

Description

This invention relates generally to an optical device and, more particularly, to an optical memory device which writes, stores and reads out data in optical form without any conversion to electronics.

Background of the Invention

It is generally accepted that the requirements for telecommunications networks and broad band services are placing increased demands on the ability of various components to operate at greater speeds and higher bandwidths. To satisfy this new requirement, there is increased use of optical fiber technology in telecommunications networks.

However, telecommunication systems still use many conventional electronic devices which cannot operate with optical signals. Therefore, to process the information being transmitted, electronic-to-optical and optical-to-electronic conversions are required.

Clearly, any device which reduces the number of conversions required would provide advantages not currently attainable.

Currently, bistable optical switches which have low switching energy are available. In one such device, the optical switching energy is achieved by the use of a material capable of absorbing light to generate a photocurrent. A voltage responsive to the photocurrent is applied to a structure having a semiconductor quantum well region to cause the optical absorption of the semiconductor quantum well region to vary in response to variations in the photocurrent. Additionally, the variations in absorption in the semiconductor quantum well region can influence the absorption of the material capable of absorbing light so as to provide a feedback path which results in nonlinear and bistable optical operating conditions.

Summary of the Invention

This invention as set out in the claims is an optical memory device in which data are written, stored and read out in optical form without any conversion to electronics. The functions performed such as readout, reset and the like can be via electronic means, optical means, or a combination of both. The inherent bistability/hysteresis which is required for the memory function is obtained with a laser structure which may include a saturable absorber.

The invention may make use of an electrically or optically controlled directional coupler switch coupled to a laser cavity for reading out and resetting the memory. This method of readout enables the memory state to be sensed with a higher efficiency than is obtainable with present day devices.

Briefly, the optical device here disclosed can comprise the following specific elements: a means of

optical gain; a saturable absorber; a static waveguide directional coupler; a switchable directional coupler; a pair of reflecting surfaces to form the laser-memory cavity; the electrical potentials required for the readout-reset control of the switchable directional coupler; or, in that instance where the switchable directional coupler is optically controlled, optical signals to initiate the readout-reset function.

The elements above noted can be either bulk or waveguide optical devices and can be either discrete units combined in hybrid fashion, or integrated units, or combinations thereof. Several material technologies exist for realizing the various elements. An integrated embodiment can be realized in a semiconductor material of, for example, the binary system GaAs; the ternary system InGaAs; or the quaternary system InGaAsP. It is to be noted that the state of the art of these material technologies for optical applications is evolving rapidly. Hybrid realizations are also attractive and the feasibility of these implementations has been demonstrated recently by a combination of semiconductor devices, glass optical fibers, and lithium niobate integrated-optic components.

Brief Description of the Drawing

The figure is a schematic diagram illustrating the invention.

Detailed Description

Referring to the FIG., a chip 10 which can be an electro-optic substrate such as LiNbO₃, a GaAs or the like supports three waveguides 12, 14, 16. Waveguide 12 in the electro-optic substrate 10 is coupled, at one end, to a second chip 18 and, at the other end, a reflecting surface 20. The second chip 18 comprises an optical gain section 22 and a saturable absorber 24. A second reflecting surface 26 is located at the end of the optical gain section of the chip 18. The chip 18 in combination with the waveguide 12 and the two reflecting surfaces 20, 26 forms a laser cavity. The reflecting surfaces 20, 26 can comprise highly polished surfaces, optical gratings having a periodic variation in the refractive index to provide a distributed feedback to function as a reflecting surface, and the like.

The chip 18 is a laser like chip where an electrode is placed on that part of the chip which acts as the gain region 22. The second region 24, which can be a few tens of μm in length does not have any electrode and functions as a saturable absorbing region.

The central waveguide 12 forms a directional coupler 28 with waveguide 14; and a second directional coupler 30 with waveguide 16. The physical locations of the directional couplers is arbitrary. They can be co-located at the center of the chip 10 as illustrated in the FIG., or they can be formed at different sites along the central waveguide 12.

In LiNbO_3 , the waveguide 12, 14, 16 can be formed by titanium diffusion or the like. The ends of the waveguides 14, 16 are coated with an antireflecting coating. One end 32 of the waveguide 12 is also coated with an antireflecting surface and the chip 18 can be attached to it by means of a short length of fiber or by butt-coupling.

The directional coupler 30 can be a fixed or switchable coupler depending upon the application of the device. The switchable version is useful in those instances where the memory is to be "written" or activated at the control of the user. If a fixed coupler is used, the memory will be activated automatically. When selected, a typical coupling efficiency can be approximately 20%. To facilitate connecting the device to receive and transmit signals, fiber pigtails 34, 36 can be connected to the ends of waveguide 14; and fiber pigtails 38, 40 can be connected to the ends of waveguide 16.

A read control 42 is coupled to control the voltage that is applied to directional coupler 28. A write control 44 is coupled to control the voltage that is applied to directional coupler 30.

The "writing" and "reading" operations of the invention are as follows: Beginning from the reset state, the gain medium 22 is pumped via current injection to a bias level that is just below the saturation level of the saturable absorber 24 and, therefore, below the threshold for lasing action of the laser cavity defined by the mirrors 20, 26 and includes waveguide 12. Thus, the optical intensity in the central waveguide 12 is very small. When an optical data pulse occurs at the input waveguide 38 or 40 of waveguide 16 (indicating the occurrence of a logical 1) it is coupled via coupler 30 with an efficiency of η_q into the central waveguide and laser cavity 12. This optical signal is reflected back from reflecting surface 20 and is directed toward the saturable absorber 24. This additional optical energy, upon reaching the saturable absorber, completes the saturation and causes the absorber 24 to become transparent and optical energy passes freely between the reflecting surfaces 20, 26. Thus, optical energy emitted from the gain region 22 is reflected back from reflecting surface 20 to cause stimulated emission and lasing action. Once lasing has been initiated, the input optical signal is no longer required as the lasing optical energy level is sufficient to maintain saturation. Thus, the optical data has been "written" and is maintained or stored in optical form by the lasing state of the laser. If the incoming signal had been an optical "off" level (logical 0), then the laser would have remained in the non-lasing state.

When the term optical or optical energy is used in this application, it is to be understood that it encompasses photon energy which can be in the range which extends from infrared through ultraviolet, or any other wavelength in the electromagnetic spectrum which can be transmitted via a fiber.

To read the information which is being stored, the optical state of the memory element, (the laser cavity defined by the mirrors 20, 26) is sensed via the switchable coupler 28. Normally, coupler 28 is conditioned to be in the "straight-through" condition. That is, optical energy will not normally exit the laser. To sense the state of the laser, switchable coupler 28 is set to the crossover state by the read control 42. If the coupler 28 is an electro-optic device, as can be fabricated in LiNbO_3 or GaAs, and the switch state of the coupler is selected by application of an appropriate voltage. If optical control rather than electric control is desired, chip 10 can be composed of an organic polymer or other optical nonlinear material. In this instance, the switchable coupler 28 would be activated optically by a separate control beam.

With the coupler 28 in the "crossover" state, the optical energy present within the laser cavity is transferred into optical waveguide 14 and exists through the fiber ends 34, 36 of waveguide 14. The optical energy output from the fiber ends of the waveguide 14 can be coupled to the next stage of a system for use as an input for additional operations which may depend on the state of the memory. The optical output signal can also be coupled to an optical detector, if desired, to convert the optical state (high/low) of the signal to an electronic level.

In this invention, the optical output signal taken from the laser cavity through the coupler 28 consists of the majority of the photons present in the cavity. They are transferred directly from the cavity to the output waveguide 14. Thus, the number of photons transferred to the output waveguide 14 in this manner are significantly greater than would be transferred if the photons were transferred from the laser cavity through a partially reflecting surface.

As a result of the read operation, the optical intensity within the waveguide 12 falls to a low level and the saturable absorber stops the lasing action. In this manner, the lasing action stops and the memory element is reset. The switchable coupler 28 is then set back to the straight-through state by the read control 42. A non-volatile memory device can be formed by combining two of the elements described above.

If desired, the light that comes out both fiber ends 34, 36 of waveguide 14 can be combined together to provide higher output intensity; or, they can be used as two parallel outputs. Similarly, either fiber end 38, 40 of waveguide 16 can be considered to be the input or, if desired, both ends can be considered to be the inputs. If both ends of the waveguide 16 are connected to different inputs which are not from the same source, then the device will store the result of a logical OR operation in its memory.



Claims

1. An optical device comprising:
a laser comprising an optical gain member (22) and a saturable absorber (24) in tandem with a waveguide (12) which acts as the cavity for the laser, said optical gain member, said saturable absorber and said waveguide being positioned between two fully reflecting surfaces, whereby said laser is capable of assuming a first non-lasing state or a second lasing state to act as a memory for a data bit that is to be stored,
writing means (16,30,44) arranged to inject optical energy into said waveguide so as to selectively optically trigger said laser from said first to said second state according to the data bit that is to be stored, and
reading means (14,28,42) arranged to sense whether the laser is in said non-lasing or said lasing state and to selectively transfer the optical energy of the lasing state to a further waveguide (34,36).
2. The optical device of claim 1 wherein said writing means comprises a second waveguide (16) which forms a directional coupler (30) with the first said waveguide (12).
3. The optical device of claim 2 wherein said directional coupler is fixed.
4. The optical device of claim 2 wherein said directional coupler is controllable, and write control means (44) are coupled to selectively control the operation of said directional coupler.
5. The optical device of any of claims 2 to 4 wherein said reading means comprises a third waveguide (14) which forms a second directional coupler (28) with the first said waveguide.
6. The optical device of claim 5 wherein said second directional coupler is selectively controllable, and read control means (42) are coupled to optically or electrically control the operation of said second directional coupler.
7. The optical device of any of claims 2 to 6 comprising
a first input (38) coupled to one end of said second waveguide and a second input (40) coupled to the other end of said second waveguide whereby the result of a logical OR operation is stored optically.

Patentansprüche

1. Optische Vorrichtung mit:
einem Laser mit einem optischen Verstärkungsglied (22) und einem sättigbaren Absorber (24) in Kaskaden mit einem Wellenleiter (12), der als Resonator für den Laser wirkt, wobei besagtes optisches Verstärkungsglied, besagter sättigbarer Absorber und besagter Wellenleiter zwischen zwei voll reflektierenden Oberflächen positioniert sind, wodurch besagter Laser dazu in der Lage ist, einen ersten Nicht-Laser-Zustand oder einen zweiten Laser-Zustand anzunehmen, um als Speicher für ein zu speicherndes Datenbit zu wirken,
Schreibmitteln (16, 30, 44) zum Einkoppeln von optischer Energie in den besagten Wellenleiter zur gezielten optischen Auslösung des besagten Lasers aus besagtem ersten in besagten zweiten Zustand entsprechend dem zu speichernden Datenbit und
Lesemitteln (14, 28, 42) zum Messen, ob sich der Laser im besagten Nicht-Laser- oder besagten Laser-Zustand befindet und zur gezielten Übertragung der optischen Energie des Laser-Zustandes an einen weiteren Wellenleiter (34, 36).
2. Optische Vorrichtung nach Anspruch 1, wobei die besagten Schreibmittel einen zweiten Wellenleiter (16) umfassen, der mit dem besagten ersten Wellenleiter (12) einen Richtkoppler (30) bildet.
3. Optische Vorrichtung nach Anspruch 2, wobei der besagte Richtkoppler fest ist.
4. Optische Vorrichtung nach Anspruch 2, wobei der besagte Richtkoppler steuerbar ist und Schreibsteuermittel (44) zur gezielten Steuerung der Funktion des besagten Richtkopplers gekoppelt sind.
5. Optische Vorrichtung nach einem der Ansprüche 2 bis 4, wobei besagte Lesemittel einen dritten Wellenleiter (14) umfassen, der mit dem besagten ersten Wellenleiter einen zweiten Richtkoppler (28) bildet.
6. Optische Vorrichtung nach Anspruch 5, wobei der besagte zweite Richtkoppler gezielt steuerbar ist und Lesesteuermittel (42) zur optischen oder elektrischen Steuerung der Funktion des besagten zweiten Richtkopplers gekoppelt sind.
7. Optische Vorrichtung nach einem der Ansprüche 2 bis 6, mit einem ersten, mit einem Ende des besagten zweiten Wellenleiters verkoppelten Eingang (38) und einem zweiten, mit dem anderen Ende des besagten zweiten Wellenleiters ver-



koppelten Eingang (40), wodurch das Ergebnis einer logischen ODER-Verknüpfung optisch gespeichert wird.

Revendications

1. Appareil optique comprenant:

un laser comprenant un élément de gain optique (22) et une matière absorbante saturable (24) en tandem avec un guide d'ondes (12) qui fait office de cavité du laser, ledit élément de gain optique, ladite matière absorbante saturable et ledit guide d'ondes étant positionnés entre deux surfaces entièrement réfléchissantes, si bien que ledit laser est capable de prendre un premier état de non-émission laser ou un second état d'émission laser pour faire office de mémoire d'un bit de donnée à mémoriser,

un moyen d'écriture (16,30,44) disposé pour injecter de l'énergie optique dans ledit guide d'ondes de manière à déclencher optiquement sélectivement ledit laser depuis ledit premier état dans ledit second état conformément au bit de donnée à mémoriser, et

un moyen de lecture (14,28,42) disposé pour détecter si le laser est dans ledit état de non-émission laser ou ledit état d'émission laser et pour transférer sélectivement l'énergie optique de l'état d'émission laser à un autre guide d'ondes (34,36).

2. Appareil optique selon la revendication 1, dans lequel ledit moyen d'écriture comprend un second guide d'ondes (16) qui forme un coupleur directionnel (30) avec ledit premier guide d'ondes (12).

3. Appareil optique selon la revendication 2, dans lequel ledit coupleur directionnel est fixe.

4. Appareil optique selon la revendication 2, dans lequel ledit coupleur directionnel est contrôlable, et des moyens de commande d'écriture (44) sont couplés pour commander sélectivement le fonctionnement dudit coupleur directionnel.

5. Appareil optique selon l'une quelconque des revendications 2 à 4, dans lequel ledit moyen de lecture comprend un troisième guide d'ondes (14) qui forme un second coupleur directionnel (28) avec ledit premier guide d'ondes.

6. Appareil optique selon la revendication 5, dans lequel ledit second coupleur directionnel est sélectivement contrôlable, et des moyens de commande de lecture (42) sont couplés pour commander optiquement ou électriquement le

fonctionnement dudit second coupleur directionnel.

7. Appareil optique selon l'une quelconque des revendications 2 à 6, comprenant

une première entrée (38) couplée à une extrémité dudit second guide d'ondes et une seconde entrée (40) couplée à l'autre extrémité dudit second guide d'ondes si bien que le résultat d'une opération OU logique est mémorisé optiquement.