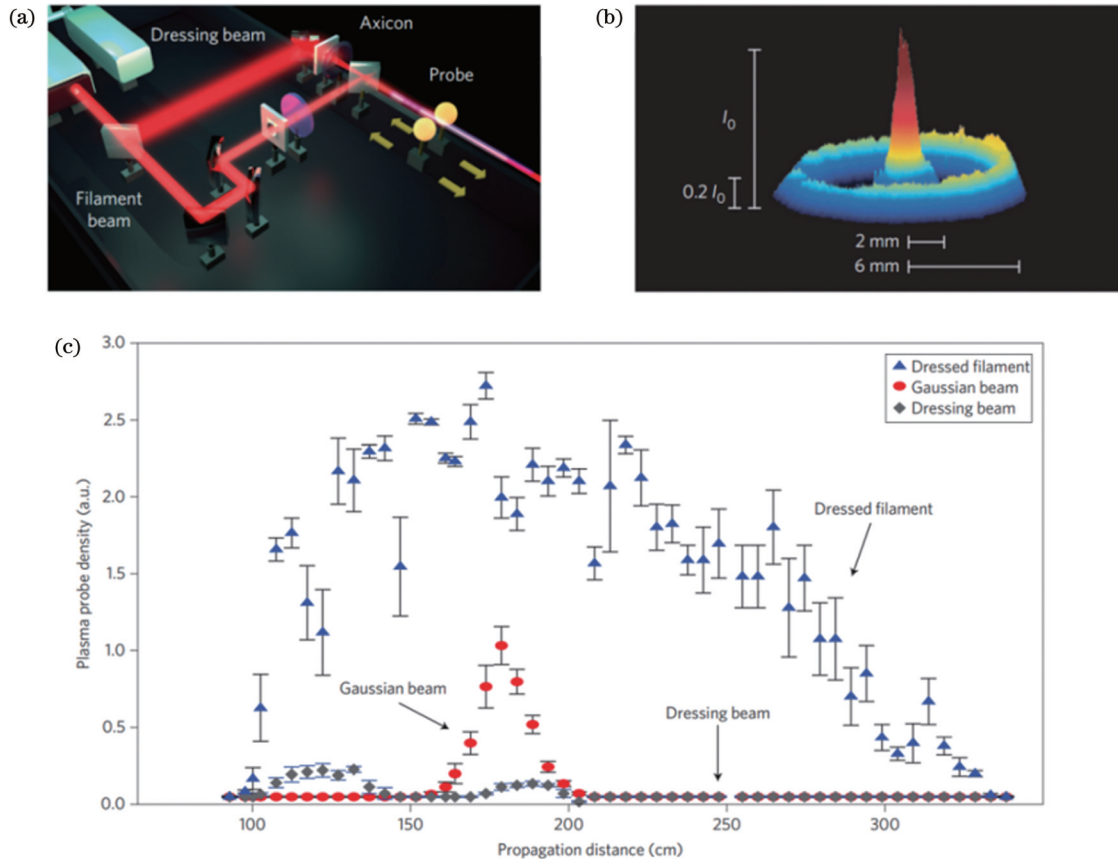


图 11 通过外部补偿能量控制成丝^[122]。(a)实验装置;(b)高斯光和环形光的初始强度剖面图;(c)在缀饰光束作用后光丝的长度增大了 11 倍

Fig. 11 Controlling filament formation by external compensating energy^[122]. (a) Experimental setup; (b) initial intensity profile of Gaussian and ring Gaussian beams; (c) 11-fold extension of filament length with aid of dressing beam

3.4 双脉冲或多脉冲方法

2003年,Tzortzakakis等^[123]在实验中观察到,红外飞秒激光脉冲经过迈克耳孙干涉仪后分成两束能量相等(约 4 mJ)的激光脉冲,在适当时间延迟下,两等离子体单丝共线传输,进而连接到一起,从而延长了等离子体丝的长度,如图 12 所示。利用双脉冲方法还可以将等离子体丝的寿命延长到 μs 量级^[19]。Chen等^[124]在双脉冲传输产生等离子体的实验中,观察到辐射光谱的强度随着第二束激光脉冲延迟时间的改变而发生明显的变化。Couairon等^[125]利用两束偏振方向垂直的激光脉冲,通过适当的时间延迟,将两个等离子体丝连接起来,光丝的长度扩展 1 倍。同时,研究者利用不同中心波长(400 nm 和 800 nm)的两个共线传输的飞秒脉冲来形成一个单光丝,当选取合适的两个脉冲之间的延迟时间时,就可以很好地控制光丝的起点位置和光丝的长度^[126-128]。

在理论方面,Feng等^[129]在能量补充和双脉冲技术的基础上,数值模拟了三个共线的超短激光脉冲在空

气中产生的扩展双色光丝。如图 13 所示,这三个脉冲包括一个基本高斯光束(波长为 800 nm,输入能量为 1 mJ)和两个具有不同空间啁啾(啁啾系数分别为 $C = 16 \text{ mm}^{-1}$ 和 $C = 32 \text{ mm}^{-1}$)的环形高斯光束(波长为 400 nm,输入能量为 0.6 mJ)。当基本高斯光丝被同向传播的初级环形光束($C = 16 \text{ mm}^{-1}$)辅助时,双色光丝的长度扩展了几倍。然而,在光丝的连接处会出现一个很大的间隙,降低了等离子体丝的稳定性的。为了填充双色光丝的间隙,引入了次级环形光束($C = 32 \text{ mm}^{-1}$)。两个低强度环形光束发生相干,向光丝中心提供能量,且 400 nm 光丝的钳制强度低于 800 nm 光丝,因此它们的输入能量(1.2 mJ)足以维持双色光丝的长距离传输,光丝的长度延伸到约 10 m,比高斯光丝单独传播的情况(约 1 m)增加了约一个数量级。这种方法为长距离光丝的产生提供了一种有效且经济的途径。相信通过调节光束束腰宽度和空间啁啾,光丝的长度也会被大大地延长,这是值得进一步研究的。

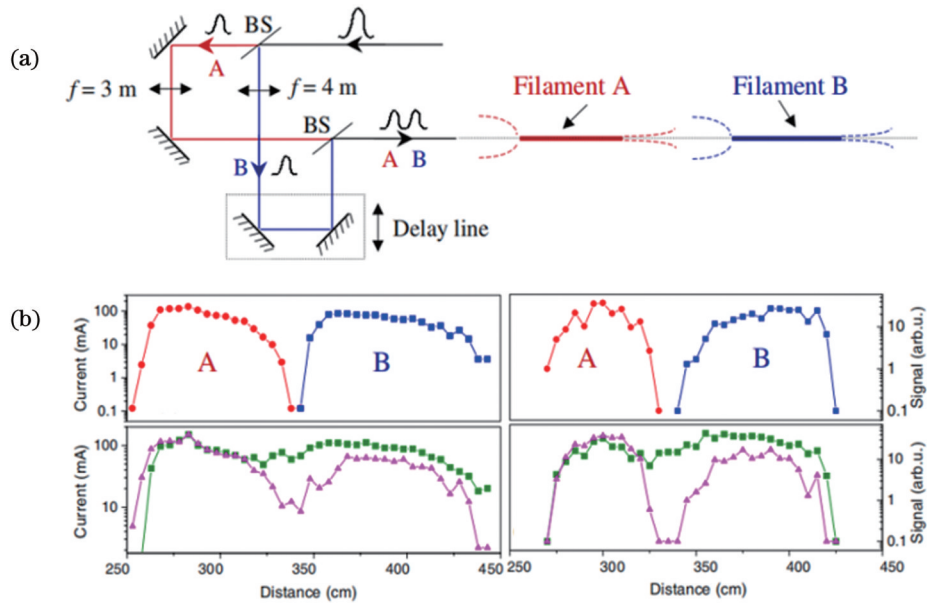


图 12 利用双脉冲技术延长光丝的长度^[123]。(a)实验装置;(b)光丝的电导率(第一列)和 THz 发射信号(第二列)的测量结果,其中第一行表示脉冲 A 和 B 分别发射,第二行表示两脉冲共线传输,延迟时间分别为 100 fs(正方形)和 0 fs(三角形)

Fig. 12 Extending filament length by double pulse technique^[123]. (a) Experimental setup; (b) measurement results of electric conductivity of optical filament (first column) and THz emission signal (second column) where first row denotes pulses A and B are launched separately, and second row denotes collinear transmission between two pulses with time delay of 100 fs (square) and 0 fs (triangle)

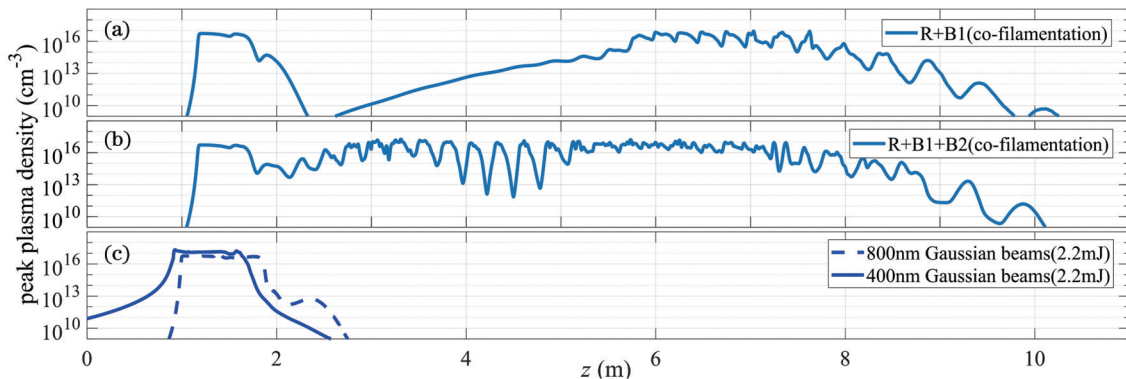


图 13 双色光丝的演化图^[129]。(a)基本高斯光束(R)和初级环形光束(B1)共同产生等离子体丝;(b)基本高斯光束、初级环形光束和次级环形光束(B2)共同产生等离子体丝;(c)总能量为 2.2 mJ 的 800 nm 或 400 nm 的高斯光束单独传播产生等离子体丝

Fig. 13 Evolution diagrams of two-color filament^[129]. Generating plasma filaments by (a) sum of basic Gaussian beam (R) and primary annular beam (B1); (b) generating plasma filaments by sum of basic Gaussian beam, primary annular beam, and secondary annular beam (B2); (c) generating plasma filaments by 800 nm or 400 nm Gaussian beam that propagates alone with total energy of 2.2 mJ

4 超长距离光丝的传输

面向大气遥感应用,探索飞秒激光光丝超长距离的传输是非常有必要的。另外,必须考虑真实的大气环境,在不同的高度下,大气中的氧气、水汽和其他痕量气体的含量不同,气溶胶组成及颗粒尺寸和分布不一样,大气湍流和大气密度呈不均匀分布,这些因素都会对光丝的远程传输产生很大的影响。然而,近年来这一领域的研究更多集中在强激光在近地面均匀大气中的传输。飞秒激光光丝在激光雷达方面的应用日益增多,人们开始探索强飞秒激光从地面向高空的垂直

传输。2003年, Teramobile 小组首次将基于光丝超连续谱的激光雷达技术应用到平流层大气环境探测,其探测高度在数千米到数十千米^[6]。实验装置如图 14(a)所示,在激光进入大气之前,引入一个脉冲啁啾控制激光束在预定距离处的成丝,利用激光雷达探测和回收超连续辐射信号。在激光脉冲垂直传输距离超过 5 km 处,探测到 600 nm 波段的散射回波信号[图 14(b)],并在垂直高度为 4.5 km 的位置处获得高分辨率大气吸收波谱,如图 14(c)所示。但由于短波长光束的瑞利散射较强,能量损耗较多,因此三次谐波 270 nm 波段的探测距离低于 2 km[图 14(b)]。随后,该小组利用

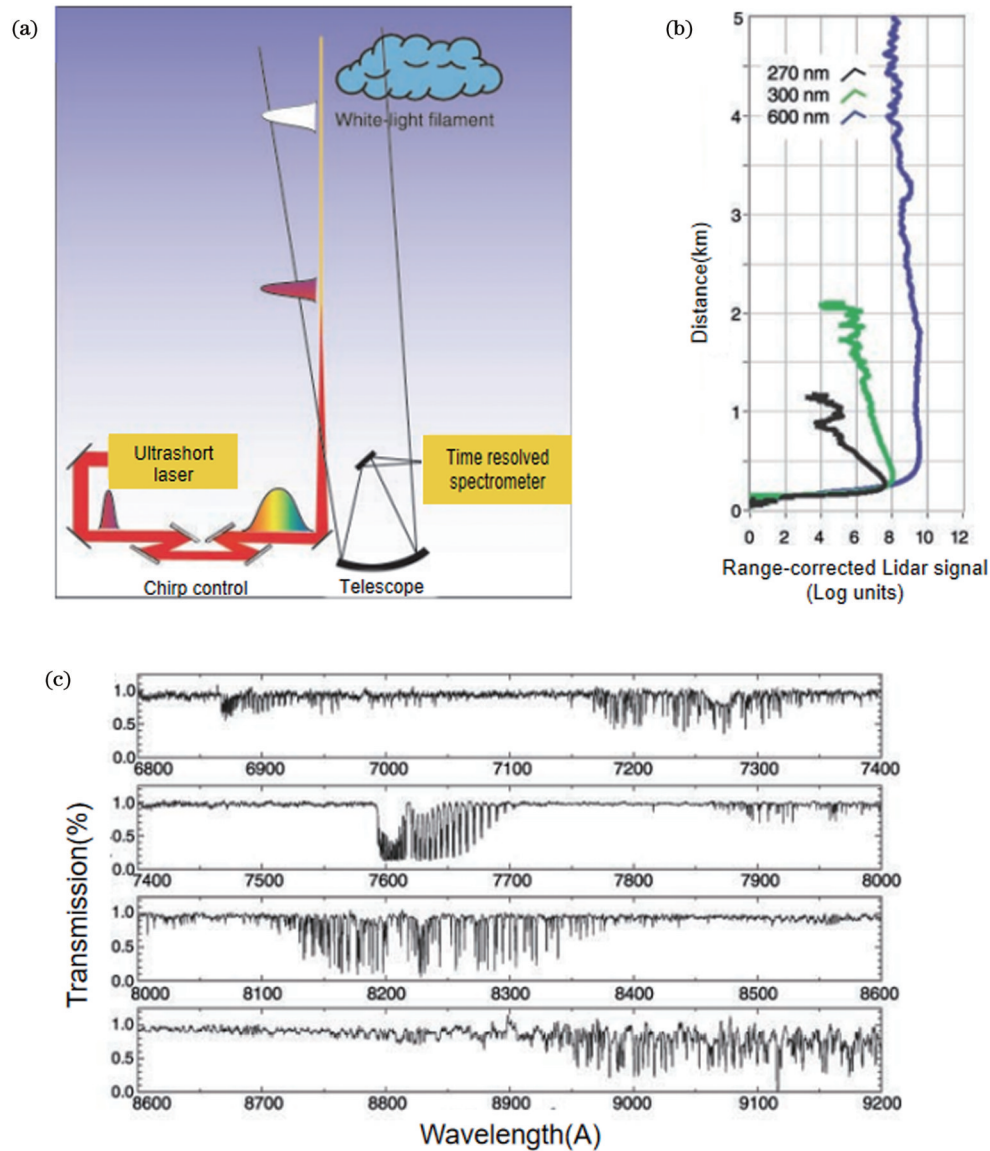


图 14 光丝白光激光雷达^[6]。(a)激光雷达实验装置示意图；(b)三个波长的回波信号强度演化；(c)垂直高度为 4.5 km 的位置处的高分辨率大气吸收光谱

Fig. 14 Filament-based white-light LIDAR^[6]. (a) Schematic of LIDAR experimental setup; (b) evolution of echo signal intensity at three wavelengths; (c) high resolution atmospheric absorption spectra at altitude of 4.5 km

该激光系统对云雾内部的粒径、密度、温度和相对湿度等进行了研究^[130]。2007年, Béjot等^[131]将脉冲能量为 26 J、峰值功率为 32 TW 的激光脉冲垂直射入到高空, 结果观察到 400 余条光丝产生, 且测量的背向散射信号显示光丝产生的超连续辐射可传输到高度在 20 km 以上的平流层。2008年, 中国科学院武汉物理与数学研究所设计了一台类似的超连续激光雷达系统, 探测到大气中的氧气在 685~694 nm 和 759~769 nm 范围内的吸收光谱^[132-133]。后来, Teramobile 小组和其他科研小组进行了多次实验研究^[11, 134-135], 探索了真实大气环境下的超连续辐射的特性及机制。

在理论研究中, 由于飞秒激光超长距离传输的模型复杂, 计算耗时长, 因此相关研究比较少。Couairon 等^[100]和 Hosseini 等^[136]研究了飞秒激光在大气中的

10 km 垂直传输, 在大气压强为 0.2~1.0 atm (1 atm = 1.01×10^5 Pa) 时进行了数值模拟。2016年, Dicaire 等^[81]率先提出了真实大气环境下星载光丝辐射超连续白光用于遥感探测的新概念和新方法, 如图 15 所示。理论上实现了强飞秒激光从 400 km 地球轨道向地面远程传输的数值仿真, 在距地面 10 km 之下可形成约 30 m 的光丝, 并可以在海拔 45 km 到地面范围内形成光丝。这是一项极具挑战性的工作, 因为在 400 km 的传输距离中, 由于激光脉冲的束腰宽度达到了几十厘米, 在径向要达到 10 μ m 的分辨率, 大约需要十万个格点, 这样的计算量是非常大的。发展超长距离传输的仿真程序是这一理论研究面临的一大困难。另外, 在复杂的大气环境条件下, 建立完备的理论模型以描述强激光的传输过程也极具挑战。

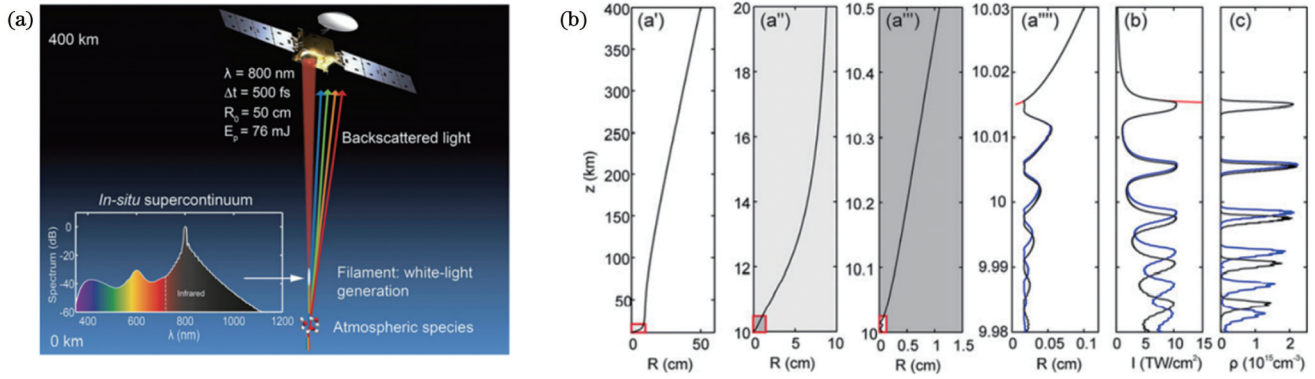


图 15 用于大气遥感的星载光丝^[81]。(a)原理图;(b)星载光丝从 400 km 地球轨道向地面传输的数值模拟结果

Fig. 15 Spaceborne filament for atmospheric remote sensing^[81]. (a) Schematic; (b) numerical simulation results of spaceborne filaments propagating from Earth orbit at altitude of 400 km toward ground

基于光丝在轨传输的巨大应用前景, Feng 等^[137]将强飞秒激光输入到一个 2 m 长的气压连续变化的气室中, 分析了大气压强从标准大气压(相当于地面)变化到不同低压(相当于高空)和从不同低压(相当于高空)变化到标准大气压(相当于地面)时, 光丝传输特性及其动力学特征。结果显示, 当输入脉冲能量一定时, 虽然激光脉冲的临界功率在低压条件下是比较高的, 但在透镜焦距(1.2 m)较大时, 相比压强从 1 atm 连续变化到 0.3 atm, 大气压强从低压 0.3 atm 连续变化到 1 atm 时的光丝长度更长, 且有利于波谱展宽到整个可见光范围, 如图 16 所示。这也说明了激光脉冲从高空向地面传播的最大优点, 即当光丝和后向散射信号在低密度介质中传输时, 光脉冲形状变形较小, 能量损耗也较低。该结果虽然是在实验室尺度且折射率梯度较大的条件下进行的, 但光丝的传输规

律、特性及动力学机制仍为星载光丝激光雷达设计提供了一定的理论参考。关于光丝在轨的远程传输, 本课题组也开展了一些理论探究^[138], 研究了强飞秒激光从 400 km 地球轨道向地面的传输, 当激光输入能量为 60 mJ, 束腰宽度为 40 cm, 脉冲宽度为 100 fs, 透镜焦距为 390 km 时, 激光的束腰半径、峰值激光强度及峰值等离子体密度随传输距离的演化如图 17 所示。可以看出, 光丝的起点位置距地面约 9.62 km, 光丝的最大强度约为 22 TW/cm², 最大等离子体密度约为 5 × 10¹⁴ cm⁻³, 由于等离子体通道传输的不稳定性, 束腰半径在光丝形成后也出现了较大的起伏, 但最小的束腰半径也在 100 μm 以下。同时对其他参数也进行了大量的模拟, 可以看出, 目前理论上得到的等离子体密度还是比较低, 在 10¹⁴ ~ 10¹⁵ cm⁻³ 量级。进一步提高

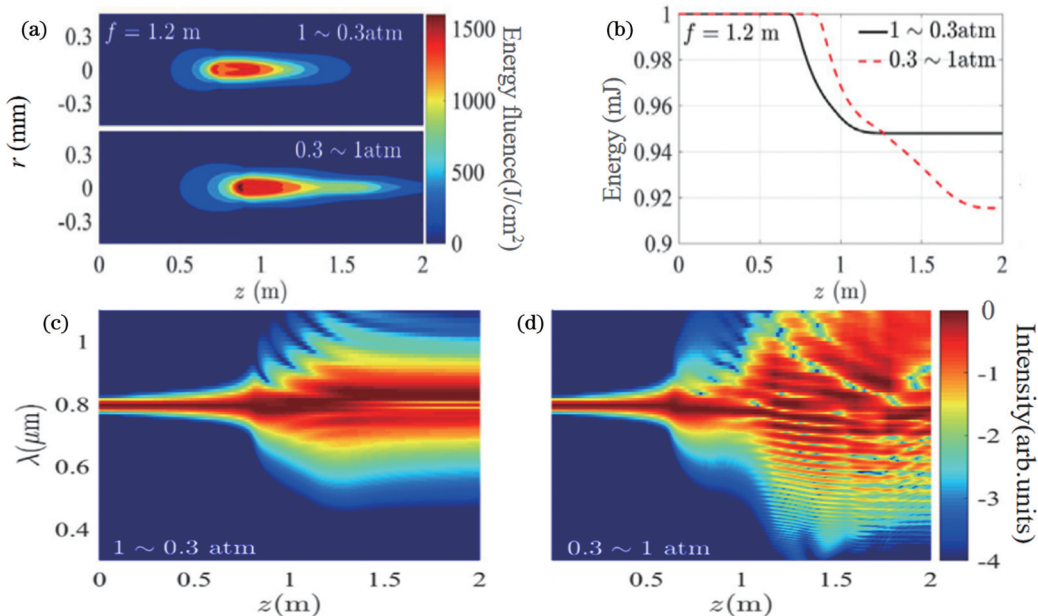


图 16 两种气压变化情况下的光丝特性^[137]。(a)光丝能量通量的分布;(b)能量随传播距离的变化;(c)(d)焦距为 1.2 m 时超连续波谱的演化

Fig. 16 Filament characteristics under two varying pressure conditions^[137]. (a) Distribution of filament energy fluence; (b) energy versus propagation distance; (c)(d) evolutions of supercontinuum spectra at focal length of 1.2 m

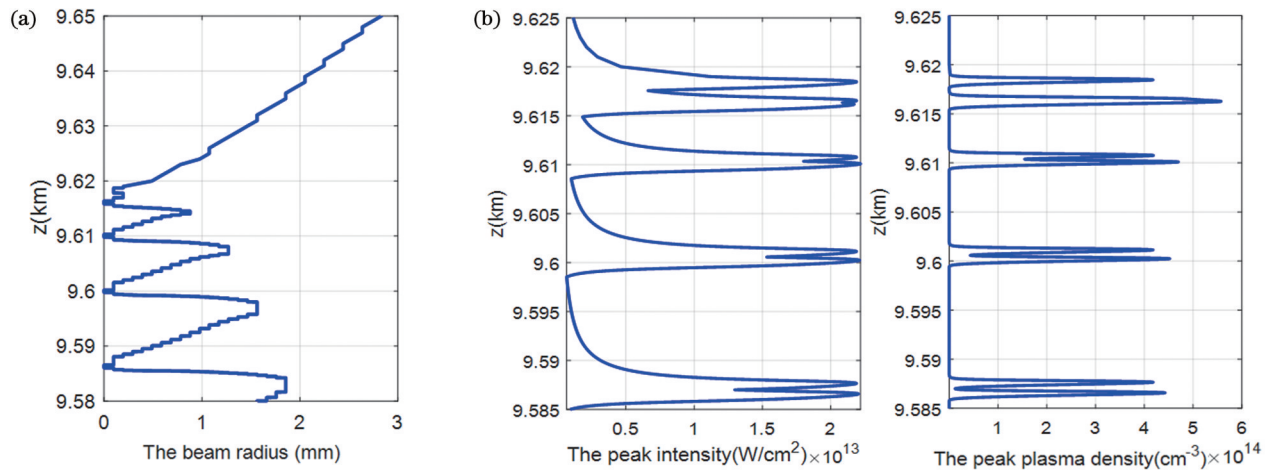


图 17 飞秒激光脉冲从 400 km 地球轨道向地面的传输^[138]。(a) 光束半径的演化; (b) 最大激光强度(左)和最大等离子体密度(右)的演化

Fig. 17 Propagation of femtosecond laser pulse from Earth orbit at altitude of 400 km toward ground^[138]. (a) Beam radius versus altitude; (b) evolutions of peak laser intensity (left) and peak plasma density (right)

仿真精度和完善理论模型是下一步工作需要解决的重要问题。

5 结束语

激光成丝是高功率超快激光脉冲在透明光学介质中传输时突破衍射极限而产生的一种独特非线性光学现象。特别是强飞秒激光在大气中产生的超连续辐射为远程遥感探测提供了一种全新的技术途径。由于其光谱可覆盖紫外波段到红外波段,因此又被称为白光激光。光丝诱导的超连续辐射除了具有宽光谱特性外,它的空间指向性也非常好。因此,相比传统激光雷达受窄带激光波长的限制,超连续白光激光雷达在探测大气成分和浓度、空气相对湿度等方面具有显著的优势。

遥感应用需要光丝长距离传输,从基本理论研究、实现长距离光丝传输的方法、光丝特性的调控和飞秒激光超长距离传输等方面进行了综述。科研人员经过二十多年的不断探索,在飞秒激光成丝的理论机制和实验技术方面都取得了很大的研究进展。但关于光丝长距离传输特别是星载光丝超长距离传输,还有许多关键的科学问题需要去探索。

首先,从目前理论模拟结果可知,飞秒激光超长距离传输所产生的等离子体密度较低($10^{14} \sim 10^{15} \text{ cm}^{-3}$ 量级),光丝的传输呈快速振荡,极不稳定,这对实际远程遥感探测应用是非常不利的。因此,如何增强光丝的超长距离传输性能是亟待解决的关键问题。利用透镜组合或望远镜系统实现高强度、远距离传输,利用时空啁啾技术提高光丝的钳制强度以增强荧光光谱的强度等,这些方法有待实验和理论验证。另外,在实验中常提高激光脉冲的重复频率,使光丝诱导的热力学运动速度加快,进而增大等离子体密度,增强超连续辐射^[47, 139-140],但当激光超长距离传输时,光丝在几百千米

处形成,此方法的效率尚需探究。

其次,光丝传输的空间尺度从实验室的几厘米、几十米到室外的几千米、几十千米再跨越到几百千米,无论是实验研究还是理论模拟都极具挑战。实验上急需发展高功率、高重复频率的飞秒激光技术,同时要求激光器件小型化、集成化,并且还能稳定输出以适应复杂大气环境。理论上应发展精度高、效率高的仿真算法,为实验提供光学参数,这对于光学系统设计和光学元件选择是极其重要的。

最后,如何将复杂的大气环境条件如温度、湿度、大气湍流以及云雾等引入到理论模型中,如何减少巨大的计算量等是理论研究中需要解决的关键问题。而面向远程遥感探测应用,也需要发展定性研究和定量分析的实验方法。

总之,强飞秒激光成丝传输具有潜在的应用前景,成丝非线性光学这个新的光学分支正在形成,它是当前物理科学研究的前沿之一。尽管从 400 km 地球轨道到地面的高功率激光脉冲传输及远程超连续辐射产生处于概念验证阶段,但地球轨道的白光激光雷达仍有可能为大气遥感探测研究提供一种新的遥感工具。

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Review on Ultra-Long Distance Propagation of Femtosecond Laser Pulses for Remote Sensing Applications

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Abstract

Significance Intense femtosecond laser pulses propagate far beyond the diffraction limit in air, producing high-intensity filaments and low-density plasma along with the radiation of supercontinuum white light. The properties of filamentation have attracted significant attention owing to their potential applications in many areas, such as lighting control, remote sensing of atmospheric pollution, terahertz emission, and rainmaking. To achieve these goals, a filament with a long-distance transmission is required. However, the variety of complicated environments, for example, cloud, fog, aerosol, and rain, has strong influence on the propagation of filamentation. The atmospheric turbulence and inhomogeneous energy distribution of the initial beam profile result in the generation of multiple filaments, which can shorten the filament length, reduce the spot quality of the beam, and limit various applications of the laser filamentation. Therefore, the generation and control of long-distance filamentation are crucial. In this study, the research progress on the long-distance propagation of femtosecond laser pulses for space-based remote sensing applications is summarized, including the basic research methods of filament propagation, producing long-distance filaments, and modulation of filament characteristics. Furthermore, the advantages of femtosecond laser filaments in atmospheric remote sensing applications and the fundamental science problems to be solved are summarized.

Progress The propagation of laser filament in air relies on a dynamic balance between Kerr self-focusing, which causes laser intensity to be clamped at a level of $10^{13} - 10^{14}$ W/cm², and plasma defocusing due to laser-induced ionization, with typical peak electron densities limited to $10^{16} - 10^{17}$ W/cm⁻³. The high intensity filament persists over many diffractions in this process, providing a great opportunity for various applications, particularly remote sensing. Currently, numerous methods have been developed to manipulate the filamentation. The filament lengths can be extended by simply increasing the input power. While the incident pulse exceeding the critical power by an order of magnitude will quickly lead to multifilamentation, which is unstable both in space and time, incorporating certain external conditions can optimize the characteristics of the optical filament. Using a phase plate, spatial light modulator, and axicon (Fig. 1) to reshape the phase of the laser beam, the formation of multiple filaments can be effectively suppressed, and the filament length can be extended. In addition, the onset and length of the filament and the intensity of the laser and plasma density can also be controlled by numerous other methods, such as using optical systems of certain lens combinations (Figs. 2 and 4), introducing an initial pulse chirp, changing the wavefront phase of the Gaussian beam to obtain the Bessel beam (Fig. 7), phase-nested beam (Fig. 8), and annular beam (Fig. 9), externally refuelling the energy of the filaments (Figs. 10 and 11), and

adopting a technique with two- or multiple-pulse (Figs. 12 and 13). The studies conducted on the methods of long-distance propagation of filamentation provide a great opportunity for remote sensing applications.

Since Braun *et al.* observed the self-guided propagation of intense femtosecond laser pulses in air, the generation of long-distance filaments has attracted much attention. Subsequently, an optical filament was transmitted over more than 50 m in the Laboratoire d'Optique Appliquée, and then La Fontaine *et al.* obtained a propagation distance of several hundred meters. In 2004, Méchain *et al.* showcased horizontal filamentation over a distance greater than 2 km. Then, the Teramobile group observed a filamentation that was generated by the vertical propagation of high-power femtosecond pulses and emitted in a supercontinuum from the ultraviolet to the infrared regions, which was detected from an altitude of more than 20 km (Fig. 14). Furthermore, the linear absorption spectra of some molecules, such as water (humidity) and ozone, were measured by filament-based LIDARs in an atmospheric environment from several km to tens of km. Moreover, the proof-of-concept of spaceborne laser filamentation for atmospheric remote sensing was presented by the European Space Agency (ESA) group. They numerically simulated the remote generation of filaments from an Earth-orbiting satellite, as well as a white light continuum extending from 350 nm to 1.1 μm (Fig. 15). Spaceborne laser filamentation might offer promising applications for atmospheric science and chemistry studies. Recently, the characteristics of the filaments generated by propagating a femtosecond Gaussian beam in a 2 m long gas cell with continuously varying pressures at different focal distances have been numerically investigated. It was demonstrated that maintaining a large pressure (1 atm) and changing to a larger pressure (such as 0.3–1.0 atm) benefit filament propagation and spectral broadening (Fig. 16). Although a large refractive index gradient was present in our calculation, we predict that the similar impact induced by the pressure variations is also applicable to propagating a femtosecond laser pulse over a real atmosphere. In addition, we also numerically simulated the propagation of a femtosecond laser pulse from a 400-km altitude towards the ground (Fig. 17). It is crucial to improve the simulation precision and perfect the theoretical model in the future.

Conclusions and Prospects Based on remote sensing applications, we review the major advances in the long-distance transmission of laser filament, including the basic research methods, the generation and modulation of the long-distance filaments, and the transmission of a femtosecond laser pulse over an ultra-long-distance. After more than 20 years of continuous exploration, research on femtosecond laser filament has made great progress in both theoretical mechanism and practical application. However, numerous scientific problems remain to be explored regarding the ultra-long distance transmission of filaments, such as the intensity of the filament and peak plasma density not being high enough, developing a laser technique with high power for complicated atmospheric conditions, and establishing a complete theoretical model for the atmospheric environment. Although laser filamentation and remote supercontinuum generation from orbital altitudes are in the theoretical proof-of-concept stage, an earth-orbiting white-light LIDAR might become a new remote sensing tool for atmospheric research.

Key words nonlinear optics; ultrafast laser; filament; supercontinuum spectrum; remote sensing