White-light symmetrization by the interaction of multifilamenting beams

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We show experimentally that the interaction of two multifilamenting beams in fused silica with incidence angles up to a few degrees results in an increase in the symmetry of the continuum emission from $D_2$ to $C_0$ around the axis of symmetry between the two beams. We observe an intense white disk between the locations of the individual conical emission patterns, reducing the conical emission in each of them. We attribute this behavior to an enhanced self-phase modulation in the interference region between the two beams. This frequency conversion depletes by more than 40% the energy initially available in the photon bath to feed filaments.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Nonlinearity is known as capable to increase the symmetry of physical systems. This is, e.g., the case in the self-similar optical collapse, in which any incident beam profile submitted to Kerr self-focusing self-converts into a circular Townes profile [1].

Self-focusing can ultimately result in filamentation, which is due to a dynamic balance between the Kerr self-focusing and defocusing on the plasma generated at the nonlinear focus [2–6]. When the incident beam power largely exceeds the critical power $P_{cr}$ of the propagation material ($P_{cr} \approx 2.3$ MW in fused silica at 800 nm [7]), the beam profile breaks up into many cells, each one yielding one single filament. These filaments generated across the beam profile were shown to be coherent with one another, which allows them to interact. These interactions can take the form of repulsion or attraction of neighboring filaments [8–12] or interference of their conical emission [13]. Moreover, the interaction of the two incident laser photon baths can also lead to the attraction or repulsion of the resulting filaments of each individual beam, depending on their relative phase [14,15]. Adequate tuning of the relative incidence angle even allows the filaments from the two beams to merge into a central one [11], or to exchange energy, resulting in a partial extinction of the conical emission [16].

In this paper, we investigate the interaction of two multifilamenting beams in fused silica with incident angles up to a few degrees. We show that this interaction results in an increase in symmetry of the continuum emission from $D_2$ to $C_0$ around the axis of symmetry between the two beams. An intense white disk is observed between the locations of the individual conical emission patterns, reducing or even almost suppressing the conical emission in each of them. We attribute this behavior to an enhanced self-phase modulation (SPM) in the interaction region, where the interference between the two beams redistributes the local wave vectors into a broad angular distribution. Frequency conversion depletes the energy initially available in the photon bath to feed filaments, similarly to the competition already observed in the case of a single beam [17].

The observed on-axis generation of the white light, while a significant fraction of the fundamental still propagates a few degrees apart, could be useful for spectroscopic applications to geometrically select the supercontinuum emission and reject this undeviated fraction of the fundamental wavelength.

II. EXPERIMENTAL SETUP

The experimental setup is depicted in Fig. 1. A femtosecond chirped-pulse amplification laser operating at $\lambda_0 = 800$ nm wavelength generates a train of pulses at a repetition rate of 10 Hz. The energy of each individual pulse is 20 mJ with a duration of 130 fs. The laser beam is divided in two parts by a thin 50:50% beam splitter. The most intense central part from each beam is selected by circular apertures of 2 mm diameter, letting, respectively, 1.2 and 1.3 mJ of energies to pass through. The beams then interact inside a 20-mm-thick fused silica block. The optimal temporal overlap is adjusted by translating a bending mirror in one arm. Visual observation as well as true-color imaging from the top of the fused silica block showed the occurrence of multiple filamentation when the two beam propagate independently as well as when they overlap temporarily.

The interaction between the beams was investigated at four incidence angles $2\theta_0=3.0^\circ$, $3.2^\circ$, $3.8^\circ$, and $4.5^\circ$ (full angles) in air, corresponding to $2\theta_0=2.1^\circ$, $2.2^\circ$, $2.6^\circ$, and $3.1^\circ$ in the fused silica block, respectively. The far-field pat-

FIG. 1. (Color online) Experimental setup: BS: beam splitter, A: circular aperture, and M: mirror.

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tern of the white-light emission was recorded with a color-frame digital camera, on a diffusing screen placed 40 mm behind the substrate. Besides, the spectrum of the emitted continuum was analyzed using a miniature spectrometer, with 0.34 nm resolution. In order to record the full dynamics of the spectrum, which spans over more than 4 orders of magnitude, different neutral density filters were used for different spectral ranges, which were then cross normalized to reconstruct the full spectra. The emitted light was collected by a Teflon integrating sphere. The angular distribution of the white-light spectrum was recorded by horizontally translating the sphere across the plane defined by the two incident beams, at a distance of 275 mm from the fused silica block. In this configuration, the 5 mm input port of the integrating sphere provided an angular resolution of 1°.

III. EXPERIMENTAL RESULTS

Figure 2 displays such far-field image. Without interaction, each beam propagates independently and yields a small (∼3–4 nm) white spot with the corresponding conical emission [see also Figs. 3(a) and 3(c)]. In contrast, the interaction of the two pulses yields remarkably strong white light and a much broader (∼10 nm) circular spot encompassing the positions of both beams [Fig. 3(b)]. In addition, the conical emission disappears. The white color of the spot as well as its size and shape are very similar for all investigated incidence angles. At larger incidences the efficiency of the white-light emission is noticeably lower and the transition from a circular to elliptical spot profile is observed. This tendency is already visible in Fig. 2(a) for 2θ₀=4.5°.

The generation of a bright white spot qualitatively observed on the screen, as mentioned above, indeed corresponds to a tenfold increase in the supercontinuum generation in the 450–700 nm region, as well as around 900 nm, as compared with the individually propagating beams (Fig. 4). This spectral broadening is practically independent from the incidence angle over the whole investigated interval of incidence angles. The two interacting beams generate white-light continuum almost as efficiently as one single beam that would bear their whole energy, depleting the fundamental wavelength by more than 40%.

Both with and without interactions between the beams, the angular distribution of the white-light spectrum (Fig. 5) is dominated by the peak at the fundamental wavelength around ±1.6°, i.e., at the original location of each incident beam. However, the interaction results in a reduction in the fundamental emission at 0° and a transversely more homogeneous spectrum, between −3° and +3°. This homogeneity corresponds to the visual observation of an homogeneous white spot on a screen in the far field. Also, the conical emission [dotted line on panel (a)] disappears almost completely when the two beams overlap temporally.

IV. DISCUSSION

The observed generation of a white-light disk in the forward direction may at once remind us of the interaction [14,15] or even the merging [11] of the filaments from two crossing beams. However, such merging occurs at very small incident angles, typically 20–30 times smaller than in our experiment [11]. Moreover, we observed neither evidence of filament merging into new filaments oriented along the z axis on photographs taken from the top of the fused silica block nor conical emission, i.e., concentric colorful rings coaxial with the forward-emitted white light. We therefore conclude...
that the process at play does not specifically depend on the occurrence of filamentation.

Instead, we interpret our observations based on a partial inhibition of filamentation due to a more efficient white-light continuum generation in the photon bath where the two beams interact through SPM and cross-phase modulation (XPM). The observed efficient depletion of the fundamental wavelength by the white-light generation reduces its power available to feed the filaments. This results in a less efficient filamentation and hence in a sharp decrease in the brightness of the associated conical emission at the exit of the fused silica block.

In the interaction region, the interference between the two beams redistributes the directions of the wave vectors, thus loosing the initial $D_{2}$ symmetry defined by the two incident beams. Instead, the wide range of wave-vector directions results in a revolution ($C_{s}$) symmetry around the $z$ axis, independently of the incidence angle. Moreover, due to the relatively large incidence angle, no interference pattern can be resolved in the far field. This is consistent with the report by Corsi et al., who reported such interference with a narrower incidence angle and observed that the white-light fringes tend to merge when the angle increases above $0.5^\circ$ [18].

The interference between the two beams does not only impact the spatial symmetry of the supercontinuum emission, but also its intensity, locally doubling the incident electric field, i.e., quadrupling the incident intensity. Note that the transient grating [19] originating from the interference pattern has a typical step of $\frac{\lambda_{0}}{2 \sin(\theta_{0})} \sim 15 \ \mu m > \lambda_{D}$, yielding a typical width of $2 \theta_{0} \sim 3^\circ$ for the zero-order spot, so that no fringes are visible within the spot on the screen. On the other hand, illuminating a glass block with a cylindrical lens also resulted in a similar circular spot, although the incident angles $\theta_{0}$ continuously range from $-5^\circ$ to $5^\circ$, thus blurring any interference pattern. We can therefore exclude diffraction on this interference pattern as the origin of the observed circular white spot.

The above discussion in terms of SPM can easily be transposed in terms of four-wave mixing (FWM), since both formalisms and SPM provide equivalent descriptions of the same physical processes if the wavelengths are quasidegenerate and the main active process is the conversion of the central wavelength into the supercontinuum. In a first step, we shall address the change in symmetry from $D_{2}$ to $C_{s}$. In FWM, two photons at $\lambda_{1}$ and $\lambda_{2}$ mix up to generate two photons at $\lambda_{3}$ and $\lambda_{4}$. In this process, the energy conservation imposes $\omega_{1} + \omega_{2} = \omega_{3} + \omega_{4}$ (with $\omega_{i}$ being the frequency associated with $\lambda_{i}$), while the phase matching condition sets $\vec{k}_{1} + \vec{k}_{2} = \vec{k}_{3} + \vec{k}_{4}$, where $k_{i} = 2 m_{i} / \lambda_{i}$. As a consequence the plane defined by $\vec{k}_{3}$ and $\vec{k}_{4}$ can spin around $\vec{k}_{1} + \vec{k}_{2}$, adding one degree of freedom to the system. If the wavelengths of the incident photons lie within the spectral peak of the incident fundamental pulse, $k_{1} - k_{2} \sim k_{0}$, the direction of $\vec{k}_{1} + \vec{k}_{2}$ is close to the $z$ axis. This degree of freedom is characterized by the angle $\phi_{3}$ between the planes, respectively, defined by $(\vec{k}_{1}, \vec{k}_{2})$ and $(\vec{k}_{3}, \vec{k}_{4})$ and results in a circular ($C_{s}$) symmetry of the emission.

However, such circular symmetry in a process driven by phase matching would at first be expected to generate colored rings rather than a white circular spot. Such spot can be understood if we consider quasidegenerate FWM events, i.e., with all $\lambda_{i}$ close to $\lambda_{0}$. Such events have a very high occurrence probability due to an efficient pumping and seeding by the fundamental wavelength itself and intrinsic phase matching. However, their net impact on the pulse spectrum is negligible because many events of opposite directions statistically compensate each other. As a consequence, quasidegenerate FWM events are not considered in usual conditions. In our configuration with crossing beams, however, spectrally quasidegenerate events must be considered because they result in the emission of photons within the incident fundamental spectral peak, but in directions outside those of the initial beams so that it yields a net geometrical effect. More specifically, the output photons at wavelengths $\lambda_{3}$ and $\lambda_{4}$ are emitted at angles

![Angular distribution of the white-light spectrum](image-url)
as derived from the cosine theorem in the triangle formed by $k_1 + k_2 = (k_1 + k_2)\cos \theta_0$, $\overrightarrow{k_3}$, and $\overrightarrow{k_4}$ (Fig. 6). $\theta_3$ and $\theta_4$ obviously depend on $\lambda_1$ and $\lambda_2$, so that the spectral width of the incident pulses provides a supplementary spatial degree of freedom. Scanning those wavelengths across the input spectrum provides a supplementary spatial degree of freedom. Moreover, our simulation is restricted to the fundamental wavelength of the incident beams due to computing limitations, but it could in principle be extended to the full spectrum of the white-light continuum. It would then obviously yield a similar angular spreading of the beam, resulting in the bright white spot observed in the experiments.

\section*{V. CONCLUSION}

In conclusion, we have shown that two ultrashort beams crossing at an angle of a few degrees in fused silica with adequate relative delay result in a qualitative change in the emission pattern of the continuum. While this pattern is composed of two sets of conical emission rings when the two beams propagate independently, their interaction results in a bright white circular spot, encompassing the directions of the two incident beams. This pattern change is the signature of SPM within the field resulting from the interference of the two incident beams. Moreover, the spectral broadening of the photon bath competes with the feeding of filamentation, largely reducing its contribution to the final far-field pattern.

The difference in the emission geometry of the white-light continuum and of the fundamental wavelength allows us to geometrically select the supercontinuum for spectroscopic applications of the white-light supercontinuum, such as remote sensing \cite{3,21} or supercontinuum cavity ring-down spectroscopy \cite{22}. For example, in our experimental arrangement, the overall losses in the blue green (BG) part of the spectrum can be less than 20–30\%, while a 2-mm-thick BG colored glass filter would reject 50–60\% of the light in the same spectral region.

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