Dynamic transition in an atomic glass former: A molecular-dynamics evidence

E. Pitard¹, V. Lecomte²(a) and F. van Wijland³

¹ Laboratoire des Colloïdes, Verres et NanoMatériaux (CNRS UMR 5587), Université de Montpellier II
place Eugène Bataillon, 34095 Montpellier cedex 5, France, EU
² Laboratoire de Probabilités et Modèles Aléatoires (CNRS UMR 7599), Université Paris Diderot - Paris 7 and
Université Pierre et Marie Curie - Paris 6 - Site Chevaleret, CC 7012, 75205 Paris cedex 13, France, EU
³ Laboratoire Matière et Systèmes Complexes (CNRS UMR 7057), Université Paris Diderot - Paris 7
10 rue Alice Domon et Léonie Duquet, 75205 Paris cedex 13, France, EU

received 12 May 2011; accepted in final form 7 October 2011
published online 15 November 2011

PACS 64.70.qd – Thermodynamics and statistical mechanics
PACS 05.90.+m – Other topics in statistical physics, thermodynamics, and nonlinear dynamical systems
PACS 05.70.Fh – Phase transitions: general studies

Abstract – We find that a Lennard-Jones mixture displays a dynamic phase transition between an active regime and an inactive one. By means of molecular dynamics simulations and of a finite-size study, we show that the spacetime dynamics in the supercooled regime coincides with a dynamic first-order transition point.

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In order to realize that a physical system has fallen into a glassy state one must either drive the system out of equilibrium, or investigate its relaxation properties. It is indeed a well-known fact that since no static signature is available, one has to resort to nonequilibrium protocols or measurements to identify a glassy state. The supercooled regime, which sets in before the material actually freezes into a solid glass, is also characterized by anomalous temporal properties, such as the increase in the viscosity, and ageing phenomena during relaxation processes. The density-density autocorrelation function at a microscopic scale, instead of exhibiting a straightforward exponential relaxation, develops a plateau (over a duration conventionally called \( \tau_\alpha \)) before relaxing to zero. The present work is concerned with the dynamical properties in the supercooled regime. The idea that dynamical heterogeneities, long-lived large scale spatial structures, are the trademark of the slow and intermittent dynamics in the supercooled regime dates back to almost thirty years [1] and many developments have occurred since [2–4]. Here, instead of resorting to local probes such as the van Hove function, the self-intermediate scattering function, or the nonlinear dynamical susceptibility — i.e. on multi-point correlation functions in space and time—we prefer to rely on a global characterization of the system’s dynamics.

More recently, it was advocated by Garrahan et al. [5] that, at the level of Kinetically Constrained Models (KCMs), dynamical heterogeneities appeared as the consequence of a universal phase transition mechanism, largely independent of the specific model under consideration. The phase transitions at work are not of a conventional type: they occur in the space of trajectories of realizations the system has followed over a large time duration, instead of occurring in the space of available configurations, as the liquid-gas transition, or a putative thermodynamic glass transition, for instance, do. There exists a well-established body of mathematical physics literature to analyze these phase transitions, which is based, in spirit, on the thermodynamic formalism of Ruelle [6,7], and which was adapted [8] and then exploited [5] in numerical and analytical studies of the KCMs. The idea behind these studies is to follow the statistics, upon sampling the physical realizations of the system over a large time duration, of a space and time extensive observable. This observable characterizes the level of dynamical activity in the course of the system’s time evolution. At this stage, the term activity refers to the intuitive picture that an active trajectory is characterized by many collective rearrangements needed to escape from energy basins, whereas an inactive

(a)E-mail: vlecomte@math.jussieu.fr
trajectory is dominated by the rapid in-cage rattling
motion of the particles without collective rearrangements.
This activity observable is used to partition trajectories
into two groups—the inactive and the active ones—depending on whether their activity is above or below the
average activity.

An important step forward in probing the relevance of
the dynamic phase transition scenario to realistic glasses is
the work of Hedges et al. [9] in which an atomistic model
was considered. The system studied by these authors is
a mixture of two species of particles interacting via a
Lennard-Jones potential otherwise known as the Kob-
Andersen (KA) model [10], and which has been shown to
fall easily into a glassy state without crystallizing.
Endowed with a Monte Carlo or a Newtonian dynamics,
Hedges et al. implemented the Transition Path Sampling
(TPS) method to produce the probability distribution
function (pdf) of the activity, at finite times. These
authors succeeded in showing that for a finite system, as
the observation time was increased, the pdf of the activity
develops a bimodal structure. In the light of previous
works on lattice models for glass formers, they interpreted
their result as an evidence for a bona fide dynamic phase
transition, expected to occur once the infinite size and
infinite observation time limits are reached. While the
work of Hedges et al. is a definite breakthrough towards a
better understanding of atomistic glass formers, it leaves a
number of questions unanswered. These are the subject of
the present work. Dynamic phase transitions occur in the
large time limit, as exemplified by the pioneering works of
Ott et al. [11], Cvitanović [12] or Szépfalusy and Tél [13]
(see Beck and Schlögl [14] for further references). The
dynamic transitions at work in glass formers are of a
subtler form, since they only emerge upon, in addition,
considering the infinite system size limit.

Our first goal in this letter is to show the existence
of a phase transition. Our second goal is to be more
precise about the location of the phase transition itself.
This is indeed a central issue: if the critical point is away
from the typical measurable activity, then the transition
scenario is at best a crossover. If, on the contrary, it is
shown that the phase transition actually takes place for
typical trajectories, then experimentally observable
consequences are expected. Our third goal is to provide
a rigorous deﬁnition of the activity. It is our feeling that
deeper insight will be gained if the notion of activity
can be characterized by standard physical concepts (like
forces between particles) rather than on phenomenological
considerations.

In the present work, we consider a KA mixture, which
we study by extending the methods of Molecular Dyanmics
(MD) to the study of temporal large deviations. By
implementing a MD version of the cloning algorithm of
Giardinà, Kurchan and Peliti [15] we are able to follow the
statistics of the large deviations of the activity. Our activity
observable is a physically transparent quantity which can be related to the rate at which the system escapes
from a given location in phase space. As we shall soon
see, the typical trajectories of the system in phase space are characterized by strong spacetime heterogeneities
—the so-called dynamical heterogeneities—which appear
to be the by-product of an underlying first-order dynamical transition in which the activity plays the role of an
order parameter. A typical realization lies at a first-order
transition point, which is thus characterized by the
coexistence of competing families of trajectories. Active
trajectories, in which a time and space extensive number
of events where a particle escapes from its local cage,
coexist with inactive trajectories in which localization of
the particles within their local neighborhood dominates
the dynamics. Without going further into the mathematical
details of what the activity is, we present in fig. 1 a
snapshot of the activity map in a three-dimensional KA
mixture in three distinct situations.

We now carry out our program and we begin by defining
an activity observable: given a set of particles interacting
via a two-body potential $V(r_i - r_j)$, in which each particle
$i$ is subjected to a force $\mathbf{F}_i = -\sum_{j\neq i} \nabla V(r_i - r_j)$, we
introduce the observable

$$V_{\text{eff}} = \sum_i \left[ \frac{\beta}{4} \mathbf{F}_i^2 + \frac{1}{2} \nabla r_i \cdot \mathbf{F}_i \right]. \quad (1)$$

The combination $\frac{\beta}{4} \mathbf{F}_i^2 + \frac{1}{2} \nabla r_i \cdot \mathbf{F}_i$ can be interpreted as
the activity of a single particle. The quantity $V_{\text{eff}}$ in (1)
appears in the study of Brownian interacting particles
and measures the tendency for dynamical trajectories
to evolve away from a given configuration. Indeed, it can be
argued [16] that the quantity $\exp(-\beta V_{\text{eff}} dt)$ is propor-
tional to the probability $P(x,t+t+dt|x,t)$ that the system
has stayed in its configuration between $t$ and $t+dt$. This
means that $\beta |V_{\text{eff}}|$ is the rate at which the system escapes
its configuration. To understand how (1) is related to

![Fig. 1: (Colour on-line) In these snapshots, the diameter of
the particles quantifies the local activity: small points refer
to mobile active particles, whereas large blobs refer to blocked
inactive particles. Red (blue) indicates that the activity is
larger (smaller) than the median one. Left: Activity map in
a typical configuration from a trajectory with excess activity
with respect to the average activity; there is a large number
of mobile particles though blocked particles also exist. Right:
Activity map in a typical configuration from a trajectory with
less activity than the average activity, large blobs dominate.](image-url)
this escape rate one writes $P(x, t + dt| x, t) = \langle x | e^{-\hat{H}dt}| x \rangle$ where $\hat{H}$ is the Fokker-Planck operator of evolution of the system. Using the detailed balance property of the dynamics, $\hat{H}$ can be symmetrized and this leads to $P(x, t + dt| x, t) \sim \exp(-\beta V_{\text{eff}} dt)$, using standard path-integral representation of the propagator $\langle x | e^{-\hat{H}t}| x \rangle$ (see [16] for details). Besides, if one regularizes the Brownian dynamics in the form of hops on a lattice, our activity can be viewed as the continuum analog of the activity introduced in Lecomte et al. [17] which counted the number of configuration changes undergone by a system over a given time interval. Perhaps more interestingly still, $V_{\text{eff}}$ also appears as the continuum limit analog of the dynamical complexity (a trajectory-dependent Kolmogorov-Sinai entropy [8]) which further clarifies its conceptual value. However, hand-waving arguments lead to a more concrete understanding of the value of the effective potential $V_{\text{eff}}$. Indeed, in the expression (1) minimizing the first term on the right-hand side drives the system away from regions of phase space where forces are nonzero. In other words, it tends to favor mechanical equilibrium configurations (whether stable or metastable). The second term on the right-hand side of (1), can be positive or negative: if negative, it will favor local minima, all the more so as they are deep and steep; if positive, it will select local maxima. As a result, there will be two classes of trajectories, according to the values of $V_{\text{eff}}$. It can be shown that the average equilibrium value of $V_{\text{eff}}$ is $\langle V_{\text{eff}} \rangle = -\beta/4 \sum_i F_i^2$, which is always negative. For minimal (negative) values of $V_{\text{eff}}$, trajectories will explore deep energy basins, for maximal values of $V_{\text{eff}}$, trajectories will explore local maxima of the energy landscape.

The total activity is defined as $K(t) = \int_0^t dt' V_{\text{eff}}(t')$. In terms of the local density $\rho(x, t)$, our activity reads

$$K = \int_0^t dt \left[ \frac{\beta}{4} \int_{x,y,z} \rho(x, t) \rho(y, t) \rho(z, t) \nabla V(x-y) \nabla V(x-z) - \frac{1}{2} \int_{x,y} \rho(x, t) \rho(y, t) \Delta V(x-y) \right].$$

(2)

It is now apparent that $V_{\text{eff}}$ involves three-body effective interactions, a fact that we a posteriori interpret by realizing that in order to escape from an energy basin via a collective rearrangement, multi-body interaction terms are needed.

Given the activity we have just defined, we set out to determine the distribution of this quantity over a large number of realizations of the process, that is, given the dynamics is deterministic, by sampling over a large number of initial states drawn from the equilibrium Boltzmann distribution. Sampling the full distribution of the activity requires sufficient statistics beyond its typical values. For that reason we have preferred to work in an ensemble of trajectories in which the average activity, rather than the activity, is fixed. In this canonical version, we consider a large number of systems evolving in parallel, and between $t$ and $t + dt$ we remove or add a system in a given configuration with a cloning factor equal to $\exp(-s V_{\text{eff}}(t) dt)$. How to perform a numerical simulation in a canonical ensemble of time realizations was explained in Giardini et al.’s cloning algorithm [15]. We combined the cloning algorithm with the molecular-dynamics simulation of the interacting particles. Choosing a positive value of $s$ allows one to focus on time realizations with a lower-than-average activity, while a negative $s$ selects over-active trajectories, and $s$ close to zero samples typical activity trajectories. To this day, no one has been able to endow the parameter conjugate to the activity $s$ with a concrete physical meaning, so that the only physically realizable value of an $s$-ensemble is achieved for $s = 0$. As will shortly become clear, analyzing the $s = 0$ properties gains enormously from being able to vary $s$ away from 0, a theorist’s privilege. The distribution of the activity $K$ is fully encoded in its generating function $Z(t, N) = \langle e^{-s K} \rangle$, or, alternatively, in the corresponding cumulant generating function $\ln Z$. We define the intensive dynamical free energy $\psi(s, N) = \lim_{t \to \infty} \ln Z(t, N)$ for any given finite size. From the knowledge of the function $\psi(s, N)$ we can reconstruct the properties of the activity $K$. In numerical terms, in view of the cloning algorithm used, $\psi$ stands for the growth rate of the population of systems evolving in parallel. The details of the simulations are as follows. We used the A-B mixture of [10] for samples of different sizes. The samples all had the approximate ratio 80/20 for A/B particles. They were first prepared at equilibrium at temperature $T = 0.8$ by coupling to a stochastic heat bath; the time step was $dt = 2 \times 10^{-2}$. During a very long simulation at equilibrium, the $N_c$ clones where prepared. Then the cloning algorithm of Giardini et al. [15] was performed with a small coupling to the heat bath, necessary to provide some stochasticity to the exploration of trajectory space, as explained in [15,18] for deterministic systems. In our simulations, the convergence was checked by varying the number of clones and the duration of the simulations. For $N = 45, 82$ the best results were found for $N_c = 1000$ and $\tau = 10 \tau_n$ ($\tau_n$ is the relaxation time); for $N = 155, 250, 393$ the best results were found for $N_c = 500$ and $\tau = 20 \tau_n$. Fluctuations in the space of clones would have required for the largest system sizes that we substantially increase $N_c$ as the tails of the distribution are sampled (extreme values of $s$).

We now present the central result of the work, namely the dynamical free energy $\psi(s, N)$ as a function of $s$ for increasing system sizes $N$. Figure 2 shows that the dynamical free energy per particle $\frac{\psi(s, N)}{N}$ settles to a well-defined limiting value for $s < 0$ as $N$ increases. This means that for $s < 0$ there exists a thermodynamic limit. On the $s < 0$ side, where the activity is above its average value at $s = 0$, which we interpret in terms of active trajectories, the physical properties are not far from
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Fig. 2: (Colour on-line) The dynamical free energy per particle \( \psi(s,N) \) is shown as a function of \( s \) for increasing sizes \( N = 45, 82, 155, 250 \) and 393. While the curves collapse onto a single master curve at \( s < 0 \), a strong size-dependent behavior is observed at \( s > 0 \). On the \( s > 0 \) side, the curves display a rapid variation at a typical value \( s_c(N) \) which decreases as \( N \) increases, leading to the putative building up of a singularity of \( \psi(s,N)/N \) at \( s = 0 \) as \( N \to \infty \). The rescaled \( [\psi(s,N) - \psi(s_c,N)]/N^{1+\alpha} \) with \( \alpha \approx 0.43 \) is shown in the inset: on the inactive side \( s > 0 \) the curves collapse onto a single curve, exemplifying the large \( N \) finite-size scaling. Applying the cloning algorithm requires the \( |V_{\text{eff}} \, dt| \) product to be infinitesimally small (in principle), which at the left end of the graph and for the largest two values of \( N \) is hardly verified (dashed lines). For these points, this product reaches .5 which accounts for the increasing error.

For those at \( s = 0 \) as predicted from the Gibbs equilibrium distribution. However, a dramatic change in behavior is observed for positive values of \( s \). Not only do the dynamical free energies exhibit a strong size dependence, but a severe change in behavior is also observed on that side of the parameter space. For \( s > 0 \), the free energy rapidly increases, and the activity rapidly decreases. The location \( s_c(N) \) at which this rapid increase sets shows a strong \( N \)-dependence: \( s_c(N) \) seems to decrease to zero as \( N \) increases. The precise location of \( s_c(N) \) has been determined thanks to a spline method and by maximizing \( \psi''(s) \); this is illustrated in fig. 3. One notes that given the existence of error bars, there is an overall decrease of \( s_c(N) \) as \( N \) increases, but one cannot exclude that \( s_c(N) \) converges to a very small positive value. As in other examples of first-order dynamical transitions [5], we remark that \( s_c(N) \) remains positive for all finite \( N \). Indeed, \( \psi'(0) = -(V_{\text{eff}}) \) is proportional to \( N \), which means that \( \psi(s) \) also scales as \( N \) in the vicinity of \( s = 0 \), and since \( s_c(N) \) marks the transition to a regime where \( \psi(s) \) scales differently with \( N \), one has \( s_c(N) > 0 \).

The interpretation in terms of active vs. inactive trajectories is easier when plotting the average activity as a function of \( s \). This is done in fig. 4, where the average activity is measured independently: we see that in the vicinity of \( s_c(N) \), the behavior of \( (V_{\text{eff}})/N \) changes abruptly from a smooth range of values at \( s < 0 \) to a strongly negative range for \( s > 0 \). In this inactive regime, through rescaling (see the inset in fig. 2), we see that the free energy behaves in \( N^{1+\alpha} \) with \( \alpha \approx 0.43 \), in contrast to the purely extensive behavior of the active regime. A similar difference of scaling exponents in \( N \) is observed in KCMs in two dimensions [5] at \( s > 0 \): \( \psi(s) \) is of order \( L \) for the Fredrickson-Anderson model (FA) while of order 1 for the triangular lattice gas (TLG). This behavior is related to the geometry of the remaining active sites in the system: those divide up along the border of fully inactive domains in the FA model, while they are isolated in the TLG. Our finding that \( \alpha \) is noninteger indicates that the KA mixture adopts configurations with nontrivial geometrical features for the inactive particles in the inactive phase due to the effective long-range interactions that develop in the \( s > s_c \) states. Since large values of \( |V_{\text{eff}}| \) correspond to inactive histories, it is expected that \( \alpha > 0 \), as observed. We note that such finite-size behaviour of the activity with nontrivial exponents is known to occur in lattice KCMs [19], where the value of those exponents are directly related to the nature

Fig. 3: \( s_c(N) \) as a function of \( N \).

Fig. 4: (Colour on-line) The average activity per particle \( (V_{\text{eff}})/N \) is measured in an ensemble of trajectories biased by a weight \( e^{-sK} \) and is plotted as a function of \( s \). While the \( s < 0 \) regime shows convergence to a size independent limit of an order comparable to its equilibrium value, the \( s > 0 \) side confirms a strongly size-dependent behavior as \( V_{\text{eff}} \) abruptly decreases to negative values. This sudden drop in \( V_{\text{eff}} \) indicates that the system freezes into inactive states.
of configurations appearing in the inactive state (which differ from those of the active state).

This allows us to claim that there exists a phase transition from inactive to active states as \( s \) is varied. Our closely related goal was to identify the location of the transition. We have shown that \( s_c(N) \) displays a strong size-dependence with an overall decrease for the range of \( N \) values explored. The two different well-defined scalings \( \sim N^{1+\alpha} \) (respectively, \( \sim N \)) for \( s > 0 \) (respectively, \( s < 0 \)) indicate that we have reached the large \( N \) asymptotics on our range of system sizes (see fig. 2). We therefore conclude that the most likely value at which the transition takes place in an infinite system is either \( s_c(\infty) = 0 \) or a very small positive value close to 0. We were not able to perform simulations for larger values of \( N \) due to the very large computation times needed.

The first-order dynamic transition scenario observed in KCMs is thus confirmed in the atomistic model we have studied. As we mentioned earlier, the location of the phase transition along the \( s \)-variable axis is an extremely relevant issue since only the value \( s = 0 \) is experimentally accessible. Note however that identifying a transition point at \( s = 0 \) is possible only on condition that \( s \) is varied across 0. Therefore, finding evidence for the transition occurring at \( s = 0 \) renders an experimental observation of the transition a credible achievement. The lesson to be drawn from the present extensive simulation series is that, as expected, it is desirable to work on as small systems as possible, yet large enough to allow for collective effects in trajectory space to develop.

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This work was supported by a French Ministry of Foreign Affairs Alliance grant. VL was supported in part by the Swiss NSF under MaNEP and Division II. We greatly benefited from discussions with R. L. JACK. We thank W. KOB for providing the software for the preparation of the configurations, and L. BERTHER for help with fig. 1.

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