

Contents

Preface	ix
---------	----

List of Contributors	xiii
----------------------	------

1

Introduction	1
1.1 General Remarks	1
1.2 Qualitative Description of Thermionic Converters	1
1.2.1 The Elementary Thermionic Converter	1
1.2.2 Vapor-Cycle Analogy	3
1.3 Basic Phenomena in Thermionic Conversion	4
1.4 Types of Thermionic Converters	5
1.5 Characteristics of Typical Thermionic Converters	12
1.6 Thermionic-Converter Systems	14
1.6.1 Solar Thermionic Generators	14
1.6.2 Radioisotopic Thermionic Generators	15
1.6.3 Nuclear Reactor Thermionic Generators	15
1.6.4 Chemical Thermionic Generators	20
1.7 Comparison of Thermionic Conversion with Other Electrical Power Systems	21
1.8 Historical Review	26
References	28

2

The Ideal Performance of Diode Thermionic Converters	31
2.1 General Remarks	31
2.2 Thermionic Emission	32
2.2.1 General Considerations	32
2.2.2 Electrons in Metals—Fermi Energy	33
2.2.3 Electron Motive and Work Function	36
2.2.4 Electron Saturation Current	38
2.2.5 Velocities of Thermionically Emitted Electrons	39
2.2.6 Ion Thermionic Emission—Ion Saturation Current	39
2.3 A Simple Diode Thermionic Converter: General Definitions	41

Contents	vi
----------	----

2.4 Electron-Motive Diagrams through the Interelectrode Space	43
2.5 Output-Current Characteristics	46
2.5.1 General Considerations	46
2.5.2 Ideal Output-Current Characteristics	48
2.6 Ideal Output-Power Characteristics	53
2.6.1 Electrical Output Power	53
2.6.2 Ideal Output-Power Characteristics	56
2.6.3 Dependence of Maximum Ideal Output Power on Electrode Properties	63
2.6.4 Electrode Properties for Useful Ideal Output Power	64
2.7 Energy-Conversion Efficiency	67
2.7.1 Energy Balance	67
2.7.2 Ideal Efficiency	72
2.7.3 Electronic Efficiency	73
2.7.4 Lead Design Optimization: Lead-Optimized Ideal Efficiency	75
2.7.5 Lead-Optimized Ideal Efficiency Characteristics	77
2.8 Optimum Ideal Performance	83
2.8.1 General Considerations	83
2.8.2 Performance Optimization	83
References	88
Additional Reading	89

3

Vacuum Thermionic Converters	90
3.1 General Remarks	90
3.2 Negative-Space-Charge Effect	91
3.3 The Vacuum Diode Thermionic Converter	93
3.3.1 Basic Configuration	93
3.3.2 Interelectrode Motive	93
3.3.3 Output-Current Characteristics	96
3.3.4 Electrode Output-Power Characteristics	107
3.3.5 Energy-Conversion Efficiency	110
3.3.6 Advantages and Disadvantages	115
3.4 The Vacuum Magnetic Triode Thermionic Converter	115
3.4.1 General Remarks and Basic Configuration	115
3.4.2 Principle of Operation	116
3.4.3 Interelectrode Motive	117
3.4.4 Partial Analysis of Performance Characteristics	118
3.4.5 Experimental Results	121
3.5 The Vacuum Electrostatic Triode Thermionic Converter	121
References	122

4

Vapor Thermionic Converters	123
4.1 General Remarks	123
4.2 Interactions of Cesium Vapor with Metallic Surfaces and Electrons	124
4.2.1 Work Function of a Metallic Surface Immersed in Cesium Vapor	124
4.2.2 Thermionic Emission of Ions and Neutral Atoms from Metallic Surfaces Immersed in Cesium Vapor	133
4.2.3 Interactions of Electrons with Cesium-Vapor Particles	135
4.3 The Cesium Diode Thermionic Converter	139
4.3.1 Basic Configuration	139
4.3.2 Low- and High-Cesium-Pressure Diodes	140
4.4 Low-Pressure Diodes	141
4.4.1 General Output-Current Characteristics	141
4.4.2 Interelectrode Motives	144
4.4.3 Neutralization Conditions	149
4.4.4 Experimental Output-Current Characteristics	153
4.4.5 Emitter Work Functions Determined from Output-Current Characteristics	162
4.4.6 Ion-Emission Currents and Ion-Richness Ratios Determined from Output-Current Characteristics	163
4.4.7 Collector Work Functions Determined from Output-Current Characteristics	164
4.4.8 Advantages and Limitations	166
4.4.9 Conditions for Optimum Ideal Performance	168
4.4.10 Spacing-Limited Performance	173
4.4.11 Energy-Conversion Efficiency	174
4.5 High-Pressure Diodes	175
4.5.1 General Output-Current Characteristics	175
4.5.2 Analysis of Performance	179
4.5.3 Materials and Construction	187
4.5.4 Experimental Output-Current Characteristics	188
4.5.5 Optimized Performance Characteristics	188
4.5.6 Discussion of Experimental Results	193
4.5.7 Energy-Conversion Efficiency	197
4.5.8 Advantages and Limitations	207
4.5.9 Techniques for Improvement of Performance	211
4.6 Cesium Diodes with Additives	216
4.6.1 General Remarks	216
4.6.2 Cesium Diodes with Electropositive Additives: Experimental Results	217
4.6.3 Cesium Diodes with Electronegative Additives: Experimental Results	221
4.7 Supplemented Vapor Diodes	225
4.7.1 General Remarks	225
4.7.2 The Pulsed Diode: Experimental Results	225
4.7.3 Radiation Diodes: Experimental Results	225
4.8 Ion Emission Vapor Triodes	229

Contents	viii
4.8.1 General Remarks	229
4.8.2 The Surface Ionization Triode: Principles of Operation	229
4.8.3 The Surface Ionization Triode: Experimental Results	230
4.8.4 The Surface Ionization Triode: Potential and Limitations	231
4.8.5 The Ion Dispenser Triode	235
4.9 Arc Triodes	237
4.9.1 General Remarks	237
4.9.2 Arc Triodes: Experimental Results	237
4.10 Concluding Remarks	239
References	240
Appendix A : Tables and Figures	243
Index	261