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THE DESIGN OF SEMICONDUCTOR PHOTOELECTROCHEMICAL

SYSTEMS FOR SOLAR ENERGY CONVERSION

by

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THE DESIGN OF SEMICONDUCTOR PHOTOELECTROCHEMICAL SYSTEMS FOR SOLAR ENERGY CONVERSION

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(ABSTRACT)

The principles and applications of semiconductor electrodes in photoelectrochemical (PEC) cells for carrying out useful chemical reactions are described. The factors in the design of efficient and stable systems and semiconductor particulate systems constructed on the basis of PEC cell principles are discussed.

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The efficient production of fuels from inexpensive precursors by utilization of solar energy with cheap and stable chemical systems has become the goal of numerous research efforts. Examples of desirable reactions are the reduction of water (or protons) to H_2 and the reduction of ${\rm CO}_2$ to methanol driven by light. Because the effect of light in any system is the creation of electron-hole (e h) pairs, the fuel-producing reaction must be accompanied by an oxidation reaction. This oxidation reaction should consume an inexpensive or waste material (e.g., produce oxygen from water), or alternatively produce a substance of some value (e.g., Cl₂ from Cl oxidation). The model often used for such systems is biological photosynthesis, in which light is utilized to produce reduced (carbonaceous) materials and O2. However, the field efficiencies of biological systems, in terms of conversions of solar energy to fuel value, is rarely better than and the individual systems do not show long lives (but they are, of 1% course, self-replicating). Man-made photosynthetic fuel-producing systems will have to show at least an order-of-magnitude better efficiency as well as lifetimes of many years.

A number of photochemical and thermochemical schemes have been proposed to effect such light-driven reactions. Among the most successful have been those involving the absorption of light and the occurrence of electron transfer reactions at the semiconductor/liquid interface. The basic principles and examples of such liquid junction semiconductor devices have beer the subject of a number of reviews. 1-5 I will emphasize in this paper the concepts involved in designing semiconductor photoelectrochemical (PEC) systems, the recent research of our group, and some of the problems that still remain.

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The general scheme for the construction of a photoelectrochemical

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system involving a single light absorber is shown in Figure 1. The energetics of the system, in terms of electron energy levels and redox potentials are given in Figure 2. In general the overall reaction involves the following stages:

- (1) Photon capture and e^{-h} pair formation (1,2).
- (2) Trapping of e^{-} and h^{+} in rapid chemical reactions (3,5).
- (3) Catalytic formation of final products (4,6) and separation.

Light is captured in the light-absorbing system (1.2) which represents a support material and the sensitizer layer. This could be a metal substrate with a thin layer of semiconductor (e.g., TiO, on Ti), a transition metal complex, or an organic dye sensitizer on a semiconductor substrate (e.g., $Ru(bpy)_2^{2+}$ or ZnPc on TiO₂; where bpy is 2,2'-bipyridine and Pc is phthalocyanine). The light-absorbing system serves to convert the incident photons into electron-hole pairs and frequently provides a gradient in electrical or chemical potential to cause separation of e^- and h^+ . Recombination of e^{-} and h^{+} is also prevented if they are transferred rapidly to suitable acceptor, A(3), or donor, D(5), molecules. The couple represented by A/A. (e.g., MV^{2+}/MV' or S_x^{2-}/S^{2-} ; where MV^{2+} is methyl viologen) should have as negative a redox potential as possible, consistent with rapid reaction with the photogenerated electron. It is unlikely that the fuel-producing reaction can occur directly at this stage, since these reactions frequently involve multielectron transfers and high energy Similarly the D/D^+ couple (e.g., Br^-/Br_2 or Fe^{2+}/Fe^{3+}) intermediates. should be as positive as possible consistent with rapid reaction of the photogenerated h^+ . The A/A⁻ and D/D⁺ couples are sometimes called "relays". since they serve to transmit the photoproduced charges to the final desired electron transfer reactions. As shown in Figure 2 formation of \overline{A} and \overline{D}^+ results in some degradation of the energy of the e h pair. The spontaneous

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back electron transfer reaction between A^{-} and D^{+} must be prevented by keeping them spacially separated or by having them react rapidly in a subsequent step. Similarly any reaction of A^- with h^+ or D^+ with $e^$ represents a loss in efficiency. The reaction of A⁻ to form fuel (e.g., $H^+ \rightarrow$ H_{2}) usually will require a catalyst, CAT_R (4), which serves to couple the \rightarrow A and H⁺ reduction reactions and provide a surface for adsorbed intermediates. Similarly an oxidation catalyst, CAT_0 (6), will usually be required to couple the $D^+ \rightarrow D$ and the terminal oxidation (e.g., $H_2^0 \rightarrow 0_2$) reaction. These catalyzed reactions again represent some degradation of the initial photon energy and again back reactions (e.g., A or e with O_2) must be prevented. The total energy of the products, ΔG_{p}^{o} , is less than the energy of the captured photon, given by the band gap of the light-absorber, E_{a} , by the needed driving forces (or overpotentials) of the various electron transfer steps. Thus if ΔG_p° is vl.3 eV (representative of many fuel-forming reactions) and each electron transfer step involves a v0.2 eV overpotential, then E_{σ} must be greater than 2.1 eV.

Principles of Semiconductor Electrodes

of semiconductor as principles electrodes applied The to photoelectrochemical cells have been discussed in a number of reviews 1-7 and will only be outlined here. Basically a space charge layer forms at the semiconductor/liquid interface as the two phases come into electronic equilibrium (i.e., as the Fermi levels or electrochemical potentials become equal) (Figure 3). The electric field in this space charge region serves to separate the e^{fh⁺} pairs produced by light absorption. The direction of the usually such that holes move to the surfaces at n-type field is semiconductors and lead to oxidations while electrons move to the surface at p-type semiconductors and cause reductions. The primary energetics of the

system can be obtained from a knowledge of the flat band potential (which for highly-doped semiconductors approximately corresponds to the location of the conduction band edge, E_c , in n-type semiconductors and the valence band edge, E_v , in p-type) and the band gap energy, E_g . Typical values for n-TiO, and p-GaAs are shown in Figure 3. However, for a given semiconductor, the location of these energy levels depends upon the nature of the solvent, the presence of ions which adsorb on or react with the semiconductor surface, and the presence of surface states or surface charge which leads to non-ideal behavior such as Fermi level pinning or inversion. However, at least as a first approximation, it is useful to consider that irradiation holes and electrons are delivered at potentials under corresponding to E_{v} and E_{c} , respectively. A PEC cell with a single absorbing semiconductor system and a metal or carbon counter electrode thus can represent the general system of Figure 1 with e^{-h^+} separation driven by the electric field in the space charge region and spacial separation of products preventing back reaction.

Design of Semiconductor PEC Cells

The design of a practical photoelectrosynthetic cell (a PEC cell which converts radiant energy to chemical free energy) is based on both semiconductor and solution properties.

1. <u>Band gap energy</u>. The value of E_g should be as small as possible consistent with driving the desired overall cell reaction. The maximum efficiency for terrestrial solar energy utilization occurs for a E_g of 1.1 to 1.3 eV, although values up to ~ 2.0 eV can be used with reasonable efficiencies.⁸

2. <u>Band edge locations</u>. The values of E_c and E_v , as represented by the corresponding redox levels, must be compatible with the desired half

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reactions $(A/A^{-} \text{ and } D^{+}/D)$. The location of these levels depends not only on the inherent work function of the semiconductor, but also upon the nature of the solvent and specific adsorption of ionic charge at the interface. The band edge locations are frequently estimated from the flat band potentials determined from plots of the interface capacitance with potential (Mott-Schottky plots) or, somewhat less reliably, from the potential for the onset of the photocurrent.

Stability. Both the thermodynamic and kinetic factors involved in 3. stability of the semiconductor have been discussed.^{9,10} The problem appears more acute with n-type materials where the photogenerated holes, which move to the interface, are capable of oxidizing the semiconductor itself. For example, with ZnO in an aqueous solution at pH = 0 the half-reaction ZnO + $2h^+ \rightarrow Zn^{2+} + \frac{1}{2}O_2$ ($E_D^\circ = +0.9$ V vs. NHE) can occur readily with holes produced at the potential of the valence band edge (~ 3.0 V vs. NHE). Thus irradiation of a ZnO electrode in an aqueous solution will cause at least partial decomposition of the semiconductor electrode. A number of approaches have been taken to stabilize the semiconductor. By proper choice of the D^{\dagger}/D couple the photogenerated holes can be removed rapidly before decomposition can occur. If the standard potential of the D^+/D couple is more positive than E_{D}° , a direct attack by D^{+} on the semiconductor is thermodynamically possible, however. It also appears that a thick layer of metal or conductive polymer on the electrode surface can serve to remove the photogenerated charge rapidly and stabilize the material.¹¹ If the solvent is changed to a nonaqueous one or the water activity is greatly decreased, E_0° can be made more positive and the stability enhanced. Experiments are also under way on the modification of semiconductor surfaces, e.g., by derivatization or polymer coating techniques, in attempts at improving stability.¹² For example, unprotected n-silicon in aqueous solutions forms

an insulating oxide film under irradiation in aqueous solutions. However, when it is covered with a thin metal layer (Au or Pt) and a thicker polypyrrole film, it behaves as a stable photoanode in I^{-}/I_{3}^{-} and Fe^{2+}/Fe^{3+} solutions.¹³ These films probably serve to protect the semiconductor by removing the photogenerated h^{+} and also by making the surface more hydrophobic. Some water penetration to the surface must still occur, however, since the addition of strong electrolyte (e.g., 11 M Li Cl) to the solution to decrease water activity improves the stability even more.^{13a} The technique of using high concentrations of electrolyte to decrease water activity while still providing a medium with high conductivity was used first by Wrighton, <u>et al</u>,¹⁴ to stabilize n-MoSe₂ during the photogeneration of chlorine in chloride media.

Although p-type materials can be reduced by the photogenerated electrons brought to the electrode surface (e.g., $p-Cu_2O$ in aqueous electrolytes), in general they tend to be more stable in aqueous media than n-type and are, in fact, self-cathodically protected from oxidation.¹⁵ The reduction of the p-type materials can also be suppressed by the use of nonaqueous media. For example, p-type Cu_2O can be employed in the reduction of nitrobenzene to its radical anion in acetonitrile.¹⁶

4. <u>Doping level.</u> The thickness of the space charge layer and the resistance of the bulk semiconductor are controlled by the doping level. This can be adjusted so that the space charge layer extends sufficiently deep that essentially all of the incident light is absorbed within it. Higher doping of the bulk semiconductor is desirable, and n^+n or p^+p structures can be used to optimize efficiences (where n^+ and p^+ refer to higher doping levels).

5. <u>Crystallinity</u>. From the standpoint of ease of production and low cost, polycrystalline semiconductor electrodes are needed. These have been

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prepared by a number of techniques (e.g., chemical vapor deposition, vacuum evaporation, sputtering, electrodeposition) and in many cases show efficiencies approaching those of single crystal materials.

Surface treatment. The nature of the semiconductor surface can be an important factor in the efficiency, since surface states can act as e^{-h} recombination centers. Thus different etching, chemical pretreatment and surface modification methods have been used to improve the cell performance. An example of this approach is the passivation of edges on n-WSe₂. Small single crystals of the layered compound WSe₂ show excellent photoelectrochemical efficiencies, when the surface is free from exposed The presence of edges leads to significant dark oxidation edge planes. currents and lower efficiencies. When these electrodes are employed to oxidize o-phenylenediamine, polymer formation occurs at the dark oxidation sites (presumably the edges), with greatly improved efficiencies in PEC cells.^{1/} Similarly selective adsorption of appropriate species (e.g., tert-butylpyridine) onto the edge planes can improve the performance of the layered compounds.¹⁸

7. <u>Redox couple.</u> The redox couples chosen for A/A^- and D/D^+ must satisfy a number of requirements. Both forms should be stable as well as highly soluble (>1 <u>M</u>) to prevent mass transport control of the current. The heterogeneous electron transfer rates should be rapid and the redox potentials appropriate to drive the desired final fuel-producing reaction at the catalyst and yet be located where photodriven charge transfer and stabilization of the semiconductor occur. They should be inexpensive and neither form should absorb light of energy above E_.

Catalysis

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Although the conduction band energy of several p-type electrodes (e.g.,

GaAs, Si) in aqueous electrolytes is at sufficiently negative values that direct reduction of protons to H_2 is thermodynamically possible, the hydrogen evolution reaction does not occur with good efficiency under This can be attributed to the slow reaction kinetics for illumination. most electrode materials; in electrochemical hydrogen evolution at terminology, most semiconductors show a high hydrogen overpotential. As depicted in Figure 4, formation of hydrogen atoms (H') by the one-electron half-reaction requires a very negative potential. This energy can be overcome if H-atoms are adsorbed as they are, for example, on Pt. The energy of adsorption of H° on most p-type semiconductors is apparently As was demonstrated with both p-GaAs 19 and p-Si, 20 the use of the small. rapid one-electron redox couple MV^{2+}/MV^{+} and finely divided Pt promotes photogenerated hydrogen evolution. The Pt plays the role of a catalyst, and allows the pooling of electrons so that the electron transfer reactions 2 H^+ + 2 $e^ \rightarrow$ H_2 and MV^+ \rightarrow MV^{2+} + e^- can both occur at equal rates. An electrochemical model for this catalyzed electron transfer has recently been described.21

Direct oxygen evolution at semiconductors (e.g., $n-TiO_2$, $n-Fe_2O_3$, $n-SrTiO_3$) has been observed, but the valence band location in these is usually sufficiently positive that formation of the high energy intermediate, hydroxyl radical (OH^{*}) appears possible. Indeed, spin trapping experiments demonstrate that at irradiated TiO_2 powders OH^{*} is formed.²² The production of O_2 utilizing an appropriate couple, D^+/D , and/or a heterogeneous catalyst should be possible. Improved rates of oxygen evolution with RuO_2 as a catalyst have been reported.²³ As discussed earlier, stability of small band gap semiconductors with appropriately placed valence band edges (e.g., at v+1.7 V vs. NHE at pH = 0 or v+1.3 V at pH = 7) may be an important problem.

Other oxidation half-reactions, which are inherently more rapid and occur at less positive potentials, such as $2 \text{ Br} + 3 \text{ Br}_2 + 2 \text{ e}$, may also be of interest. Another possibility is the use of "sacrificial" waste materials. For example, the photo-oxidation of acetate to produce ethane and CO_2 at n-TiO₂ occurs quite readily,²⁴ and acetate and other carboxylic acids are fermentation products obtainable from biomass. However, one should note that the overall reaction $2 \text{ CH}_3^{\text{COOH} + \text{C}_2^{\text{H}_6} + \text{CO}_2 + \text{H}_2$ occurs with $\Delta G^{\circ} < 0$, i.e., is thermodynamically downhill, so that the PEC cell reaction is really a photocatalytic (rather than an energy-storing photoelectrosynthetic) one.

Particulate Systems

The principles of semiconductor PEC cells can be applied to the design of particulate or powder systems for carrying out photoreactions.^{1,2} For example, platinized TiO, powder in a rough sense can be visualized as a short-circuited photocell analogous to that of Figure 3. Light impinging on the TiO_{2} again causes e^{-h} pair formation and the Pt again appears to serve as an effective reduction site. While there have been few studies on the detailed mechanisms and physical-chemical nature of photoreactions at semiconductor powders in solution, a number of different photoreactions, including metal depositions, decarboxylations, polymerizations, and even small amounts of amino acid synthesis have been demonstrated.^{1,2} Reduction of CO, to methanol and other reduced species on irradiated TiO,, CdS, and GaP powders has also been reported, 25 although the overall efficiency for this reaction is quite low. Even the direct splitting of water to 0, and accomplished with semiconductor/catalyst powders and Н, has been colloids.²⁶ electrochemical model can again be proposed for An photoprocesses on semiconductor powders (Figure 5). However, the existence

of a real space charge region in the small, usually lightly-doped, particles is unlikely, and probably most charge separation occurs at the particle surface. Thus an alternative, more chemical way of looking at the photoprocess is as follows. Consider a TiO, particle. The e^{-h} pair produced near the surface on irradiation forms, at least transiently, oxidized and reduced sites on the surface. Spin trapping experiments 22 and the results of a number of photochemical studies (e.g., the formation of hydroxylated products during irradiation of benzene and benzoid acid) strongly indicate that the primary h^+ -trapping step is formation of hydroxyl radicals.27a The nature of the reduced site is less certain. However, Ti(III) species in solution have been identified during irradiation of TiO, powders in the presence of oxalate ion,^{27b} and this may represent the primary reduced species. The formation of a lattice 0_{2}^{-} species also appears possible from gas phase studies of irradiated TiO_2^{28} and spin trapping 2^{22} experiments. Thus the process can be written in chemical terms as:

$$\operatorname{Ti}(\operatorname{III})^{\circ\circ\circ}O_2 + \operatorname{H}^+ \stackrel{\operatorname{Pt}}{\to} \operatorname{Ti}(\operatorname{IV})^{\circ\circ\circ}O_2 + \operatorname{V}_2\operatorname{H}_2$$

 $h v + h^+ + e^-$

The powder systems are of interest because they are inexpensive and relatively easy to fabricate. However, they do not offer the large spatial separation of the initially-produced oxidized and reduced forms of the PEC cells and the final products from particulate systems are formed as a

mixture rather than in separate streams. There are numerous studies of photoreactions at powders underway and new physical methods of characterizing the photoprocesses in (e.g., solution photoelectrophoretic, 29 electrochemical, 29 conductance.³⁰ and flash photolysis^{26b}) as well as powerful microscopic and spectroscopic methods of examining the powders in vacuum, are emerging.

The State-of-the-Art and the Future

The solar power efficiency of most photoelectrosynthetic systems with no input of external electrical energy is generally about 1 - 2% in terms of fuel value of products out vs. solar energy in. Photoassisted processes, where an electrical bias is applied to the PEC cell and both radiant and electrical energy are used to produce products, show higher efficiencies but of interest from practical are less а viewpoint. These photoelectrosynthetic efficiencies are 5 to 10 times smaller than those obtainable with liquid junction photovoltaic cells. Improvements in performance and practical cell construction require consideration of the following:

1. Energetics. As discussed in the introduction, consideration of the driving forces needed to carry out a fuel-producing reaction suggest that an $E_g \stackrel{>}{=} 2.1 \text{ eV}$ is required. This value is outside the range of maximum efficiency of solar energy utilization and can be contrasted to the smaller band gap materials used in photovoltaic cells (e.g., GaAs and InP; $E_g = vl.3$ eV) where output voltage (usually < 0.6 V) is not a major factor. A suggested approach to the more effective utilization of solar energy is a dual light absorbing system, ¹ depicted in Figure 6. In this case the needed energy can be obtained from two small band gap semiconductors ($E_g v l.3 eV$) (Figure 7). While two photons are now required in this system to drive a

single electron through the redox chain, the smaller band gaps allow a much better match to the solar spectrum. The light absorbing systems could be two n-, two p-, or an n- and p-type semiconductor utilizing the O/R redox pair to couple to the two systems. An alternative approach is the use of nand p-type materials connected with an ohmic junction ("photochemical diodes") to couple two photons into the overall chemical reaction.³¹

In particulate systems involving such dual light absorbers, special pains will have to be taken to avoid "short-circuiting" reactions of the intermediate redox species from greatly reducing the efficiency. One approach may be the immobilization of some of the redox couples on the surfaces within polymer layers.

An important apparent problem in the energetic analysis described above is the existence of "Fermi level pinning."³² Briefly, it appears that surface states within the semiconductor band gap, if present at a sufficiently high density, can pin the Fermi level in the semiconductor at a value that is less than the total gap energy. For example with both p-Si and p-GaAs maximum photovoltages of only \sim 0.6 V are obtained in liquid junction photocells. This would imply that larger band-gap materials may be required to drive the desired reactions. A positive aspect of Fermi level pinning is that the semiconductor band edges can be moved with respect to solution redox energy levels to carry out reactions which would not appear possible by consideration only of the semiconductor electrode energetics in the solution in the absence of redox couples. Surface treatment to decrease the extent of Fermi level pinning may be possible.

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2. <u>Kinetics</u>. Recombination of the initially formed e^{-h} pair, as well as intermediates on particulate systems, decreases the efficiency. The extent of recombination can be decreased by improving the kinetics of removal of e^{-} and h^{+} to form final products. There is some evidence that

surface states and grain boundaries can act as recombination centers and methods of passivating these by specific chemical treatment have been proposed.³³

A key problem appears to be stability of the small 3. Stability. band gap semiconductors to the reactive intermediates, e.g., those in the oxygen-evolution reaction, or to the very positive redox couples (D^{+}/D) needed to drive the oxidation. Various approaches, such as covering the a passivating or polymer layer or employing surface surface with modification are under investigation. The rapid removal of photogenerated charge and reactive intermediates by use of a catalyst on the electrode surface also promotes semiconductor stability. Another approach involves the use of larger band gap and stable semiconductors, e.g., TiO_2 , and a $Ru(bpy)_{3}^{2+,34-36}$ (e.g., organic dye, layer an metal sensitizer phthalocyanine 3^{37}) to allow the utilization of lower energy radiation. A number of examples of sensitized processes at semiconductors have been described, but so far the observed efficiencies have been rather low because thin sensitizer layers do not absorb sufficient quantities of light and thicker layers tend to be resistive. In some cases, recombination processes within the sensitizer layers and dve stability also appear to be problems. However, this approach, particularly with particle systems, is still under active investigation. 23,38

Conclusions

About a decade has passed since Honda and Fujishima³⁹ suggested that PEC cells based on single crystal n-type TiO_2 might be used for the photodecomposition of water to H₂ and O₂. During this period much has been established about the behavior of the semiconductor/liquid interface and many new materials have been investigated. Particulate systems have been

devised and a number of different photocatalytic and photoelectrosynthetic methods have been developed. While the goal of an efficient and stable system for the direct solar production of fuels remains an elusive one, semiconductor-based systems remain the most efficient chemical systems described for so far such reactions. Moreover, research in photoelectrochemistry has led to an improved understanding of the semiconductor/liquid interface and the photoprocesses which occur there. It has also provided new insight into a variety of processes (electrochemical, photographic, catalytic, photolytic).

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Figure Captions

- Figure 1 Schematic diagram of system for utilization of solar energy in a photoelectrosynthetic reaction (e.g., $H_2 0 \rightarrow H_2 + l_2 0_2$). l and 2 represent the light-absorbing system and support; the dashed line around 1 and 2 represents a possible stabilizing layer on the system. 3 and 5 are redox couples, either in solution or incorporated onto the surface of the system; they act as the primary electron and hole acceptors. The final reaction is catalyzed by oxidation and reduction catalysts, CAT₀ and CAT_p, respectively.
- Figure 2 Representative energetics for the system in Figure 1. The numbers at the energy levels represent potentials in V vs. NHE for the reactions at pH = 0. These potentials would shift by ~ 0.059 V per pH unit at 25°C, so that at pH 7, they would be about 0.4 V more negative.
- Figure 3 Schematic representation of (A) n-type semiconductor photoelectrochemical cells with typical values for the band edge locations for n-TiO₂ at pH = 0 (V vs. NHE). (B) p-type semiconductor cell with band edge locations for p-GaAs at pH = 0.
- Figure 4 Representation of effect of Pt in catalysis of hydrogen evolution reaction. Potentials at pH = 0 in V vs. NHE at right. ΔG_{ads} is the energy of adsorption of H-atoms on Pt. The relative location of H⁺ to H• and H₂ levels depends upon potential of the particle.
- Figure 5 The application of individual electrode (semiconductor and Pt) current-potential (i-V) curves in the design of

photoelectrochemical cells and particulate systems. Curves shown are for an n-type semiconductor (e.g., n-TiO₂) as shown in Figure 3A. The broken lines show the behavior for the oxidation $(D \rightarrow D^+)$ and reduction $(0 + R, e.g. H_2$ evolution) at Pt and the solid lines at the irradiated semiconductor. The $D \rightarrow D^+$ reaction occurs at less positive potentials at the semiconductor because it is driven by light. <u>a</u> is the operating point for a semiconductor/Pt system and <u>b</u> is for the semiconductor alone. The higher currents at the operating point show that the platinized semiconductor should show a high reaction rate.

- Figure 6 Schematic diagram of a solar energy utilization system employing two light-absorbers and requiring two photons (at energies $h\nu_1$ and $h\nu_2$) to drive one electron through the system. The system is similar to that in Figure 1, except that an intermediate redox couple, O/R, connects the two light absorbing systems.
- Figure 7 Representative energetics for the system in Figure 6. See Figure 2 caption for other information.



FIGURE 1

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