Ball Lightning Experiments

Information from
http://www-personal.umich.edu/~reginald/ball_l.html

Ball Lightning in the Microwave

This is a great experiment to try at home. It requires a microwave oven, a candle, a toothpick and a lighter. First you put the candle (~1-2 inches in height) in the microwave (remove glass plate from bottom so candle sits on metal). Put the toothpick in the candle sticking straight up. Light the toothpick on fire so that flames are leaping off the tip. Shut the door quickly and turn on oven full blast. There will be loud popping noises and then balls of fire will leap from the toothpick and fly around inside the microwave while making a buzzing sound like a bee. If it doesn't work at first try to move the position of the candle in order to find the "hot spot" in the oven for it to work.

Real Ball Lightning Generated by Pulsed Power Inductor

This experiment is very DANGEROUS. The author did this one a few years ago. The Idea was got from an article about a guy generating ball lightning using a high current transformer (TBA). The author had an idea of using an inductor to store large amounts of electrical energy. The conductor on the end of the stick touches the metal ring. This completes the circuit, and start the inductor. Then there was used the air compressor nozzle to blow out the arc as the wire was pulled away. The copper wire explodes and creates rapidly rotating and burning molten balls of copper. These 'Balls of Fire' exhibit many of the properties of real ball lightning.

Electric Discharge Produced into Air Half-Space

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In the article a possibility of streak lightning control by means of low intensive laser emission is observed.

During investigation of an electric discharge into air half-space [1] it was noticed that this discharge can be controlled by a low intensive laser beam. Now there is a problem of laser control of lightning discharge [2]. However, numerous works on this approach demonstrate that "the hope to get a quick solution of the problem of lightning control by laser emission has not been confirmed" [3].

Careful observation of this problem in [2] has shown ways out the situation. The authors of [2] consider plasma channel produced (by means of laser) in free atmosphere at a possible greatest height to be of doubtless interest of the science of lightning. Finally, creation of the plasma channel should be of benefit for lightning protection. The authors of [2] give notice that "there are many difficulties of fundamental and practical importance on this path".

Weak theoretical understanding of lightning generation causes pessimistic estimations of solution of the problem. The article [2] notes particularly that "there are neither adequate theory, nor numerical calculations and qualitative understanding of the phenomena defining the speed of a leader… The situation of a theory of the leader channel is little better (from quantitative point of view)…".

Realistically the following statement can refer to the lightning discharge: "The electric discharge appeared to be very "unhandy" for theoretical description but the most interesting phenomenon in the experimental aspect" [4].

Experimental Part

In this work a capacitor bank with 0.6 mF capacity, which can be fed up to ~5 kV, was used to produce impulse discharge into air half-space. A scheme of the device is presented in Fig.1. At connection/ disconnection of a discharger 5 a "spout" is let out of an electrode 3. The spout carries the potential of the cathode (virtual cathode) at a significant height into air half-space. A probe placed at the height of ~15 cm fixes a potential which is similar to the potential occurring at the cathode. The researches have demonstrated that the produced formation continues to glow for several hundreds of milliseconds (the glow is fixed from a zone located at 15-45 cm above the cathode). Typical time of the discharge comes to 100±20 msec and depends on the cathode material. Electric field generated in the spout comes to less than 8 V cm^{-1}.

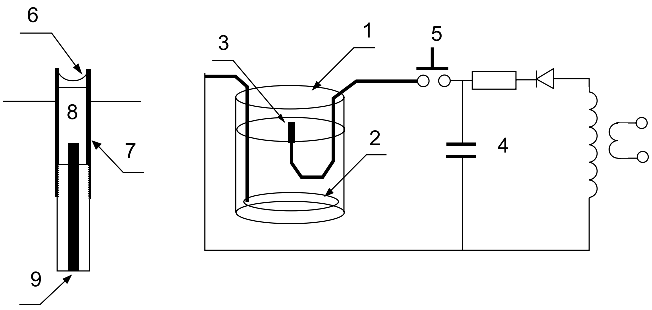

Fig 1
A scheme of a device made for producing of long-living plasmoids

1 – a polyethylene reservoir, 2 – a ring electrode, 3 – a central electrode, 4 – a capacitor bank of 0.6 mF capacity, 5 – a discharger, 6 –water or aqueous suspension drop, 7 – a quartz pipe, 8 – a carbonic or metal electrode, 9 – a copper bar.

The spout was acted by weak laser emission of less than 1 mW at 22-centimeter height. The laser beam was directed perpendicular to the discharge axis, the spout achieving the laser beam moved along the beam towards the laser.

In Fig.2 the spout has moved ~8.5 cm along the laser beam, and a usual sphere formation was generated. Due to the horizontal motion it was distorted if to be compared with usual sphere formation. The usual sphere formation is represented in Fig.3 (also see the cover).

Fig. 2
Motion of the leader channel (spout) along the laser accompanied with the sphere formation

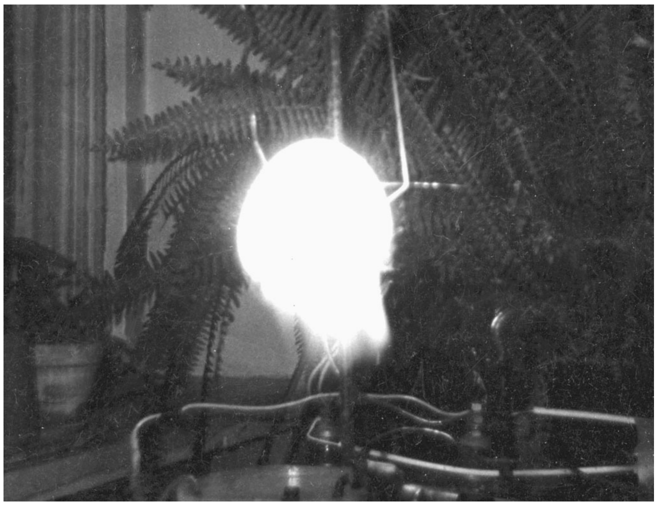

Fig.3
The standard ball formation

Discussion

As it is evenly mentioned in [5], results of model experiments are difficult to be applied directly to laser control of lightning because in short intervals characteristics of the discharge differ from characteristics of lightning discharges. Actually, at comparing considered current and the field existing in a lightning (i~100 A, ~3 V cm^{-1}) with these phenomena occurring in a laboratory spark (~1 A, ~300 V cm^{-1}) incorrectness of modeling of this process becomes obvious. From the other hand the authors of [2] note that "the leader channel is like a channel of electric arc… At current strength of ~100 A plasma of the channel of the arc is supported by fields the densities of which come to several volts by a centimeter. The lightning has such leader currents".

Even an air arc of atmosphere pressure has a field of about 100 V cm^{-1} at currents of about 1 A. The generated discharges (spout) accompanied by the field of less than 8 V cm^{-1} (maximal current appearing in the discharge gap is 50-60 A) are more appropriate for modeling the leader channel of the streak lightning than typical discharges used for investigation of these processes, for example, like [6].

At first approximation the leader channel is considered as an ideal conductor in the article [2]. We make research to define the field in the discharge (spout) more exactly. The article [2] makes the following consideration about a cause of occasional generation of new leader heads: "the surface of *equipotential* plasma conductor (channel) *has* a property of *instability*. There is an occasionally generated sharp jut. An intensified field appears at the jut along the edge. Under the influence of the field the jut becomes to grow in any direction including at the significant angle to the weak outer field". The aforesaid seems to explain why our leader channel changes its direction and runs at right angle to its initial motion. (Fig.2). Weak harmonic action of the laser beam to the leader channel causes generation of a new head which continues motion "on the significant angle".

The effect of plasma motion towards a light beam is a demonstration of a general tendency of propagation of the discharges to an incident electromagnetic field [7]. "Area occupied by plasma usually increases towards the laser emission" [8]. Leading character of motion of this formation is confirmed in [9] as well as the interaction with the laser beam is confirmed in [10]. It should be taken into account that in the works [9-10] experiments were performed at devices which generated such a discharge. However, that discharge was by 2 orders weaker than the discharge generated by the device represented in this work. Naturally, the results were less defined. Comparison of the discharges is presented in [11].

According to our data, the leader channel (spout) has a very abrupt bound (less than 1 mm). In this layer the field can come to ~30 kV cm^{-1} (at height of 15 cm).

Conclusions

Due to the assumption [2] about *instability* of the surface of the *equipotential* leader channel there has been successfully performed the "control" action on an electric discharge which models a streak lightning. It has been achieved by means of weak harmonic oscillations made by the laser. This mechanism is supposed to be applied for streak lightning control.

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