ULTRAFAST ELECTRON DIFFRACTION:
DIRECT DETERMINATION OF
STRUCTURAL DYNAMICS OF
MOLECULAR EXCITED STATES

Thesis by
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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

California Institute of Technology
Pasadena, California
2006
(Defended: May 23, 2006)
Acknowledgements

Although this thesis is the direct product of the last five and a half years of my education, it is also the fruit of the many years that preceded my time at Caltech. It is therefore to all the people who guided and influenced me since the beginning that I owe thanks here. However, since there are so many, only a few can be given the individual mention that they all deserve.

It is thanks to my high school chemistry teacher, Dave Wilson, that I chose chemistry as my major when I applied to college. His teaching took my interest in chemistry (at the time, mostly in making things explode) and put it in pursuit of the science behind what just anyone can see. As an undergraduate at Rutgers University my organic chemistry professor, Pat O’Connor, was an unofficial advisor of sorts and I appreciate the time he took to socialize. As an honor’s program researcher, I am indebted to my advisor Professor Lionel Goodman for providing me with an appreciation of the fundamentals. Both theoretically and experimentally everything boils down to the isolated molecule.

And of course, I have my graduate advisor, Professor Ahmed Zewail, to thank above all other mentors for his guidance, occasional parenting, and making this all possible. Professor Zewail encouraged me to work hard and, as he often said, “push the frontiers of science.” But, what he required of me was to have passion for whatever I did – I can’t imagine leaving his group without taking away a more important lesson than that. His passion for science delivered through our many meetings and discussions was
inspirational and nothing short of awesome. It truly was an honor to work with him and I am sincerely grateful.

Down in the subbasement, I had the pleasure of diffracting electrons with a fantastic gang of scientists: Hyotcherl Ihee, Vladimir Lobastov, Boyd Goodson, Chong-Yu Ruan, Ramesh Srinivasan, Sang Tae Park, Shoujun Xu, Yonggang He, and Andreas Gahlmann. I don’t have enough space to say something nice about them all, so I’ll recognize in particular Ramesh and Sang Tae with whom I worked the closest and the longest. Both are excellent scientists, good friends, and from each I learned a great deal while working and having fun. Their imprint lies on everything reported in this thesis.

The Zewail group itself was the paradigm of camaraderie. I have everyone who shared the floor with me at some point to thank for the overall atmosphere. I’ll miss the multinational element and the constant schooling in foreign culture that I received. Particular mention should go to my long-time lab neighbor, Hern Paik. Hern and I must have put down 1000 liters of coffee together over the course of both our graduate tenures. Although group members years apart, Theis Solling and Marco Seidel shared with me a love for the outdoors. With each I had a number of adventures and I value their friendship greatly.

Additional thanks go to Dian, the chemistry department’s graduate secretary, for being patient, kind, and possessing a sense of humor similar to my own. Mike in the machine shop also deserves some space here for the countless times that he had to deal with me while I was stressing out over another problem with the equipment that had to be solved immediately. The Zewail group was privileged to have several fun and friendly
administrators and secretaries during my stay. De Ann, Maggie, Janet, Sylvie, and Mary always lightened the mood and were a great asset to the atmosphere of the group.

I’d also like to gratefully recognize the financial support of the Blanche Mowrer Fellowship during my first year at Caltech, and the National Science Foundation and Air Force Office of Scientific Research for funding the work that is reported on within this thesis.

Last, but certainly not least, I want to thank my parents, Stuart and Cathy Feenstra, who were always proud of me and did everything they could to help me learn and live. It is to them that I owe the most.
Abstract

Ultrafast electron diffraction (UED) has been applied to determine the structures of isolated molecules and the dynamics of their excited states. Preceding the experimental accounts is a detailed discussion of the theoretical methodology behind UED in the Caltech labs. The procedure is explained by which electron scattering signal is measured and processed to allow the direct determination of structural dynamics (the signature feature of this experiment). The apparatus itself is also broken down into its component parts and discussed.

UED has the capability of studying both ground and excited state systems, which will be demonstrated by example. A number of molecules were studied in their ground states (chlorobenzene, bromobenzene, iodobenzene, 2-fluoropyridine, acetylacetone, benzaldehyde, acetonaphone, and methylbenzoate). The structures were determined and compared with structures derived by theoretical calculations and with the results of previous gas electron diffraction inquiries. The molecular structures of 2-fluoropyridine, acetonaphone, and methylbenzoate had not been previously experimentally determined. The structure of ground-state acetylacetone is discussed in detail as it represents an old problem involving the influence of intramolecular hydrogen bonding.

Acetylacetone, benzaldehyde, and acetonaphone were also studied after excitation by a femtosecond laser pulse. Acetylacetone was observed to fragment – losing the hydroxyl radical. Calculations were performed to further explore the dynamics and mechanism. For excited benzaldehyde and acetonaphone, a bifurcation of pathways was structurally resolved. Both molecules have photophysical and photochemical channels from the excited state. The photophysical channels result in the formation of a structure possessing a quinoid ring. The photochemical channels differed – for benzaldehyde, molecular dissociation resulting in benzene and carbon monoxide, and for acetonaphone, homolytic bond cleavage resulting in methyl and benzoyl radicals. The structures of all species were determined as were the time scales involved. Calculations were used to assist in the determination of the excited state decay mechanisms.
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