

Dynamics of pyroclastic density currents

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“The only real knowledge is experience.” E.



*Rare painting of a pyroclastic flow that likely occurred during the 1810 Vesuvius eruption.
Alfano and Friedlander, Die Geschichte des Vesuv, plate 35.*

Abstract

Pyroclastic density currents (PDCs) are the most dangerous mass flows on Earth. Yet they remain poorly understood because internal measurements and observations are hitherto non-existent. In this thesis, the first measurements and views into experimental large-scale PDCs synthesized by “column collapse” provide insights into the internal structure, transport and emplacement dynamics of dense PDCs or pyroclastic flows.

While from an outside point of view, PDCs resemble dilute gravity currents, the internal flow structure shows longitudinal and vertical complexities that greatly influence the PDCs’ propagation and emplacement dynamics. Internal velocity and concentration profiles from direct observations provide the evidence of an unforeseen intermediate zone that plays an important role into the transfer of mass from the ash-cloud to the underflow. The intermediate zone is a “dense suspension” where particle cluster in bands to form mesoscale structures. These reduce particle drag and yield an extreme sedimentation rate of particles onto the newly-formed underflow. These findings call into question the existing paradigm of a continuous vertical concentration profile to explain the formation of massive layers and an underflow from ash-clouds. Instead, a sharp concentration jump occurs between the intermediate zone, with concentrations of the order of few volume percent, and the underflow, with concentrations of c.45%.

PDCs were found to be composed of 4 main zones identified as the underflow, and the ash-cloud head, body and wake. Following the evolution of the PDC structure over time allows the formation of a complex ignimbrite deposit sequence to be uncovered, reproducing experimentally the “standard ignimbrite sequence” reported from field studies. Experiments revealed that each flow zone deposited the particulate load under contrasting emplacement timescales (spanning up to 5 orders of magnitude), which are primarily controlled by the concentration of the zone.

The ash-cloud head is the most dynamic zone of the PDC, where proximally mass is intensively transferred downward and feeds the underflow front, while at all times, the finest particles are entrained upward and feed the wake through detachment of large Kelvin-Helmholtz instabilities. Subsequently, kinematic coupling between the moving underflow and overriding ash-cloud leads to a forced-supercriticality, preferentially affecting the head. The wide range of particle sizes and densities yield a spectrum of gas-transport behaviours ranging from a poorly coupled and rapid-sedimenting mesoscale regime up to a homogeneously coupled long-lived suspending regime.

Internal velocity and concentration profiles illuminate the role of boundary velocity, which yields forced-acceleration of the ash-cloud. Kinematic coupling of the ash-cloud with the underflow induces a velocity at the lower flow boundary, while shear stress at the ash-cloud/underflow wanes and results in the shrinking of the maximum velocity and concentration heights. Therefore, the ash-cloud can reach high velocities and multiply its destruction potential.

The experimental work presented in this thesis provides the first datasets of the internal physical properties of PDCs, which can be used to test the validity of current numerical models and highlight their limitations.

This thesis also presents the study of a small hydrothermal blast that occurred at Mt. Tongariro, New Zealand, on the 6th of August 2012. The study of the blast is subdivided into two phases: the PDC phase and the ballistic phase. The detailed study of the PDC along the main propagation axis highlighted the role of the longitudinal zoning of the current, which was reflected in the complex tripartite deposit architecture.

The study of the blast-derived ballistic crater field revealed a zone of high crater density that was related to the focus of ballistic trajectories around the main explosion direction. Simple inverse ballistic modelling provided evidence for a shallow blast (c. 5° above horizontal) from Te Maari. Furthermore, a comparison of ballistic block lithologies confirmed the origin of the elongated succession of craters or fissures formed by successive blasting during the eruption.

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgments	v
Table of Contents	vi
List of Figures.....	xi
List of Supplementary Figures	xxii
List of Tables	xxiii
List of Supplementary Tables.....	xxiv
Chapter 1 - Introduction	1
1.1 Research problem and motivation.....	2
1.2 Research questions and objectives	6
1.3 Thesis outline and structure.....	10
1.4 Literature review	13
1.4.1 Terminology	13
1.4.2 History	14
1.4.3 Introduction to pyroclastic density currents	19
1.4.4 Pyroclastic density currents hazards.....	23
1.4.5 PDC deposits	26
1.4.5.1 Trigger mechanisms.....	26
1.4.5.2 Field characteristics of PDC deposits	30
1.4.6 Transport mechanism	42
1.4.7 Physics of PDCs	49
1.4.7.1 Physics of dilute PDCs.....	49
1.4.7.2 Dynamic of concentrated PDCs.....	53
1.4.8 Modelling of PDCs.....	57
1.4.8.1 Experimental modelling of PDCs	58
1.4.8.1.1 Dilute flows	58
1.4.8.1.2 Dense flows	61
1.4.8.1.3 The rise of large-scale experiments.....	65
1.4.9 Numerical modelling	70
1.4.10 Summary and future perspectives.....	76
Chapter 2 – Material and Methods	79
2.1 Large scale experimental setup	80
2.1.1 Introduction to the setup	80
2.1.2 Introduction to the experimental procedure.....	81

2.1.3 The apparatus.....	83
2.1.4 Initial and boundary conditions	86
2.1.5 Reproducibility	89
2.2 Material	89
2.3 Measurements, sensors and software	91
2.3.1 Sensors for flow measurements	91
2.3.2 Flow measurement – Particle concentration.....	97
2.3.2.1 Measuring high concentration > ~5–10%	97
2.3.2.2 Measuring medium to low concentration < 5–10%	98
2.3.3 Software.....	102
2.4 Grain-size analysis, density measurements and componentry	102
2.5 Scaling of the experimental PDCs	103
Chapter 3 – Revealing the internal structure of pyroclastic density currents	107
3.1 Introduction	109
3.2 Methods.....	110
3.2.1 Generating PDC in large-scale experiments.....	110
3.2.2 Sensors and analytical methods.....	111
3.3 Results	113
3.4 Conclusion.....	122
3.5 Supplementary material.....	123
Chapter 4 – Inside pyroclastic density currents – uncovering the enigmatic flow structure and transport behaviour in large-scale experiments	126
4.1 Introduction	128
4.2 Methods.....	131
4.2.1 Synthesizing PDCs in large-scale experiments	131
4.2.2 Sensors and analytical methods.....	132
4.2.3 Non-dimensional number estimates	133
4.3 Results	136
4.3.1 Viewing inside experimental PDCs.....	136
4.3.2. Fluid dynamic characteristics of PDC regions	143
4.3.3 Coupled motion between underflow and ash-cloud regions	146
4.3.4 The internal flow structure	149
4.3.5 Distribution of dynamic pressure inside experimental PDCs.....	151
4.3.6 Multiphase transport.....	153

4.4. Discussion	158
4.4.1. The PDC structure	158
4.4.2. Coupled underflow/ash-cloud motion	159
4.4.3. Gas-particle transport	160
4.5. Conclusion.....	162
4.6. Supplementary material.....	163
Chapter 5 – Dynamics of the PDC frontal region – The influence of underflow and ash-cloud interactions on the head kinematics and structure.....	167
5.1 Introduction	169
5.2. Methods.....	171
5.2.1 Producing PDC in large-scale experiments	171
5.2.2 Sensors and analytical methods	174
5.3. Results	176
5.3.1 Outer flow kinematics	176
5.3.1.1 Outer appearance of experimental flows	176
5.3.1.2 Kinematics data of the flow front	178
5.3.1.3 Kinematic data of the ash-cloud and underflow	180
5.3.1.4 Densimetric Froude number of the ash-cloud head	182
5.3.2 Inner flow kinematics	186
5.3.2.1 Internal velocity through the head region	186
5.3.2.2 Vertical velocity and concentration structure in the middle of the head	188
5.4. Discussion	190
5.4.1 Kinematic coupling of underflow and ash-cloud	190
5.4.2 Interdependence of the head vertical structure to the Froude number	191
5.4.3 Forced supercriticality and head shape – comparison with other gravity currents	194
5.4.4 Implication of the underflow-ash-cloud coupling on PDC hazards	195
5.5 Conclusions	197
5.6 Supplementary material.....	199
Chapter 6 - Using the spatial distribution and lithology of ballistic blocks to interpret eruption sequence and dynamics: August 6 2012 Upper Te Maari eruption.....	203
6.1 Introduction	205
6.1.1 Tongariro Volcano and the 6 August 2012 Te Maari eruption	207
6.2 Methods.....	209
6.2.1 Mapping.....	209
6.2.2 Ballistic modelling.....	210

6.3 Results	212
6.3.1 Geology of the fissure area	212
6.3.2 Ballistic crater distribution	217
6.3.3 Ballistic craters and block lithologies.....	218
6.3.4 Estimation of launch-angles of the western ballistic field.....	222
6.4 Discussion	226
6.4.1 Crater distribution.....	226
6.4.2 Eruption source.....	228
6.5 Conclusions	230
Chapter 7 – Transport and deposition processes of the hydrothermal blast of the 6 August 2012 Te Maari eruption, Mt. Tongariro	234
7.1 Introduction	236
7.2 Methods.....	240
7.2.1 Characterizing the PDC deposit along the WNW sector.....	240
7.2.2 Total grain-size distribution.....	240
7.3 Results	241
7.3.1 General characteristics and stratigraphy.....	241
7.3.2 Granulometry.....	246
7.3.3 Local facies variations	252
7.4 Discussion	257
7.4.1 General interpretation	257
7.4.2 Architecture of the PDC deposit.....	258
7.4.3 Bottom-and-top deposit at the lava flow obstacle	260
7.4.4 Grain-size distribution within the PDC	261
7.4.5 Longitudinal PDC zoning.....	263
7.4.6 Density stratification of the blast current	264
7.5 Conclusions	268
7.6 Supplementary material: Method for estimation of the total blast grain-size distribution	270
Chapter 8 – Synthesis and conclusions	273
8.1 Synthesis.....	274
8.2 Specific findings.....	278
8.2.1 Gas-particle transport in PDCs at intermediate concentration and turbulence intensity	278
8.2.2 Tractional interaction between PDC underflow and ash-cloud regions	279

8.2.3 Forced-supercriticality – how interaction between underflow and ash-cloud regions leads to supercritical flow	280
8.2.4 Entrainment of ambient air	281
8.2.5 Head vortex.....	281
8.2.6 Hydrothermal blast: PDC	282
8.2.7 Hydrothermal blast: ballistics	282
8.2.8 Hypothesized similarities between experimental PDCs and the Tongariro blast..	283
8.3 Future perspectives.....	285
References	288
Appendices.....	331
Appendix A: Supplementary data	331
Appendix B: Statement of contribution	333

List of Figures

- Fig. 1.1. A: A dense PDC at night that looks like a lava flow, Sinabung volcano (Indonesia). B: Picture of a hot and dense PDC at Sinabung volcano (Indonesia). Long exposure allows us to visualize the ash cloud that is cooler (not glowing). Courtesy Richard Roscoe, Photovolcanica..... 19
- Fig. 1.2. Plot of the number of publications dealing with pyroclastic density currents against time (years) (black line) and the number of those publications that are peer-reviewed articles (red line).....20
- Fig. 1.3. Origins of “magmatic” pyroclastic density currents. A: Short single-pulse current derived by momentary collapse of a plinian column. B: Sustained current derived from prolonged pyroclastic fountaining. The height of the jet (gas thrust) that feeds the current may vary and is transitional into (C). C: A sustained current derived from prolonged low pyroclastic fountaining (boiling-over) explosive eruption. This lacks the kinetic energy derived from the potential energy of a high fountain. It may be accompanied by a buoyant eruption column (not shown) that does not feed the current. This may also be accompanied by the collapse of vent-proximal piles of agglutinate that feed scoria-and-ash flows (Lube et al., 2007a). D: Current with a single (or multiple) surge derived from lateral blasts initiated by catastrophic decompression of a magmatic and/or hydrothermal system. E: Single surge current derived from a collapsing lava dome or flow front. Hot rock avalanches generate turbulent density currents. F: Deposit-derived pyroclastic density current caused by gravitational collapse and avalanching of a loose ignimbrite or a rhyolite lava flow front. The current may be single surge or more sustained where the collapse is retrogressive. Most ignimbrite deposits derive from current type (B) and (C), which may involve periods of quasi steady flow. Many may include significant components derived from currents type (F). PDC generation mechanisms summarized from Branney and Kokelaar (2002) and Lockwood and Hazlett (2010).28
- Fig. 1.4. Basaltic-andesite massive ignimbrite overlain by stratified units of similar composition at Llaima volcano, Chile. Such outcrop depicts the dichotomy of PDC deposits as the massive, thick gray layer is overlain by thin beds that display multiple bedforms.32
- Fig. 1.5. Median ($Md\Phi$) and sorting ($\sigma\Phi$) showing different fields drawn depending on whether they are from pyroclastic surge (solid line), cross bedded deposits from Ubehebe crater (USA) and Taal volcano (Philippines) (dotted line), fallout (dashed-line), pyroclastic flows (point and dash alternate), (solid line). Modified from Fisher and Schmincke, 1984)..33
- Fig. 1.6. Typical downstream transitions in pyroclastic density currents deposits of the Songaksan tuff ring, Cheju Island, South Korea, over a distance of 2 km. Modified from (Chough and Sohn, 1990).36
- Fig. 1.7. Cross bedding and dune bedforms in a phreatomagmatic sequence of pyroclastic surges, Cap d’Agde, France.36

Fig. 1.8. Base surge spreading out during the eruption of Te Maari, 21 st of November 2012. Picture by Lomi Schaumkel.....	37
Fig. 1.9. Tripartite hydrothermal blast deposit from the 2012 Upper Te Maari eruption. Note the massive, stratified and topmost laminated (appearing massive in the picture) units.	38
Fig. 1.10. Block-and-ash flow at Sinabung volcano (Indonesia) in July 2015. Courtesy of Umar Rosadi.	39
Fig. 1.11. Block-and-ash flow deposit, Mont-Dore, France. Note the ashy matrix that support angular blocks that are from the dome from which the collapse initiated.	40
Fig. 1.12. Complex of multiple pumice flow lobes at Lascar volcano, Chile. (Courtesy of Patrick Whelley, NASA Goddard Space Flight Centre).....	41
Fig. 1.13. PDC and debris avalanche mobility plot. The mobility is assessed as the non-dimensional ratio of the Area/Volume ^{2/3} for data of pyroclastic density currents separated into pumice flows, block-and-ash flows, pyroclastic surges and lateral blasts. Data from debris avalanches are indicated as a comparison. The red line separates dilute transport from concentrated transport regimes. Data have been combined from Hayashi and Self, 1992; Yamamoto et al., 1999; Calder et al., 1999; Fujinawa et al., 2008; Komorowski et al., 2013; Lube et al., 2014.....	49
Fig. 1.14. Photographs of three-layered saline currents in lock-exchange experiments (modified from Gladstone et al., 2004).....	59
Fig. 1.15. Example of vertical velocity profiles in granular flows (Modified from Lube et al. 2004).	62
Fig. 1.16. Deposit of initially non-fluidized flows (a) on smooth substrate and (b) on a 3 mm “rough” substrate, and of initially fluidized flows on (c) smooth substrate and (d) “rough” substrate. (Modified from Chedeville and Roche, 2014).....	64
Fig. 1.17. Sequence of pictures taken from an experiment of column collapse. A: Initiation of the column at the conduit exit. B: Start of the column collapse. C: Impact of the dense collapsing column on the ground and initiation of the PDC. D: Propagation of the density current.	66
Fig. 1.18. Experimental flows at ambient (A) and (B) temperature and heated (C) and (D). Time-averaged velocity fields are shown and depict the complexity in the rising buoyant plume. Modified from Andrews (2014).....	68
Fig. 1.19. Experimental PDCs and example of depositional sequence. A: Initiation of the column collapse from the hopper. B: Sideview of a fully dilute and turbulent PDC. C: Sideview of the internal structure of a concentrated ash-cloud. D: Cross section through a dune-bedform generated in “dilute” experiments.	69
Fig. 2.1. PELE components. A: Sketch of the PDC generator depicting the four main components (Tower, free-fall section, chute, flat section), modified from Lube et al., (2015). B: Overview photograph of the indoor setup. C: Overview photograph of the outdoor section.	

- Fig. 2.2. Sketch of hopper B and dimensions. 85
- Fig. 2.3. Picture of one of the four 1.5t loadcells implemented to the hopper to measure the time-variant mass discharge rate. B: Mass discharged over time from the hopper B for a $0.5 \times 1.2 \text{m}^2$ area of discharge. 86
- Fig. 2.4. Air piston that opens the trapdoor. B: Compressed air bottle with solenoid valve. C: the trapdoor opening mechanism. 86
- Fig. 2.5. Velocity of the front of the collapsing column with distance from the trapdoors. The black dots are the experimental data and the black line is the free fall velocity predicted from Newton's law as $V = (2gh)^{0.5}$, where V is the velocity, g the gravitational acceleration (9.8ms^{-2}) and h is the drop height. 87
- Fig. 2.6. Outcrop picture of the ash-rich Taupo ignimbrite near Hatepe. B: Grain-size distribution of the two facies use to create the initial experimental mixture. C: Outcrop photograph of the location where the Taupo ignimbrite facies is sampled near Taupo city. D: Median grain-size diameter versus sorting coefficient following Walker (1983) of the two deposits and path of the two-component mixture with different proportions of mixing. 90
- Fig. 2.7. A: Grain-size distribution of the blend of 17% of the fines-rich Taupo ignimbrite facies with 83% of the Taupo ignimbrite. B: Averaged clast density versus grain-size of the 17-83% blend. 91
- Fig. 2.8. Picture of the NAC HotShot 1280 high speed camera. B: Picture of the Basler acA2000-340km high speed camera. C: Casio Exilim EX-F1. 93
- Fig. 2.9. A: Sensor locations in the large-scale setup. B: Load-cell and pore pressure sensor installed into chute floor. C: Picture of the experimental setup with sediment samplers installed in vertical profiles. 95
- Fig. 2.10. A: MEAS piezoresistive differential pressure transducer (154N-1G). B: MEAS DBBSM S-Beam load-cell transducer. C: 64 channel National Instruments data logger. D: Electronic board that amplifies the signal of the near-IR OBP608B sensor. E: Infrared sensor placed in a vertical profile. F: Glass cover slip protecting the sensor from impact and abrasion. 95
- Fig. 2.11. Grayscale versus voltage measured by near-IR sensor. 0% gray corresponds to white and 100% would be black. 99
- Fig. 2.12. A: Picture of the flow with three tubes installed. B: Close-up of the glass tube sampling particles. C: Calibration curve between the voltage of the IR-sensor and the particle volumetric concentration measured from the tubes. 100
- Fig. 2.13. Estimates of Reynolds number (Re), Stokes number (S_T) and Stability number (Σ_T) for natural pyroclastic surges (dashed lines) and PELE large-scale experimental flows (grey box). Estimates of scaling parameters were compiled by (Burgisser et al., 2005). Comparison with recent large-scale experiments from Dellino et al. (2007) and talc experiments by Andrews (2014) is made (black solid line). Modified from Lube et al. (2015). 104

Fig. 3.1. Synthesizing pyroclastic density currents in large-scale experiments. a, side view of an experimental pyroclastic density current at the eruption simulator PELE. b, the lower 0.95 m of the flow at a runout distance of 3 m at different times. c, passage of the head region at 3 m. Arrows highlight the interfaces between underflow (U) and ash-cloud regions (C) (black), and between intermediate (CL) and high turbulence (CU) zones of the ash-cloud, respectively. Rapid sedimentation of dendritic clusters of mesoscale turbulence entraps gas pockets (GP) in the underflows. Vertical scaling bars are 0.3 m long..... 114

Fig. 3.2. Evolution of the internal flow structure and velocity fields. a-d, Longitudinal cross-sections of the advancing experimental PDC at four different times. Black solid line, dotted line and grey area demark upper flow boundary, top of underflow and aggrading deposit, respectively. Extents of head and body regions of ash-cloud and relative proportions of the mass of particles transported in underflow (U) and ash-cloud (C) regions are shown also. Two vertical lines annotated “a” and “b” indicate the location of the proximal and intermediate observer locations referred to in figure 3.4. 115

Fig. 3.3. Experimental deposit and time-scale of deposition. a, Sketch of the experimental deposit sequence (not to scale) correlating the three depositional units to the parent zones of the flow (head, underflow, body/co-ignimbrite). Two vertical ‘outcrop’ sections “1” and “2” highlight the sediment structure with the standard ignimbrite flow unit deposited only in an intermediate runout zone. b-d, thickness-distance plot (black line) and isochrones of deposition (red dashed lines) for the head, underflow and body regions, respectively. 117

Fig. 3.4. Internal structure of experimental PDCs. a, vertical profiles of vorticity, horizontal and vertical velocity components, and particle concentration at 3.1 m from source during passage of the rear of the head. b, same as a at a runout distance of 10.6 m. Dotted and dashed lines demark interfaces between underflow (U), intermediate (CL) and high turbulence (CU) zones of the ash-cloud, respectively, with their depth-averaged Reynolds numbers given also. For the underflow, red solid lines show depth-averaged particle concentrations. Light-red bar indicates maxima (in the central part) and minima (at the base and top of underflow). 118

Fig. 4.1. Schematic representation of gravity and pyroclastic density currents. A: Schematic diagram of the anatomy of a concentrated PDC, modified from Wilson and Walker, 1982. B: Schematic illustration of a concentrated PDC, modified from Sulpizio and Dellino, 2008. C: Typical schematic diagram of a gravity current with inner and outer regions defined by the velocity profile. D: Generalized structure of a dilute PDC with a head intergradational into a body with an overriding mixing zone and trailing wake, modified from Branney and Kokelaar, 2002..... 130

Fig. 4.2. Photographs of the experimental flows and internal velocity fields for various time steps. A: Photographs of the flow for 5 time steps. Note the progressive formation of a wedge-shape snout, and the appearance of an underflow layer underneath the ash-cloud. B: Longitudinal cross-sections of the advancing experimental PDC at four different times. Grey dotted line, grey dashed line, solid line, dotted line, grey area and black area demark upper flow boundary, a visible diffuse interface within the ash-cloud separating the wake from the

body, top of underflow and aggrading deposit, respectively. Extent of head and body regions (separated by a broad interface represented in a red dashed line) are indicated. 137

Fig. 4.3. Photographs of various aspects portion and processes occurring within the head of experimental currents. A: Sideview photograph showing the nearly semi-elliptical head shape with a wedge front. Note Kelvin-Helmholtz instabilities that grew in size up current. Dashed and solid lines indicate the different outlines of the ash-cloud, underflow and head. B: Close-up photograph of the snout of the head, which developed a small elevated nose. C: Photograph of the same front after 0.012 sec (after B) that depicts a transient expelled flow front. D: Picture of the internal structure of the flow head shows three zones: the lowermost one is the underflow, separated by a sharp interphase from the intermediate concentrated zone where mesoscales structures develop. Particles gather in clusters of dendritic pattern. E: Frontal view of the flow in the proximal area showing lobes-and-clefts instabilities. F: Flow front develop finger instabilities in the medial and distal area. G: Cross-section through a lobe developed nose. H: Close-up photographs showing a cross section through the flow front with finger instabilities. Note the thin <1cm thick fingers. I: Finger instabilities can transport large particles (pumices) at the front. 139

Fig. 4.4. Photographs illustrating main processes occurring within the body and wake of the ash-cloud. A: Large Kelvin-Helmholtz instabilities form in the wake and can have a size scaled with the layer thickness. Formation of the wake occurs through the first vortex located in the middle of the head. B-D: Sequence of photographs showing the instabilities forming along the wake-body interface, and the breakdown of KH instabilities that feed the wake from the ash-cloud. Note also the eddy passing through with particles that locally migrated towards its margin. 141

Fig. 4.5. Height-variant dynamics. A: Height-variant mass transported in the ash-cloud and captured by samplers at three locations (3.1, 8.5 and 11.7 m from source). B: Time-variant velocity (black line) and concentration (red line) at 0.32 m of height at 3.1 m of distance from source. C: Time-variant velocity and concentration at 0.32 and 0.92 m of height at 8.5 m from source. D: Time-variant velocity and concentration at 0.32 and 0.92 m of height at 11.7 m from source. 142

Fig. 4.6. Time-variant fluid dynamics of the flow at the three observer locations. A: Time-variant wake, body, and underflow upper interfaces at the three observer locations. B: Densimetric Froude number of the total ash-cloud and body at the three observer locations. C: Reynolds number of the head, wake and body at the three observer locations. D: Entrainment coefficients of the head, wake and body at the three observer locations. Note the grey bar that highlights the transition zone where the wake is created. 144

Fig. 4.7. Depth-averaged flow kinematics of the ash-cloud and underflow. A: Time-variant wake, body, and underflow upper interfaces at the three observer locations at 3.1, 8.5 and 11.7 m. B: Time-variant average velocity of the ash-cloud (black) and underflow (grey). C: Maximum velocity value within ash-cloud and underflow. D: Depth-averaged particle concentration of the ash-cloud and underflow and depth-averaged mass-flux. 147

- Fig. 4.8. Vertical distribution of densities and velocities at 11.7 m. A: Vertical velocity profiles of the vertical (black component) and horizontal component (red). B: Logarithmic concentration isolines and dynamic pressure map. Vertical concentration profiles are indicated in black. Note the three pulses of dynamic pressures. The first two are within the head, while the last occurs rearwards of the head..... 152
- Fig. 4.9. Transport regimes for the head, body and wake in experimental flows. Stokes (ST) and Stability ΣT non-dimensional numbers of the local median grain-size transported within the head (A), body (B) and wake (C). ST and ΣT describe the degree of coupling of the solid and gas and also the particle residence time within largest eddies respectively. Median grain-size is indicated by the size of the symbols. Symbols with an orange rim represent near-bed measurements in the lower 5-10% of the total flow thickness. Arrows indicate the 15th and 85th percentiles of the distribution. Fields from 1 to 5 are indicated in shades of grey with red numbers referring to respective transport regimes described atop the figure..... 156
- Fig. 4.10. Schematic diagram of PDC vertical and longitudinal structure. A: Generalized structure of a PDC with underflow and ash-cloud with highlight on the form and formation of the head, body and wake zones. B: Particle transport regimes in proximal PDCs, where the underflow lags behind the front. C: Particle transport regimes in medial and distal PDCs where the underflow is well present inside the head of the ash-cloud. Note the lengthening of the head and evolution of the front shape. 157
- Fig. 5.1. Large-scale experimental setup and location of the sediment samplers at 3.1, 5.4, 8.5 and 11.7 m from source. Note that the experiment presented in this chapter only involved the large hopper B..... 172
- Fig. 5.2. Images of the experimental flows and photographs of natural PDCs. A: The PDC is composed of an ash-cloud head, body and wake overriding a concentrated underflow. Note the different shapes of the head. B: Experiment where a wedge-shaped front developed in the ash-cloud head. C: Experiment where the ash-cloud front took a bulbous shape. D: PDC with a well-developed wedge front at Sinabung volcano. Courtesy of Marc Szeglat. E: PDC with a bulbous front at Sinabung volcano, Indonesia. Courtesy of Bracken..... 177
- Fig. 5.3. Kinematic of the flow front. A: Flow front velocity on slopes of 19°, 15° (B) and 9° (C). Symbols for the different experimental runs (see number of experiment and experimental conditions in Table 5.1) are indicated by an insert in figure 5.3.A..... 179
- Fig. 5.4. Ash-cloud and underflow kinematics. A–C: Velocity of the ash-cloud front (black dots) and underflow (red dots) versus distance from source. D–F: Position of the ash-cloud (black) and underflow (red) fronts versus time. G–I: Densimetric Froude number Fr' of the head at different observation points along the channel. J–L: Velocity of the ash-cloud front with time. The red curve is a best fit regression, whereas the blue curve is the theoretical fit of the flow front velocity of planar gravity currents assuming a constant densimetric Froude number (Huppert and Simpson, 1980)..... 181

Fig. 5.5. Variation of the head geometry and the non-dimensional lower boundary velocity of the ash-cloud as a function of the densimetric head Froude number. A and B: Definition of the head ratio R is defined as equal to $H/2L_{1/2}$. Definition of the parameter noted A as the non-dimensional velocity at the lower ash-cloud boundary. C: Plot of A against the densimetric head Froude number. D: Plot of R against the densimetric Froude number (Fr') of the head. Data from the literature are from (1) Britter and Linden, 1980; (2) Simpson and Britter, 1979; (3) Sequeiros et al., 2010; (4) Maxworthy and Nokes, 2007; (5) Hacker et al., 1996; (6) Marino et al., 2005; (7) Nogueira et al., 2013; (8) Shin et al., 2004; (9) Gladstone et al., 2004..... 185

Fig. 5.6. Velocity profile through the head. A: Idealized velocity profile composed of an inner region where the modified law of the Wall noted with “*” is applied and an outer region where the velocity is described by the Turbulent Wall Jet from the height H_p upward. B: Sketch of the 6 velocity profiles through the head. Note that they are time-variant profiles. C: 6 velocity profiles and associated densimetric Froude number. The ash-cloud noted “C” is delimited from the underflow noted “U” by a thin vertical line. The black line corresponds to the measurements whereas the blue line corresponds to the theoretical fit built from either the combination of the modified law of the Wall and Turbulent Wall Jet or solely the Turbulent Wall Jet. The dashed line separates the inner and outer region of the velocity profile within the ash-cloud. The symbol underneath each velocity profile depicts the direction of the traction at the ash-cloud/underflow interface. When the upper arrow points forward (to the right), the ash-cloud induces traction at its lower boundary, whereas the opposite symbol where the upper arrow points to the left indicate that the underflow imposes traction on the ash-cloud..... 187

Fig. 5.7. Idealized velocity and concentration profile with theoretical laws describing the velocity and concentration of the ash-cloud (B). Thick blue and red/yellow lines represent the velocity (C, E, G and I) and concentration law respectively (D, F, H and J), whereas the black lines represent the experimental data. Law of the wall has been plotted from the lower ash-cloud boundary up to the height of maximum velocity (inner region). The turbulent wall jet law (Altinakar et al., 1996) has been plotted as an approximation of the outer velocity region of the ash-cloud while the inner region has been approximated with the law of the wall following the Von Karman approach (Allen 1970; Altinakar et al., 1996). Similarly, the concentration law follows the description of Altinakar et al. (1996) for turbulent wall jet in red while in yellow is the portion of the concentration that is nearly constant. 189

Fig. 5.8. Velocity and concentration profiles versus the ash-cloud head densimetric Froude number. A: Ratio of the maximum flow height over the maximum height (H_p/H) of the head as a function of the Froude number. B: Maximum velocity over the depth-averaged velocity (U_p/U_{avg}) as a function of the Froude number of the head. C: Height of the deflection point in the concentration profile over the total head height (H_c/H) as a function of the Froude number (Fr'). D: Ratio of the maximum concentration over the depth-averaged concentration (C_c/C_{avg}) in the middle of the head (where H was measured). The black lines are the fits to the data of the present study, with the equation and corresponding R^2 indicated. The red solid lines are the fits to saline and turbidity currents combined by Sequeiros et al. (2010), with the

red dashed lines that encompass all data spread around the fits. The orange solid line in B and respective equation and R^2 represent the alternative best fit to the ash-cloud data of the present study. 193

Fig. 5.9. Schematic diagram of the ash-cloud forced to a supercritical behaviour by the underflow. The diagrams show the penetration from A to C of the underflow within the ash-cloud and subsequent effects upon the ash-cloud head internal and outer structures. A: The underflow is lagging behind the ash-cloud head. The velocity of the ash-cloud front U_f is greater than the underflow front velocity U_u . Velocity and concentration profiles through the middle of the head depict a thick inner boundary layer. Note the head of the ash-cloud with an aspect ratio Height/Length ~ 0.5 . The head densimetric Froude number Fr' is near 1. B: The underflow front is within the ash-cloud head. The underflow is faster than the ash-cloud and provides a velocity in the lower ash-cloud head, which affects the internal velocity and concentration profiles. The inner region of both velocity and concentration profiles shrinks while the underflow densifies near the lower boundary and accelerates. Coupling between underflow and ash-cloud yields the forced-supercriticality of the ash-cloud where Fr' of the head is >1 . C: Similar to B, but the underflow and ash-cloud fronts are “merged”. While the relative higher mobility of the underflow leads to scenarios from A to C, the reverse is also possible (C to A), where the underflow would slow down faster than the ash-cloud (for instance on shallow slopes) and the latter would “decouple” from the underflow and behave as a dilute gravity current with $Fr' \sim 1$ 198

Fig. 6.1. Location of Upper Te Maari Crater. A: Map of North Island (New Zealand) showing the position of the Tongariro Volcanic Centre (TgVC) and the Taupo Volcanic Zone (TVZ). B: DEM of the northern portion of Mt Tongariro with the main volcanic features marked. Solid lines show the regional normal fault trend; the dotted line represents the alignment of vents that is almost parallel to the regional fault trend. The pointed line represents the possible extension mapped in North crater to the Upper Te Maari Crater. 206

Fig. 6.2. Distribution of the eruption units of the 6 August 2012 Upper Te Maari eruption on top of a LiDAR DEM and 10_m DEM. I notice that the maximum extent of the PDC deposit and ballistic field are in similar directions NW and E of Upper Te Maari Crater. The coordinate system is NZTM2000. (TAC= Tongariro Alpine Crossing). 208

Fig. 6.3. Comparison of the Upper Te Maari Crater area before and after the eruption. A: The crater from the Tongariro Alpine Crossing in January 2009. B: View in November 2012 showing the western, broader part of the fissure ($>50\text{m}$ wide). Note that the crater is still intact. C: The Upper Te Maari Crater view from the east in January 2009. D: Post eruption view showing the new eastern part of the fissure. The two linked arrows show the position of the junction between the western and eastern fissure at its narrowest (10 m) and shallowest part (10 m). 213

Fig. 6.4. Post-eruption Digital Elevation Model (DEM) based on LiDAR data of the fissure and Upper Te Maari crater area. The junction represents the narrowest and shallowest point of the fissure and delimits the eastern and western parts as shown on Fig. 6.3B. 214

Fig. 6.5. A: View of the western fissure, A: Delineation of amphitheater (dashed line) created by the landslide (see Procter et al., 2014) and end points of section B,C and the blocks D,E, F described in the text. B: Eastern part of the fissure with exposures of the same stratigraphy as in A. The two white lines are 5 m long. B': Closer look at the bottom of the junction between fissures. C: Stratigraphic section along the western fissure composed of a succession of proximal PDCs and fallout deposits. D–D': Underlying, and in the background, single blocks of lava (first type) are present. Second type of block visible on the landslide amphitheater, corresponding to agglutinates attached to dense lava blocks (delineated by dashed line). E–E': Breccia (third type of block) made by angular lithic in a compacted fine-grained matrix composing the base of the fissure. F: Block with a discontinuous highly altered zone (delineated by dashed line) separating two type of breccia.216

Fig. 6.6. A: Distribution of all >2.5 m size craters in the ballistic field. B: Crater size distribution: 2.5–3.5 m, 3.5–4.5 m and >4.5 m.217

Fig. 6.7. Distribution of ballistic impact craters of various size classes. A: All craters ≥ 2.5 m, the background density is 450 craters/km² and the red-outlined areas (HDBF) are the loci of highest spatial density. B: Craters between 2.5 and 3.5 m. The red dotted line defines the profile shown in Fig. 6.10. C: Craters between 3.5 and 4.5 m. D: Craters ≥ 4.5 m. E: Crater size distribution.220

Fig. 6.8. Impact craters: A: A 6m diameter crater within the high-density western part of the ballistic field. A': PDC deposit covering the crater, scale in cm. B: 3 m-wide crater in the eastern high-density impact area. B': PDC deposit (massive and stratified layer) inside and beside the crater. C: 2 m-wide crater in the northern ballistic field. C': Very thin laminated ash cover. D: 4 m ballistic crater with preserved block (circled) outside of the PDC inundation area WNW of the crater. E: Scattered ballistic blocks (highlighted) in a 4 m-wide crater in the western deposit area. F: Block deposited during the PDC emplacement. The Block impacted the massive PDC layer and is covered by the stratified layer. The flow direction (left to right) is indicating by the thinning of the top PDC layer behind the block.221

Fig. 6.9. Lithologies, densities and distribution of the four classes of ballistic blocks (densities in g/cm³). Stripped lines represent the area where ballistic lithology types were found (C, F, J and M). Block type 1 is made up of dense lava (A and B), sometimes with attached agglutinate (B; circled by dotted line). Type 2 blocks are vesicular scoria or vesicular lava fragments (C and D). Type 3 clasts include breccias, agglomerates and agglutinate blocks (G, H and I), that can be hydrothermally altered (G), or oxidized (I). Type 4 blocks are porphyritic, angular, poorly vesicular, often columnar jointed and fresh to poorly altered andesitic lava (Fig. K and L).222

Fig. 6.10. Calculated possible ballistic trajectories for the range of block sizes and density seen in the western high impact density zone using Eject! (Mastin, 2001). A: Relationship of crater diameter to type 1 block-diameter. B: Crater density profile on the westerly traverse (Fig. 6.7B) for 2.5–3.5 m diameter craters, showing the limits of the high-density zone (>650 craters m⁻²) between 1010 and 1350m from source. C: Calculation for velocities “v”=202 m s⁻¹ of the optimal angle 33° for blocks of 0.32m of diameter with a density 2.4 g cm⁻³ and

estimates of launch angle to reach the high density zone. D: Estimation of shallow angle trajectories for a range of observed block diameters (0.23–0.4 m) using initial parameters from panel C. E: Effect of the range of density and block diameter on trajectories using launch angles and velocity from panel C. F: Estimation of the range in velocities (165.8–307 m s⁻¹) explaining the range of ballistics found in 2.5–3.5 m diameter-craters along the topographic profile.....223

Fig. 6.11. Model for the 6 August 2012 eruption of Upper Te Maari. After destabilization of the hydrothermal system (A), three main explosions (B–D) produced distinct ballistic fields partially overlapping (B'–D'). Not to scale.233

Fig. 7.1. A: Location of the Tongariro Volcanic Center (TgVC) in the Taupo Volcanic Zone (TVZ) of New Zealand. B: Location of the Upper Te Maari crater in the TgVC. C: Isopach map of the PDC deposit and flow directionality and damages (modified from Lube et al., 2014). D: Distribution of the eruption units of the 6 August 2012 Te Maari eruption (modified from Breard et al., 2014). The black line indicates the sampling transect along the main spreading axis for the WNW blast.239

Fig. 7.2. Topographic profile along the main WNW PDC axis with the distribution of the main depositional facies and the locations of large dune fields also shown. B: Relative proportions of units A, B and C against distance from source. C: Deposit thickness against distance from source. Black, grey and dotted lines are exponential fits of the form e^{ax+b} 242

Fig. 7.3. A, B and A', B': Proximal tuff breccia facies of unit A. C and C': PDC deposit forming a dune and section through the tripartite deposit. D and D': In the distal zone, the PDC deposit is often plastered onto obstacles and is composed of unit A, B and C, with the latter being poorly preserved. E: Proximal-to-distal stratigraphic section of the Tongariro hydrothermal blast. The red line represents 2cm of length. Note different vertical scales on bar charts.245

Fig. 7.4. A–C: Integrated grain-size distribution of units A, B and C. D: Grain-size distribution of the ballistic blocks. E: Total grain-size distribution of the PDC.....247

Fig. 7.5. The grain-size median diameter $Md\Phi$ versus sorting $\sigma\Phi$ of units A, B and C. B: Grain-size sorting $\sigma\Phi$ and median diameter $Md\Phi$ of the three units against distance from source. C: Examples of grain-size frequency ($>-1\Phi$ = lapilli blocks; $4\geq X >1\Phi$ = medium and coarse ash; $>4\Phi$ = fine ash) histograms for units A, B and C at different distances from source. Note different vertical scales on bar charts.248

Fig. 7.6. Largest clast diameter in each unit versus distance (A). B-D: Weight percentage of different grain-size fractions against distance in unit A, B and C. E: Topographic profile along the main flow axis.250

Fig. 7.8. Strong change in PDC deposit facies across a 40 m high ridge at 1200 m from source. A: Overview sketch of different sampling locations across the ridge. B: Dune bedform which nucleated around vegetation and characterized by a rounded crest and shallow slopes; C: Dune bedform on the ridge crest that shows a lee length longer than the stoss

- length and high dip of the slopes: D: 5cm thick deposit sequence with highly erosive lower contact of unit A and B. While unit A is massive, unit B is stratified with undulatory beds that display small scale thickness variations. Thin unit C is very fine laminated; E: 8 cm thick tripartite PDC sequence composed of the unit A which is vegetation rich at its base, a planar stratified unit B and laminated unit C.253
- Fig. 7.9. A: Geometric parameters of dune bedforms measured in the field. B: Average thickness and wavelength of the dunes in each dune field against distance. Exponential fits to the data and the square misfits (R^2) are also shown.....255
- Fig. 7.10. Cross-sections of the PDC deposit at the bottom (A) and the top of the lava ridge at 1000 m from source (B). C: Grain-size distribution of unit A at the bottom and at the top of the lava flow with grain-size median and sorting parameters.....256
- Fig. 7.11. Cartoons of the blast evolution with distance at Tongariro. After the burst phase, the pyroclastic mixture rapidly collapses and develops vertical and longitudinal density stratifications. Rapid deposition leads to the formation of unit A (A). At 500 m from source, a second unit B is deposited from the slower and more dilute zone of the flow (A). Dune bedforms are generated regularly on the stoss sides of five ridges located along the main flow axis. For illustrative purposes, unit A and B are represented in black and white respectively.267
- Fig. 7.12. Cartoons of the blast evolution with distance and longitudinal deposit facies variations at Tongariro. A: The thin unit C veneers the two other units. At ~2400–2500 m from source, the flow becomes buoyant and reaches its final runout. For illustrative purposes, unit A and B are represented in black and white respectively. B: Longitudinal facies change of the PDC deposit.268

List of Supplementary Figures

Supplementary Fig. 3.1. Grain-size and particle density distributions. a: Grain-size distribution of the initial experimental mixture. b: density distribution of the natural volcanic particles composing the experimental mixture. The average particle density is 1950 kg m^{-3}	125
Supplementary Fig. 3.2. Mesoscale turbulence structures in large-scale PDC experiments. Still-images from a high-speed movie of the flow at 3.1 m from the source at 0.06 (a, b) and 0.09 (c, d) seconds after flow front arrival. Mesoscale structures occur in the middle zone of intermediate turbulence and take the form of dendritic clusters of particles. White crosses in (b) and (d), numbered 1 and 2, depict the same features in both images and illustrate the rapid sedimentation of the mesoscale structures at velocities of $\sim 1.7 \text{ m s}^{-1}$. Vertical white bars are 0.3 m long.	125
Supplementary Fig. 4.1. Experimental setup and grain-size characteristics. A: Sketch of PELE setup. Note that in experiments presented in this paper, no Supplementary gas was added to the mixture. B: Unimodal grain-size distribution of the initial mixture. C: Density distribution of the experimental mixture.....	163
Supplementary Fig. 4.2. Velocity and concentration profile in the frontal part of the head prior arrival of the underflow at 3.1 m from source. A: Horizontal and Vertical velocity profiles (black and red lines respectively). B: Concentration profile.	164
Supplementary Fig. 5.1. A: Unimodal grain-size distribution of the initial mixture. B: Particle density distribution of the experimental mixture with respect to grain-size.....	201
Supplementary Fig. 7.1. Crater diameter versus ballistic block diameter	270

List of Tables

Table 2.1. Initial and boundary conditions of experiments and ranges of flow parameters at impact.....	88
Table 2.2. Flow measurements with associated sensors and measurement frequency.....	92
Table 2.3. Vertical spacing of the near-IR sensors from the channel base.....	99
Table 2.4. Bulk flow scaling of natural dilute PDCs and PELE experimental currents, and comparison of non-dimensional deposit length scales. Natural PDC ranges are from Burgisser et al. (2005).	104
Table 2.5. Scaling parameters of natural concentrated PDCs (Natural PDCs) and for the dense underflow in the large-scale experiments. Natural PDC data are from Roche (2012).	105
Table 5.1. Experimental variables and resulting initial flow conditions at impact for the six different experiments. Impact velocities were measured from high-speed video footage, while the impact particle concentrations were estimated following the method of Lube et al., (2015).	173
Table 6. 1. Initial parameters used in the Eject! ballistic model.....	210
Table 6.2. Characteristics of the eastern and western fissures. Western and eastern PDC deposit volumes after Lube et al. (2014) are presented for comparison.	214
Table 6.3. Proportions of different lithologies within and outside the eastern and western high-density impact area and the northern impact field.....	221

List of Supplementary Tables

Supplementary Table 3.1. Bulk flow scaling of natural dilute PDCs (Burgisser and Bergantz, 2005) and PELE experimental currents. V and L are characteristic velocity and length scales of the flow. μ corresponds to the dynamic viscosity of the flow. ρ is the mixture density and ρ_0 is the ambient medium density. D is the particle diameter. * Estimates of the range of negative values of the Richardson number corresponding to hot PDCs with buoyancy reversal is based on the study of volcanic plume (Carazzo et al., 2015) and PDCs (Dufek, 2016). 123

Supplementary Table 4.1. Bulk flow scaling of natural dilute PDCs (Burgisser and Bergantz, 2005) and PELE experimental currents. Where U and L are characteristic velocity and length scales of the flow. μ corresponds to the dynamic viscosity of the flow. ρ is the mixture density. ρ is the flow density and ρ_0 is the ambient medium density. D is the particle diameter. * Estimates of the range of negative values of the Richardson number corresponding to hot PDCs with buoyancy reversal is based on the study of volcanic plume (Carazzo et al., 2015) and PDCs (Dufek, 2016). 165

Supplementary Table 5.1. Bulk flow scaling of Natural dilute PDCs (Roche 2012) and PELE experimental currents. Where U and L are characteristic velocity and length scales of the flow. μ corresponds to the dynamic viscosity of the flow. ρ is the mixture density. ρ is the flow density and ρ_0 is the ambient medium density. D is the particle diameter. 199

Supplementary Table 5.2. Dense underflow scaling of Natural dilute PDCs (Burgisser and Bergantz, 2005) and PELE experimental currents. With ρ_p and ρ_g the particle and gas density, γ the shear rate, d the particle diameter, hc the current height, g the acceleration of gravity. D is the particle diameter. c denotes the flow concentration during propagation, c_0 is the maximum concentration at loose packing, γ is the shear rate. k is the permeability of the granular medium. Re_p is the particle Reynolds number defined as follows: $Re_p = 2DU\rho_s / \mu$ 200