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Title	Multi-Turing instability spectra and spatial fractals in absorptive systems
Authors	Christian, JM, Bostock, C, McDonald, GS and Huang, JG
Type	Conference or Workshop Item
URL	This version is available at: http://usir.salford.ac.uk/32868/
Published Date	2014

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Multi-Turing instability spectra and spatial fractals in absorptive systems

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Spontaneous optical pattern formation in ring cavities containing saturable absorbers has been increasingly studied over the past two decades, with models often based on the two-level Maxwell-Bloch equations. Linear stability analysis of the weakly-absorptive system tends to be fraught with complexity, and leads ultimately to a threshold instability spectrum for Turing patterns that possesses comparable multiple minima [Patrascu *et al.*, *Opt. Commun.* **96**, 433 (1992)] – a *multi-Turing spectrum* that we have proposed as a universal signature for predicting a system’s innate capacity to generate spontaneous spatial fractals [Huang and McDonald, *Phys. Rev. Lett.* **95**, 174101 (2005)]. Taking the mean-field limit decreases the overall complexity of the problem [Firth and Scroggie, *Europhys. Lett.* **26**, 521 (1994)] but the multi-Turing spectrum vanishes, leaving only a single instability lobe which provides no obvious mechanism by which fractal patterns can emerge.

Here, we consider two reduced models of a two-level saturable-absorber system without recourse to mean-field theory [Huang, Christian, and McDonald, *J. Nonlin. Opt. Phys. Mat.* **21**, 1250018 (2012)]. Our analysis begins with the thin-slice approximation, capturing the interplay between the circulating cavity field, a diffusive population difference (driven by local light intensity), and the classic ring cavity boundary condition (lumping together periodic pumping, coupling-mirror losses, and interferomic mistuning). Simulations have shown that emergent spatial patterns can be both simple (single-scale) and fractal (multi-scale) in character. More recently, we have gone beyond the thin-slice limit and applied our approach to bulk geometries (where light-medium interaction lengths become finite and can no longer be ignored). Theoretical analysis still predicts a multi-Turing spectrum under the conditions of an instantaneous local medium response (i.e., no diffusion) and paraxial diffraction (i.e., nonlinear Schrödinger-type governing equation). This key result suggests that the multi-Turing mechanism may be truly universal, arising in even the simplest models of a bulk absorptive cavity.