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ISOCAM* Observations of NGC 6946: Mid-IR Structure

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Abstract. The nearby spiral galaxy NGC 6946 was observed with ISO-CAM in the mid-infrared, achieving 7″ resolution and sub- MJy sr^{-1} sensitivity. Images taken with CAM filters LW2 (7μm) and LW3 (15μm) are analysed to determine the morphology of this galaxy and understand better the emission mechanisms. The mid-infrared emission follows an exponential disk with a scale length 75″. This is 60 % of the scale length in the optical R-band and radio continuum. The nuclear starburst region is too bright for reliable measurement in these images. Its surface brightness exceeds the inner disk by at least a factor of 12. The arms and interarm regions are clearly detected, with each of these components contributing about equally to the disk emission. The arm-interarm contrast is 2-4 in the mid-IR, close to that measured in the visible R band light and lower than the contrast in $H\alpha$, suggesting that non-ionizing radiation contributes significantly to dust heating.

Key words: Infrared:galaxies – Infrared:ISM:continuum – Galaxies:ISM – Galaxies:spiral – Galaxies:structure

1. Introduction

NGC 6946 is a nearby face-on spiral galaxy, a good target for a study of star-formation and related processes in "normal" galaxies. In addition to the well-resolved disk, it has a starburst nucleus (*e.g.* Engelbracht et al. 1996), and a bright northern spiral arm that earned it an entry in the Atlas of Peculiar Galaxies (Arp 1966). NGC 6946 was therefore selected as a focus of the Key Project on the interstellar medium of normal galaxies (Helou et al. 1996) under NASA Guaranteed Time on ISO (Kessler et al. 1996). We report here on the ISO-CAM (Césarsky et al. 1996) maps obtained for this galaxy, revealing for the first time the mid-infrared (mid-IR) morphology at vastly improved resolution and sensitivity.

Mid-IR emission in the 5 to 20 μm range is dominated by very small grains fluctuating to high temperatures and from Poly Aromatic Hydrocarbons (PAH) features. Even though these grains are not in thermal equilibrium, they still convert heating photons (Draine and Anderson 1985), and should therefore trace star-formation, allowing a detailed and un-extincted view of that activity. By studying the distribution of the mid-IR emission with respect to other components of the galaxy, i.e. HI, H_2, ionized gas, and starlight we can also characterize the heating sources for the mid-IR, and better define its diagnostic value.

2. Observations and Data reduction

NGC 6946 was mapped at 7μm (LW2 filter, $\Delta\lambda = 3.5\mu$m) and at 15 μm (LW3 filter, $\Delta\lambda = 6\mu$m), using the raster scan mode to cover roughly $12.5' \times 12.5'$ centered on the nucleus. CAM was set to 6″/pixel, and the raster was made up of 8×8 pointings separated by 81″, or 13.5 pixels in each direction, allowing for better spatial sampling. At each pointing in the raster scan we took 8 frames integrating 5 seconds for each at 7 μm, and 10 frames of 2 seconds each at 15 μm. Hα and broad-band imaging

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of NGC 6946 was done at Palomar observatory 60-inch telescope.

The first step in reducing the ISO-CAM data was deglitching, done within the ISOCAM Interactive Analysis package using the routine "mr1d_deglitch", found most reliable among the available procedures for removing cosmic ray hits. Detector transients were then removed within the same software package, using the "IPAC" transient removal algorithm, which uses a simplified physical model for each pixel's time dependent behavior. Then a set of eight "local" flat fields were constructed by taking medians of sequential galaxy-free frames and were then used to form interpolated flats for each of the individual frames, by simple linear interpolation for each pixel. The dark-removed, deglitched and transient corrected data were then flattened by dividing each frame by the appropriate interpolated flat field. Using these processed data we then constructed a model for the sky flux distribution in an array with $3'' \times 3''$ pixels. This finer array is required because the raster steps amount to 13.5 of the $6'' \times 6''$ camera pixels. We assume the raster steps correspond exactly to commanded values. A least-squares fit was then made to determine the maximum likelihood value of the sky's average surface brightness in each pixel. This scheme of modelling the sky avoids some of the error propagation problems of the more traditional means of producing mosaiced images (cf Van Buren and Kong, 1996).

The diffraction-limited beam of ISO has a FWHM of $3''$ at 7μm and $6.3''$ at 15μm, but this resolution is not achievable with our observing mode. The 7 μm image contains foreground stars whose FWHM measures about $7.3''$. At 15μm the stars are very faint, and only one of them has a measurable FWHM of $7.2''$. The noise levels in these images are approximately 0.1 MJy sr^{-1} $\simeq 2\mu$Jy arcsec^{-2}, roughly 3 times lower than the noise in the "Auto-Analysis Results" map (OLP4.0). Features roughly a thousand times brighter are still reliably measured in these maps. The inner $15''$ or so are too bright to measure, and the surface brightness at the nucleus exceeds 300 and 560 MJy sr^{-1} respectively in LW2 and LW3.

These maps result from a preliminary data reduction which could be significantly improved, especially in the areas of transient removal and flat fields.

3. Disk Structure

The ISOCAM maps of NGC 6946 have enough resolution, sensitivity and extent to allow a detailed comparison with the maps at other wavelengths. The mid-IR images at both 7μm and 15μm show a good qualitative similarity to optical, radio and $H\alpha$ images. Diffuse emission from the disk in the interarm regions is clearly detected (Figures 1 and 2) and can be traced out to $\sim 5'$, comparable to the optical size $D_{25} = 10 - 12'$.

Except for the region in the inner $50''$ of the galaxy where oval distortions are present (Zaritsky & Lo 1984),

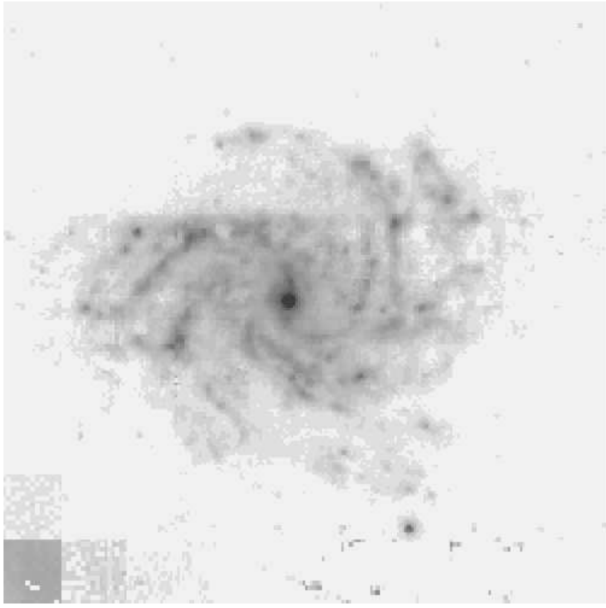

Fig. 1. ISOCAM image of NGC 6946 in the LW2 filter at a wavelength of 7μm, $\Delta\lambda = 3.5\mu$m. This image is a mosaic of 8×8 pointings. Log scale of brightness is used to display the dynamic range of the exponential disk surface brightness. Some Galactic foreground stars are visible to the south and west of NGC 6946. Fortuitous alignment of several features produces what seems to be an "edge" parallel to the major axis in the north. This is at least partly real and visible in optical images, and is exaggerated by residual responsivity drifts unaccounted for by the time-dependent flat field. The image is rotated 21° clockwise w.r. to images showing North at top and east to the left.

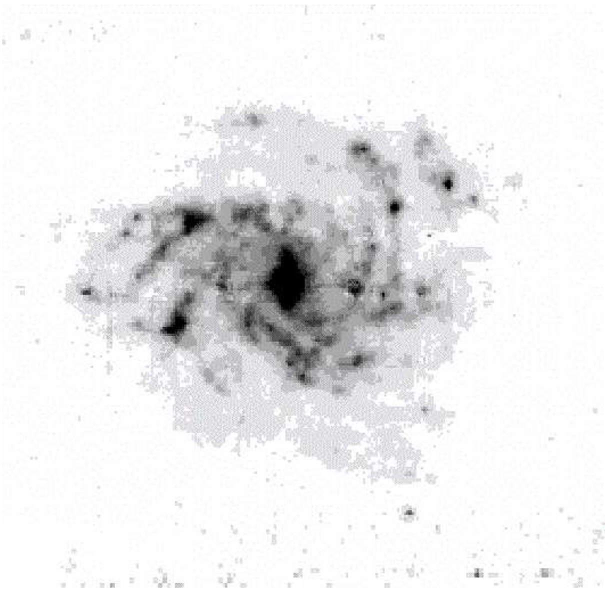

Fig. 2. ISOCAM image of NGC 6946 in the LW3 filter at a wavelength of 15μm, $\Delta\lambda = 6\mu$m (cf caption of Figure 1 for details). The image is displayed with a different greyscale stretch from figure 1 to show the faint outer disk

the mid-IR light follows an exponential profile (Figure 3). The radial profile of the galaxy is calculated by deprojecting the galaxy to the plane of the sky (assuming an inclination of 30° and position angle of 69°, subtracting the mean sky from an annulus outside the galaxy and then taking median emission levels at different annuli. Taking the median emission in annuli instead of the mean minimizes contributions from very bright regions of the spiral arms. Both LW2 and LW3 images were analysed in this manner and show identical scale lengths of 75″ at radii between 70″ and 200″. This scale length is mildly dependent on range of radii where the fit is taken, and on the sky subtraction; we estimate the uncertainty at about 10%.

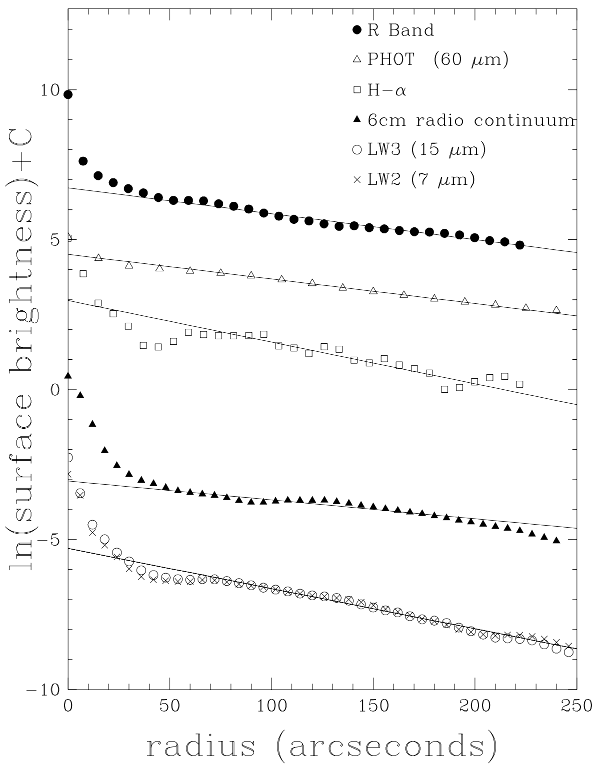

Fig. 3. The radial profile of NGC 6946 is exponential at most wavelengths including the mid-Infrared, but with different scale lengths. We show the profiles in the mid-IR from ISO-CAM (7 & 15 μm) , radio continuum (6 cm), $H\alpha$, Far-Infrared (60μm) and Optical R band.

For comparison we derive scale lengths for the optical R-band, and $H\alpha$ using the same method as for the mid-IR emission. The results are listed in Table 1. Also listed are scale-lengths derived by previous studies of this galaxy. We see that the mid-IR emission and $H\alpha$ emission have similar scale-lengths closest to the scale length of CO distribution of 86″ (Tacconi & Young 1986, TY86). Red light in optical R band shows a scale length of 115″. To reconcile the optical and mid-IR scale lengths we need to have made in the CAM images a sky subtraction error about ten times greater than the pixel-to-pixel rms noise. The ratio of mid-IR to radio behaves much like the ratio of FIR to radio, falling by the expected factor of 2 from a radius of 100″ to 200″ (Lu et al. 1996).

Table 1. Scale lengths

Wavelength	scale length	range of fit	Source
7 μm	74.6″	70 − 200″	this paper
15 μm	74.6″	70 − 200″	this paper
$H\alpha$	71.9″	70 − 200″	this paper
R-band (0.70 μm)	115.9″	70 − 200″	this paper
6 cm continuum	109 − 140″	90 − 240″	Lu96
60 μm	78 − 115″	90 − 240″	Lu96
HI (21 cm)	294″	200 − 580″	TY86
H_2	86″	40 − 280″	TY86
Total ISM (HI+H_2)	112″	40 − 280″	TY86

4. Arm-Interarm Contrast

A striking feature of the ISO-CAM maps of NGC 6946 is the conspicuous diffuse disk underlying the arms. The disk is relatively symmetric, making it unlikely to be the result of transient effects in detectors or other artifacts. In a semi-flocculent galaxy like NGC 6946 it is difficult to quantify the arm-interarm contrast. We define this contrast as the ratio between the peak in the arms and the median value of brightness in an annulus at the same radius. The arm regions were selected from the maps by eye. The contrast varies between 2 and 4 with the northern arm showing a higher arm brightness. The arm-interarm contrast rises from 2 to 4 with increasing radius along the northern arm (Figure 4). The southern arm is not continuous and shows arm-interarm contrast between 1 and 2 in the inner parts of the galaxy and up to ∼4 in the outer section which is disjointed (Figures 1 and 2). These results are consistent with TY86 who find that the arm-interarm ratio in CO emission increases with radius.

Comparison of the arm-interarm contrast between mid-IR and $H\alpha$ emission could address the question of what heats the dust, and more specifically whether it is the ionizing radiation which is responsible for the mid-IR emission (Devereux & Young 1993) or whether diffuse soft UV and visible starlight plays a significant role (Persson & Helou 1987). If the dust heating is primarily from ionizing radiation, the mid-IR emission should follow the distribution of ionized gas as traced by Hα for example. The data in hand (Figure 4) suggest that the arm-interarm contrast is higher for Hα than for the mid-IR. Since our Hα images do not detect interarm emission, our estimate of the discrepancy in contrasts is only a lower limit. The Hα and Mid-IR emission have similar scale lengths in the disk as shown in the previous section, whereas they have dissimilar arm-interarm contrast. The arm-interarm contrast in Mid-IR is closer to the contrast in R band light, which has a much longer scale length than mid-IR or Hα. One explanation may be that the PAHs are destroyed near HII regions in the arms, thus softening the contrast between arms and interarms.

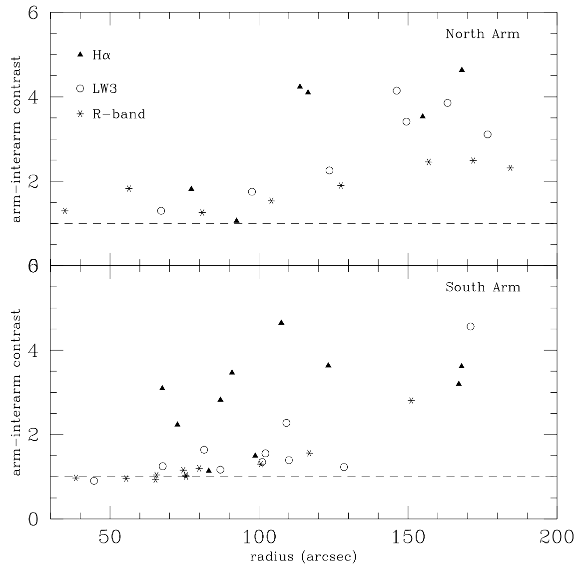

Fig. 4. The Arm-Interarm contrast (defined in §4) is plotted as a function of radius for the northern and the southern arms. The triangles represent the arm-interarm contrast in the $H\alpha$ image smoothed to the CAM resolution and the open circles show the contrast for LW3 (15μm) image. The asterisks show the arm-interarm constrast for smoothed R band images

5. Nucleus

Various indicators point to NGC 6946 as having a starburst nucleus (e.g. van der Kruit, Allen & Rots 1977, Rieke 1976; Telesco & Harper 1980; DeGioia-Eastwood et al. 1984). The starburst nature of the nucleus is confirmed by the ISOCAM data, which show a greatly enhanced surface brightness, 12 and 18 times the surface brightness of the nearby inner disk at 7μm and 15μm respectively (Figure 3). These values are lower limits because the nucleus is beyond the linear regime of the CAM detector in these data. Telesco, Dressel & Wolstencroft (1993) measure the peak brightness at 10.8 μm to be 0.4 Jy. The size of the nucleus is measured to be 100 pc at 10 μm (Telesco et al. 1993) and 8$''$ ($\sim$ 200 pc) at 6 cm continuum Beck & Hoernes (1996).

6. Conclusion

Based on this preliminary reduction of ISO-CAM data, the mid-IR morphology of NGC 6946 is quite distinct from other traditional tracers of the interstellar medium, and a promising addition because it is largely free of extinction. The maps clearly show the familiar structure of arms, exponential disk, and high brightness star-burst nucleus. However, they also suggest that the mid-IR may be a more complex tracer - it is closest to Hα in disk scale length, but resembles most the visible R band in arm-interarm contrast. The mid-IR emission is not distributed like atomic gas which has a hole in the center (TY86) nor like total gas distribution, but its radial profile is similar to that of molecular gas (which resembles Hα). Though puzzling and subject to more thorough data reduction and analysis, these properties are not necessarily contradictory, since each of the tracers is a product of different physical components modified by several effects.

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