Anisotropic thermomagnetic avalanche activity in field-cooled superconducting films

F. Colauto,1 D. Carmo,1 A. M. H. de Andrade,2 A. A. M. Oliveira,3 W. A. Ortiz,1 and T. H. Johansen4,5

1Departamento de Física, Universidade Federal de São Carlos, 13565-905, São Carlos, SP, Brazil
2Instituto de Física, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, 91501-970, Porto Alegre, RS, Brazil
3Instituto Federal de Educação, Ciência e Tecnologia de São Paulo, 13563-905, Campus São Carlos, SP, Brazil
4Department of Physics, University of Oslo, P. O. Box 1048 Blindern, 0316 Oslo, Norway
5Institute for Superconducting and Electronic Materials, University of Wollongong, Northfields Avenue, Wollongong, NSW 2522, Australia

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The electrodynamic behavior of isotropic superconducting Nb films cooled below its critical temperature in the presence of in-plane applied magnetic fields is investigated using magneto-optical imaging. A specially designed local flux injector is used to show that the frozen-in in-plane vortices strongly guide and enhance the penetration of perpendicular vortices, whereas their penetration across the array of in-plane vortices is essentially unchanged. This result provides the key to understand why field-cooled square superconducting films show anisotropic nucleation of flux avalanches (jumps) along the 4 edges. The explanation is based on an analytical model for thermomagnetic avalanche nucleation in type-II superconducting films, and allows to understand the entire scenario of different flux dynamics observed experimentally.

The gradual penetration of magnetic flux in films of type-II superconductors experiencing an increasing external magnetic field can be interrupted by the onset of dramatic flux avalanches. These events, also called flux jumps, nucleate at points along the film edge, and from there, the flux invades the film in the form of dendritic structures with branches advancing at speeds up to 100 km/s. Using magneto-optical imaging (MOI), this phenomenon has been observed in films of many superconducting materials, such as Nb, Pb, MgB2, Nb3Sn, YNi2B2C, NbN, and MoS1.

Films of YBa2Cu3Ox, however, show remarkable stability. For a long time the only known way to trigger avalanche events in this material was by applying a laser pulse to perturb the flux-filled film locally. More recently, Baziljevich et al. showed that also YBa2Cu3Ox films become unstable in magnetic fields when applied at rates near 3000 T/s. They also found that during these avalanche events the YBa2Cu3Ox decomposed and evaporated, leaving ditches in the film as permanent traces of the advancing avalanche front — a unique evidence for the thermomagnetic nature of the instability.

Another remarkable observation was reported by Albrecht et al. where a square MgB2 film was deposited on a vicinal substrate, creating 6% anisotropy in the critical current density. Although small, this anisotropy resulted in dramatic changes in the avalanche activity as function of temperature, T. At T well below 10 K, the avalanches nucleated evenly from all 4 edges of the film, and when approaching 10 K, they occurred only from the pair of edges where the larger critical current density was flowing. Then, above 10 K avalanches never appeared. This peculiar behavior was fully explained using theoretical results obtained in works by Denisov et al.

Quite recently, Vlasko-Vlasov et al. reported MOI investigations of a square Nb film initially cooled below Tc = 9.0 K in the presence of an in-plane magnetic field H||. When then a perpendicular field, H⊥, was applied it was found at 6 K that the flux penetration was gradual, and strongly anisotropic. At 5 K, the penetration took the form of dendritic avalanches, also they displaying distinct anisotropic features, namely: With H|| applied along any pair of parallel edges, the avalanches nucleated only from the edges aligned with the field. Those edges were also seen to have the steepest gradient in the density of penetrated perpendicular flux. A qualitative explanation for the intriguing observation was given by drawing analogy to avalanches occurring along slopes in granular media.

In the present work, the anisotropic avalanche behavior reported in Ref. is fully explained from equations governing the electrodynamics of type-II superconducting films. The explanation is based also on new MOI observations where we make active use of local flux injection into Nb films with H||-induced anisotropy. These results allow us to adopt an analytical approach related to that used in Ref., thus generalizing the applicability of the stability analysis of the coupled non-linear and non-local equations governing the thermomagnetic instability in film superconductors.

The first question to address is whether the anisotropic regular flux penetration in Nb films with frozen-in H|| is due to reduced pinning of the perpendicular vortices moving parallel to the in-plane ones. Or is it due to enhanced pinning of the incoming vortices as they move across the array of in-plane vortices? In principle, both effects could also be active simultaneously.

To resolve the ambiguity we made use of the flux injector design shown in Fig. 1. Samples of this shape were prepared from 200 nm thick Nb films grown on Si (100) substrates by magnetron sputtering in a UHV system with base pressure less than 2 x 10^-8 Torr. The films have a critical temperature of Tc = 9.1 K, and patterning was performed using optical lithography. By passing an applied current, iapp, in the legs extending from the lower edge, a controllable amount of magnetic flux can...
be injected into the square from the point where the 2 legs meet. The sides of the square are 2.5 mm long.

To observe the flux penetration into the sample we used a magneto-optical imaging (MOI) setup where a thin plate of Faraday rotating Bi-substituted ferrite-garnet film with in-plane magnetization served as sensor. The sensor plate was placed directly on top of the Nb film, and when viewed in a polarized light microscope with crossed polarizers, the image brightness represents a direct map of the magnetic flux density distribution. The objective lens used in this work was a 5X MPPlanFL Olympus, and images were recorded using a Qimaging Retiga 4000R CCD camera. Its pixel scale was calibrated based on a Pelcotec TM CDMS Standard. The image analysis was carried out using the Image J 1.48 software. A resistive coil was placed around the optical cryostat to apply perpendicular fields, \( H_\perp \). In-plane fields \( H_\parallel \) were generated by a pair of permanent magnets mounted on a rotatable stage allowing \( H_\parallel \) to be applied in various directions, see Fig. 1, left panel. Current pulses were provided by a Keithley-2635 current source.

Presented in Fig. 2 are magneto-optical images of the sample cooled to 7.0 K before a current pulse was applied in the injector. Panel (a) shows the flux distribution after initial zero-field-cooling. In panels (b)-(d) an in-plane field, \( H_\parallel = 1 \) kOe oriented in 3 different directions, was applied during the initial cooling.

The tendency described above is here repeated, i.e., parallel to \( H_\parallel \) the injected flux penetrates much deeper than in panel (a), while the transverse width of the injected area is essentially the same. Panel (c) displays the result with \( H_\parallel \) oriented along a diagonal of the square sample, and confirms that the dominant effect of \( H_\parallel \) is to guide the flux injection. These observations allows us to conclude that the anisotropy in the flux penetration is largely due to reduced pinning of the vortices moving parallel or anti-parallel to the frozen-in \( H_\parallel \). This translates directly into an anisotropy in the critical sheet current. Let \( J_{c^T} \) and \( J_{c^L} \) denote the critical sheet current flowing in the directions along and transverse to the \( H_\parallel \), respectively, see Fig. 1, right panel. From the flux injection images in Fig. 2 we
conclude that $J_c^L$ is essentially constant, whereas $J_c^T$ becomes smaller with larger applied $H_\parallel$.

Consider next the flux penetration at a lower temperature in a similar Nb film shaped as a plain square with 2.5 mm sides. The film, having the same thickness as the sample with injector, was initially cooled to $T = 2.5$ K in the presence of in-plane magnetic fields. Then, a perpendicular field of $H_\perp = 38$ Oe was applied, creating the flux distribution seen in the images presented in Fig. 3.

Panel (a) shows the flux penetration into the initially zero-field-cooled sample, and one sees that the penetration at this temperature is dominated by dendritic avalanches. Each branched structure is the result of one avalanche event, which started from the point at the edge where the tree structure is rooted. In this panel one sees that the avalanches nucleated from locations quite equally distributed between all the 4 edges.

In panel (b) the isotropic symmetry is broken as the majority of avalanches here nucleate from the pair of edges oriented vertically in the figure. Then in panel (c), the anisotropy is complete, as no avalanches nucleate along the horizontal edges. When increasing the $H_\parallel$ further, see panel (d), the full anisotropy remains.

To explain this striking behavior we make use of results from theoretical analyses of the thermomagnetic instability in superconducting films thermally coupled to their substrate\cite{16,17}. The analyses consider a film strip of width $2w$ and thickness $d \ll w$ placed in an increasing perpendicular magnetic field creating a critical state in the flux-penetrated region near the edges. By solving the Maxwell and thermal diffusion equations, it was shown that for small perpendicular fields there is no solution for perturbations growing with time, implying a stable situation. As the field increases the flux distribution can become unstable, with the fastest growing perturbation having a non-zero wave vector along the film edge. This implies an instability developing in the form of a narrow finger perpendicular to the edge — a scenario corresponding to the early stage of the observed flux dendrites.

Within this model, a film of thickness, $d$, becomes unstable when the flux penetration depth, $\ell$, reaches the value given by,

$$\ell = \frac{\pi}{2} \sqrt{\frac{\kappa T^* d}{J_c E}} \left( 1 - \sqrt{\frac{2h_0 T^* n J_c E}{n J_c E}} \right)^{-1}. \quad (1)$$

Here, $T^* \equiv -(\partial \ln J_c / \partial T)^{-1}$, $\kappa$ is the thermal conductivity, and $h_0$ is the coefficient of heat transfer between the film and the substrate. The parameter $n \gg 1$ characterizes the nonlinear current-voltage curve of the superconductor, described by the commonly used relation for the electrical field, $E \propto J^n$.

The threshold value for the applied perpendicular field, $H_{th}$, can then be found by combining Eq. (1) with the Bean model expression for the flux penetration depth in a thin strip of half-width $w$ \cite{23,24}, which gives

$$H_{th} = \frac{J_c}{\pi} \arccosh \left( \frac{1}{1 - \ell/w} \right). \quad (2)$$

Plotted in Fig. 4 as a full curve is the generic relation between the threshold field and $J_c$, based on the two equations above. Included in the figure are also two line segments representing the two critical sheet currents, $J_c^L$ and $J_c^T$. The lines are drawn vertical, to stay within the Bean model approximation.
According to the present MOI observations, the full line representing $J^c_c$, should remain fixed in the graph, being essentially independent of the magnitude of $H^\parallel$. The dashed line, representing $J^T_c$, should for the isotropic case, $H^\parallel = 0$, obviously overlap with $J^c_c$. Then, for increasing $H^\parallel$, the $J^T_c$ gradually decreases and the dashed line shifts to the left in the graph. The threshold field will then increase for avalanche nucleation along the two edges where $J^T_c$ flows. At the same time, the threshold field at the other two edges remain unchanged. Thus, more avalanche events are expected to start there, in full accord with the anisotropy seen in Fig. 3 (b).

Then, as $H^\parallel$ increases further, the dashed line in Fig. 4 will at some point enter the region where avalanches can no longer occur. Thus, avalanches will then only nucleate from the two edges along which the $J^c_c$ flows, again in full agreement with the MOI observations. We therefore conclude that the entire scenario of different avalanche activities in a square superconducting film with various degrees of field-induced anisotropy has been explained based on an adequate theoretical model.

Finally, it is interesting to compare the morphologies of the avalanches observed in the present experiments with those in the work on MgB$_2$\cite{12}. Figure 5 presents in the left panel a magneto-optical image of our Nb film at $T = 4.5$ K, which is close to the highest temperature where the penetration is dendritic in this film. During the cooling the field $H^\parallel = 1.0$ kOe was frozen in as indicated in the schematic shown below the images. Then, the field $H^\parallel = 45$ Oe was applied, triggering the large and strongly branching avalanches from the pair of edges that are parallel to the frozen-in flux.

The right panel shows an image of the MgB$_2$ film at $T = 10$ K, also this the border line temperature between dendritic and regular flux penetration. Here the applied field was $H^\perp = 160$ Oe, and the terrace structure of the viscinal substrate is indicated below the image. Although the MgB$_2$ film shows a significant edge roughness, and higher concentration of point-like defects, all the main characteristics in the two image are essentially the same. And this in spite that the physical origins of the anisotropy are completely different. This suggests a remarkable universality in the theoretical model applied here for the onset conditions of thermomagnetic avalanches in superconducting films.

Finally, note that in a recent work\cite{13} the formulas above, represented in the graph of Fig. 4, were generalized by including in the linear stability analysis also modes with complex instability increments. I.e., scenarios of oscillatory precursor behavior were also considered. It was there found that the threshold perpendicular field can then be expressed as,

$$H_{th} = \frac{J_c}{\pi} \tanh \left( \frac{\hbar T^*}{nwJ_{c}H_{\perp}(t)} \right) ,$$

where $H_{\perp}(t)$ is the ramp rate of the applied field. It is readily verified that the curve representing the above relation between $H_{th}$ and $J_c$ has the same qualitative shape as the graph shown in Fig. 4. Thus, the present analysis, making use of the generic graph in that figure, has an even broader basis of applicability. However, it still remains to be found which type of modes are actually responsible for the triggering this instability in different materials under various conditions.

In conclusion, we have investigated magnetic flux penetration in isotropic square Nb superconducting films cooled below $T_c$ in the presence of externally applied in-plane magnetic fields. Using magneto-optical imaging it was found that the frozen-in field creates a tunable extrinsic anisotropy in the critical sheet current, leading to a corresponding anisotropy in the penetration of perpendicular flux. In square films cooled to 2.5 K, the flux penetration was largely dominated by avalanche dynamics, and with increasing in-plane fields the avalanche activity became increasingly anisotropic, with the majority of avalanches nucleating from edges oriented parallel to the frozen-in field. This sequence of behaviors observed for a range of in-plane fields was fully explained theoretically.

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25. Separate measurements have shown that the anisotropy in the $J_c$’s is well described by $J_c^T = J_c^L / (1 + c H_f^2)$ where $c = 8 \cdot 10^{-10}$ Oe$^{-3}$. 
26. 93.