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Nanoscale thermoelastic probing of megahertz thermal diffusion

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The authors demonstrate a method to probe thermal diffusion at megahertz frequencies with nanometer lateral resolution in a thin opaque film on a transparent substrate. They map photothermally induced megahertz surface vibrations in an atomic force microscope using tightly focused optical illumination from the substrate side. By comparison with a theoretical model of the surface displacement field, the authors derive the thermal diffusivity of a thin chromium film on a silica substrate. © 2007 American Institute of Physics. [DOI: 10.1063/1.2770769]

With the continued trend for miniaturization of integrated circuit devices, there has been much interest in the thermal probing of thin films, multilayers, and microstructures down to nanometer length scales. The thermal properties of thin films are, in general, very different from the bulk and depend on defects, grain size, texture, and morphology.\textsuperscript{1–3} Transient or sinusoidally modulated temperature fields are particularly useful for probing thermal properties because the associated thermal wave propagation can be accurately controlled or localized by choice of the time scale. For a modulation frequency \( f \) the thermal diffusion length decreases with increasing frequency as \( 1/f^{1/2} \), taking a value \( \sim 1 \) \( \mu \)m for \( f \approx 1 \) MHz. Therefore, it is advantageous when probing thin films with thermal waves to work at high frequencies in order to restrict the measurement volume as much as possible to the film itself.

A particularly versatile noncontact method to transiently heat opaque thin films is to use pulsed or modulated optical beams, either focused to a single spot or crossed to produce induced gratings; time scales from seconds to picoseconds can be accessed in this way.\textsuperscript{4–8} Likewise, optical detection of temperature fields by thermoreflectance or the mirage effect, or of surface displacement fields by optical beam deflection, interferometry, or diffraction have given rise to performant techniques for the noncontact probing of the thermal diffusivity in thin films.\textsuperscript{8–11}

However, the lateral resolution of conventional optical detection methods is limited to micron scales owing to the optical diffraction limit. To overcome this limit for purposes of imaging transient thermal fields, the most developed thermal sensing schemes with submicron lateral resolution are based on scanned local probe techniques.\textsuperscript{14,15} Use of a modulated heat source in an atomic force microscope (AFM) tip, for example, has proved useful for imaging time-varying temperature distributions up to frequencies of \( \sim 100 \) kHz.\textsuperscript{15–17} AFM-based probing of kilohertz surface vibrations induced by resistive heating or chopped light allows additional contrast from the thermal expansion coefficient.\textsuperscript{14,18}

Higher modulation frequencies in the megahertz range—more appropriate for probing thin films of thickness in the \( \sim 100 \) nm range or below—can be combined with nanometer spatial resolution using a method known as optical heterodyne force microscopy (OHFM).\textsuperscript{19} This detects photothermally induced surface vibrations in an AFM, and can image subsurface nanoscale features through their effect on the surface displacement produced by a megahertz thermal field that is optically excited \textit{directly below} the scanning AFM tip. To produce a quantitative measurement of the thermal diffusivity in thin films using the combination of megahertz thermal waves and local probing, however, one needs to move the scanning tip laterally with respect to the modulated thermal source in a way analogous to the conventional all-optical methods.\textsuperscript{6,9,10}

In the present letter, we present a method based on OHFM to achieve this, involving optical excitation from the transparent substrate side of the sample and AFM detection of surface vibrations from the film side. We demonstrate the method using a thin Cr film on silica using variable frequency probing in the range of 100 kHz–4 MHz.

Figure 1 shows the modified OHFM setup. We use a commercial AFM system (TM microscopes, CP-M) based on an optical-lever detection system for the bending of a V-shaped cantilever (Ultralever D, length of 85 \( \mu \)m, width of 28 \( \mu \)m, thickness of 0.8 \( \mu \)m, spring constant of 1.6 N m\(^{-1}\)),

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.8\textwidth]{figure1}
\caption{(Color online) Schematic diagram of the modified optical heterodyne force microscope setup. AOM: acousto-optic modulator. The cantilever is slanted at an angle of 15° to the sample surface.}
\end{figure}
resonant frequency of 170 kHz, and tip radius of 10 nm). The sample consists of a polycrystalline Cr thin film with a thickness of 260 nm made by electron beam deposition on a fused silica substrate. The thickness was independently determined by laser picosecond acoustics. An 830 nm laser beam chopped at a frequency \( f_1 \sim 1 \text{ MHz} \) is focused on the substrate side of the Cr film through a 50× microscope objective lens, producing surface vibrations of small amplitude \( \Delta y \) (in the nanometer range) and phase \( \phi \) through thermal expansion. The cantilever base is mounted on a piezoelectric spot. The incident optical power \( P_1 = 2 \text{ mW} \) is stabilized by chopping at a frequency \( f_1 = 2 \text{ MHz} \) with \( f_2 = 1 \text{ MHz} \) and \( f_1 = 1 \text{ MHz} \) with \( f_2 = 2 \text{ MHz} \). The data obtained with a 2× microscope objective lens are recorded. The focus of the optical spot, with an axial distribution across the sample surface when the scanner moves in the \( x \) direction parallel to the center of the optical spot are recorded. The focal distance \( r \) is obtained, where \( r = (x^2 + y^2)^{1/2} \) is the radius to the surface detection point. As an aside, for the simpler case of a semi-infinite solid, \( U(r) \) is a sum over volume elements \( dV' \) at \( r' = (x', y', z') \),

\[
U(r) = \frac{(1 + \nu) \alpha}{\pi} \int T(r') \frac{z'}{|r - r'|^3} dV',
\]

where \( \nu \) is the Poisson ratio and \( \alpha \) is the linear thermal expansion coefficient. (Nowacki25 has derived a similar result for an infinite solid.) For our more complicated film-on-substrate geometry, the formulas are not reducible to a compact form such as Eq. (1). We take literature values for \( \alpha, \nu \), shear modulus, and thermal diffusivity \( D_s \) of silica.26–28 Likewise for Cr (Refs. 26 and 27) except the thermal diffusivity \( D_s \) because the thermal conductivities of thin films are known to differ strongly from bulk values. Using the data of Fig. 2 together with that of line scans at 100 kHz, 200 kHz, 1 MHz, and 4 MHz (not shown), we obtain \( D_s = (4 \pm 2) \times 10^{-6} \text{ m}^2 \text{s}^{-1} \) by least-square fitting to the phase and to the logarithm of the amplitude over regions \( \Delta x = \pm 1 \mu \text{m} \) of reasonable signal-to-noise ratio. The optical spot size \( W = 1 \mu \text{m} \) is a sum over volume elements \( dV' \) at \( r' = (x', y', z') \),

\[
U(r) = \frac{(1 + \nu) \alpha}{\pi} \int T(r') \frac{z'}{|r - r'|^3} dV',
\]
The displacement amplitude varied linearly with the incident optical power up to 2 mW, but showed signs of saturation for higher powers, as shown in Fig. 3(a) for $f_1 = 2$ MHz. Interestingly, the FWHM width of the amplitude-position curves for displacement is not constant but increases with $P$ [see Fig. 3(a)]. Such an increase, which compensates the amplitude saturation so that the product of FWHM width and amplitude [the product of the two curves in Fig. 3(a)] is approximately proportional to the absorbed power, may be due to the temperature dependence of the sample or tip physical properties, or of the water meniscus between the tip and the sample. Examples of $Y$-directed scans obtained at the relatively high power $P=8$ mW are shown in Figs. 3(b) and 3(c) for the amplitude and phase (dots), respectively. Because of the larger signal level, the signal-to-noise ratio is improved. The predicted amplitude and phase profiles for the displacement with the same value of $D_f$ as above are also shown for reference. The agreement is still reasonable in spite of the nonlinear behavior.

At present our apparatus is restricted in application to one-dimensional spatial profiling because of the fixed tip and moving mirror stage setup. However, by using a scanned tip and a fixed stage it should be possible to obtain two-dimensional images of the thermoelastic field with nanoscale resolution. Since we are sensing surface displacement rather than temperature, the lateral resolution in the present setup is only limited by the mechanical contact area of nanometer order. Although it is difficult in arbitrary nanostructures to separate thermal diffusivity and thermal expansion, this method should prove useful for imaging nanoscale two-dimensional megahertz thermal fields in thin films and in nanostructures of well-defined geometry.

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21. We neglect the defocusing caused by scanner motion that gives rise to an estimated maximum 2% increase in $W$.
22. We use subpicosecond optical pulses with 82 MHz repetition rate, but this has no influence on the sub-10 MHz dynamics here.
24. Simulations showed that owing to the low substrate thermal diffusivity, the incorporation of any value of $R_{so}$ even infinite, changed the FWHM of the temperature profiles by <10% for a broad range of Cr diffusivities.