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# Optimizing microalgal production in raceway systems

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## Abstract

The industrial exploitation of microalgae is characterized by the production of high value compounds. Optimization of the performance of microalgae culture systems is essential to render the process economically viable. For raceway systems, the task of optimization is rather challenging since the process is by essence periodically forced and, as a consequence, optimization must be carried out in a periodic framework. In this paper, we propose a simple operational criterion for raceway systems that when integrated in a strategy of closed-loop control allows to attain biomass productivities very near to the maximal productivities. The strategy developed was tested numerically by using a mathematical model of microalgae growth in raceways. The model takes into account the dynamics of environmental variables temperature and light intensity and their influence on microalgae growth.

*Keywords:* control, microalgae, modeling, optimization, photobioreactors, raceway

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## 1. Introduction

Microalgae assimilate inorganic carbon through photosynthesis, a process that takes place in two phases, namely light-dependent stage (light reactions) and light-independent stage (dark reactions). The second phase comprises a series of reactions catalyzed by the enzyme ribulose biphosphate carboxylase oxygenase (RuBisCO). In this phase, CO<sub>2</sub> is incorporated into organic material, leading to the formation of the carbon building blocks that are further synthesized into carbohydrates, proteins, lipids and nucleic acids [38].

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8 Due to its biochemical properties, microalgae have been raised as promising feed-  
9 stocks for the production of high value compounds. The commercial use of microalgae  
10 includes applications in food industry and cosmetics [35]. Moreover, microalgae have been  
11 identified as a renewable source for biodiesel production [5, 18]. However, despite these  
12 favorable characteristics, microalgae production in a sustained and large scale basis is  
13 probably carried out far from an optimal working mode. Here, we mainly refer to the  
14 technology of raceways (high rate open ponds), which are nowadays the systems generally  
15 used for large microalgae production.

16 The difficulty of achieving optimal productivities of microalgae in outdoor systems  
17 results from the high interaction of phenomena that take place during growth and the low  
18 level of control that we have on them. This factor makes the whole process inefficient under  
19 an environment that is fluctuating by nature. The challenge of optimizing microalgal  
20 culture systems is a broad endeavour that includes reactor design [24, 32] and strain  
21 selection [33]. Furthermore, once the reactor configuration and the microalgal strain have  
22 been chosen, optimal performances can be achieved by acting on operational variables,  
23 such as temperature, pH and nutrient feeding rate. In this aspect, mathematical models  
24 offer a powerful tool to be exploited. Indeed, optimization can be model driven. Since  
25 microalgal metabolism is mainly influenced by nutrient availability, light intensity and  
26 temperature, several models have been developed to account for these factors [8, 14, 15,  
27 29, 26, 3]. A work of synthesis has been performed to provide a mathematical model that  
28 incorporates the main factors that influences microalgal dynamics by keeping a relative  
29 simple structure [2] that might be suitable for control processes.

30 The task of bringing a process close to optimality by acting on the inputs of the system  
31 is the realm of optimal control. The optimal control problem that we are considering  
32 consists in finding the time evolution of the manipulated variables maximizing a given  
33 criterion on a finite time horizon. This problem can be solved by indirect methods such  
34 as the Pontryagin's maximum principle or by direct methods (numerical optimization).  
35 The advantage of using Pontryagin's maximum principle is that of providing an analytic  
36 solution. In this respect, a theoretical study on a simplified model of microalgae growth  
37 provided guidelines on the form of the controller to reach an optimal productivity [16].

38 This study was the first dedicated to optimal control of microalgae in a periodically  
39 varying environment. A series of simplifications were needed to provide a very simple  
40 model suitable for applying the Pontryagin's maximum principle. The distance between  
41 the proposed optimal strategy and the optimal strategy for a more realistic model is  
42 therefore difficult to assess.

43 When a mathematical model is complex, the application of the Pontryagin's maxi-  
44 mum principle is not straightforward. Hence, methods based on numerical optimization  
45 are, in practice, the most used. In the standard form, the numerical approach takes  
46 place in open loop fashion, without taking into account the real state of the system. For  
47 a real implementation, however, available measurements (either online or offline) must  
48 be used to compensate for disturbances and to correct model mismatches (see, *e.g.*, [4]  
49 for a survey of methods). An example of this type of strategy is the predictive con-  
50 trol approach, in which the optimal control problem is solved online. This strategy was  
51 developed for the optimization of biomass and oil productivities for the heterotrophic  
52 microalgae *Auxenochlorella protothecoides* [11]. This approach, however, is computa-  
53 tionally expensive and requires sophisticated algorithms of adaptation and proof of process  
54 stability is lacking.

55 A practical alternative for optimizing system performance is to translate the optimiza-  
56 tion problem into a regulatory (tracking) problem. The objective then consists in finding  
57 a variable (or a combination of variables) that when regulated maintains the system close  
58 to optimality [34]. In the case of photobioreactors, the phenomenon of light transfer  
59 to the culture governs the performance of the system [28]. Based on this principle, it  
60 has been proposed that under constant light, maximal productivities can be attained by  
61 maintaining the light intensity at the bottom of the reactor at a constant value. This  
62 value corresponds to the compensation irradiance ( $G_c$ ), defined as the minimum value  
63 of light intensity required to guarantee a positive net growth rate (strict compensation  
64 condition) [7, 6, 37]. By defining the working illuminated fraction  $\chi$  as the fraction of  
65 the reactor volume with light intensities higher than the compensation irradiance, it has  
66 been demonstrated mathematically that an optimal biomass productivity requires the  
67 condition  $\chi = 1$ .

68 For outdoor raceways, the definition of a strategy to guarantee maximal productivities  
69 is not trivial due to the diurnal light cycle. It has been conjectured that the compensation  
70 point should also be reached for natural light in order to maximize productivity [25].  
71 Inspired on this premise, an experimental study with *Chlorella sorokiniana* was carried  
72 out on an artificial lightened photobioreactor with planar geometry mimicking the daily  
73 cycle of light [9]. The experimental set-up was conceived to maintain the photon flux  
74 density leaving the reactor at a constant value. The luminostat operation did not exhibit  
75 significant improvements of productivity compared to an operation at constant dilution  
76 rate. From these results it can be drawn that keeping a constant light intensity at the rear  
77 of the reactor might not be an optimal strategy for varying light conditions. Accordingly,  
78 an imminent question is thus how to attain maximal productivities when light is varying.  
79 In the present work, we proposed a simple operational criterion which when regulated  
80 to an adequate set point maintains the system near to optimal operation. The proposed  
81 strategy has the advantage to be straightforward to implement in a classical closed loop  
82 control.

83 As a basis, we use the model proposed by [2] for a planar culturing device in combi-  
84 nation to a model describing lipid production under nitrogen limitation [19, 20]. These  
85 models have shown to reproduce experimental data of lab scale systems. Here, we extend  
86 such models to account for characteristics of raceway systems. Our *in silico* case study  
87 takes the configuration of a pilot-scale open raceway (Algotron) located at INRA-LBE,  
88 France.

## 89 **2. Modeling**

90 Under the assumption that nitrogen and light are the limiting factors for the growth  
91 of microalgae, we combined the biomass model from [2] to the lipid production model  
92 proposed in [19, 20]. It results in the following mass balance equations for a completely  
93 mixed reactor at constant volume  $V$

$$\dot{s} = f_i s_{in}/V - f_o s/V - \rho x, \quad (1)$$

$$\dot{q}_n = \rho - (\mu - R)q_n, \quad (2)$$

$$\dot{x} = (\mu - f_o/V - R)x, \quad (3)$$

$$\dot{x}_l = \beta q_n \mu x - \gamma \rho x - r_0 \phi_T x_l - f_o x_l/V, \quad (4)$$

$$\dot{x}_f = (\alpha + \gamma) \rho x - r_0 \phi_T x_f - f_o x_f/V, \quad (5)$$

94 where  $s$  is the extracellular nitrogen concentration and  $q_n$  is the internal nitrogen quota.  
 95 The concentration of the total carbon biomass  $x$  is the sum of three carbon pools, namely  
 96 storage lipids ( $x_l$ ), carbohydrates ( $x_g$ ) and a functional pool ( $x_f$ ), mainly formed by  
 97 proteins and phospholipids. Note that the dynamics of  $x_g$  can be easily deduced since  
 98  $x_g = x - (x_l + x_f)$ . The influent nitrogen concentration is  $s_{in}$ .

99 The temperature exerts a strong influence on the behaviour of microalgae systems, in  
 100 particular in outdoor raceways [27]. This effect is included in the model in two manners.  
 101 Firstly, it is assumed, in line with [14], that temperature has an homogeneous effect on  
 102 uptake, growth and respiration rates. Secondly, following the work of [13], the Chl a:N  
 103 ratio was set to be dependent on the temperature and light. The equations are detailed  
 104 later on.

105 To model the growth rate, the following is assumed:

106 (i) Microalgal growth is uncoupled dynamically to nutrient uptake. Growth kinetics  
 107 follows the cell quota model of Droop [12].

108 (ii) Light intensity is distributed spatially in the raceway. The absorption of light in the  
 109 raceway follows the Lambert-Beer law. Thus, for a given depth  $z$ , the corresponding  
 110 light intensity  $I_z$  satisfies

$$I_z = I_0 \exp(-\xi z), \quad (6)$$

111 where  $I_0$  is the incident light and  $\xi$  is the light attenuation factor, expressed as

$$\xi = a \text{Chl} + b. \quad (7)$$

112 At the bottom of the reactor  $z = L$ . The term  $\xi L$  is known as optical depth ( $\lambda$ ).

113 It should be noted that  $I_0$  varies in time in an oscillatory fashion. Its amplitude  
 114 depends on the season and the geographical location. For a given day,  $I_0$  follows an  
 115 increasing behaviour until noon, then decreases until midnight.

116 (iii) Light intensity affects the growth rate. This effect is described by a Monod type  
 117 kinetics. For a given depth  $z$  ( $0 \leq z \leq L$ ) with intensity  $I_z$ , the growth rate at  
 118 hypothetical infinite nitrogen quota is

$$\mu_z = \tilde{\mu} \frac{I_z}{I_z + K_{sI}}. \quad (8)$$

119 Finally, the growth rate is represented by an average growth rate obtained by in-  
 120 tegration of (8) along the raceway depth. The resulting equation for the growth rate  
 121 reads

$$\mu = \bar{\mu} \phi_T \left( 1 - \frac{Q_0}{q_n} \right), \quad (9)$$

with

$$\bar{\mu} = \frac{\tilde{\mu}}{\xi L} \ln \frac{I_0 + K_{sI}}{I_0 e^{-\xi L} + K_{sI}},$$

$$\phi_T = \frac{(T - T_{\max})(T - T_{\min})^2}{(T_{\text{opt}} - T_{\min}) [(T_{\text{opt}} - T_{\min})(T - T_{\text{opt}}) - (T_{\text{opt}} - T_{\max})(T_{\text{opt}} + T_{\min} - 2T)]}.$$

122

123 The term  $\phi_T$  represents the temperature effect. It is described by the model developed  
 124 for bacteria by [30] and validated for microalgae by [3].

125 Nitrogen uptake rate ( $\rho$ ) is modeled by a modified Michaelis-Menten kinetics [19].

$$\rho = \bar{\rho} \phi_T \frac{s}{s + K_s} \left( \nu + (1 - \nu) \frac{\bar{I}^m}{\bar{I}^m + \epsilon_I^m} \right) \left( 1 - \frac{q_n}{Q_l} \right). \quad (10)$$

126 The nitrogen uptake rate is expressed as a function of the average irradiance in the raceway  
 127  $\bar{I}$ . Here, it is considered that nutrient uptake is regulated by the internal nitrogen quota,  
 128 *i.e.*, when the cells are nutrient saturated, uptake rate stops. Additionally, the equation  
 129 includes a light regulating factor (in the form of a Hill-type function). Therefore, when  
 130 the cells enter to the dark period, the nutrient uptake rate exhibits a slowdown.

131 The model includes an overall respiration rate  $R$ , that gathers maintenance respiration  
 132 and biosynthesis cost (assumed to be proportional to nitrogen uptake rate):

$$R = r_0\phi_T + \varphi\rho, \quad (11)$$

133 where  $r_0$  is the maintenance respiration and  $\varphi$  is a biosynthesis cost coefficient. Model  
 134 notation is given in Table 1.

135 Additionally, it is assumed that chlorophyll concentration (Chl) is correlated to par-  
 136 ticulate nitrogen ( $xq_n$ ) [2]. The Chl:N ratio ( $\theta_N$ ) is influenced by light and temperature  
 137 following [13]

$$\theta_N^{-1} = (g_1 - g_2T) + g_3\bar{I}\exp(-g_4T). \quad (12)$$

138 In this equation, it is implicitly assumed that the cells are photoacclimated at the average  
 139 light intensity  $\bar{I}$ .

140 Environmental variables, notably light intensity (solar irradiance) and temperature  
 141 govern reactor performance. These two variables incorporated in the kinetics of growth  
 142 and nitrogen uptake can be accessible from online sensors or meteorological stations.  
 143 In addition, mathematical models have been developed to predict light intensity [23] and  
 144 raceway temperature [1] for a given location. In the present study, mathematical modeling  
 145 supported by meteorological data was used for the location of Narbonne, France (see  
 146 Fig. 1).

147 Model parameters were taken from studies on the microalgae *Isochrysis* aff. *galbana*,  
 148 when available. The parameters describing  $\phi_T$  are those obtained for *Nannochloropsis*  
 149 *oceanica* [3].

### 150 3. Driving raceway operation to optimal performance

#### 151 3.1. Optimal problem statement

152 In this study, we are interested in designing a control law on the input flow rate ( $f_i$ )  
 153 that allows to bring either the biomass productivity ( $P_x$ ) or the lipid productivity ( $P_l$ )  
 154 very close to the maximal productivities that can be attained in the raceway. For a given  
 155 time horizon  $t_f$ , the maximal productivities can be obtained by solving an optimal control  
 156 problem that can be formulated as follows



$$\begin{aligned}
& \max_{f_i(t)} \int_{t_0}^{t_f} \psi(t, \mathbf{x}(t), f_i(t)) dt. \\
& \text{s.t.} \\
& 0 \leq f_i(t) \leq f_{\max} \\
& \dot{\mathbf{x}} = \mathbf{g}(\mathbf{x}, f_i, t), \quad \mathbf{x}(0) = \mathbf{x}_0.
\end{aligned} \tag{13}$$

157 With  $\mathbf{x}$  the state vector and  $f_{\max}$  the upper bound of the input flow rate. If the  
158 purpose of the controller is to optimize biomass productivity  $P_x$ , then

$$\psi(t, \mathbf{x}(t), f_i(t)) = f_o(t) x(t). \tag{14}$$

159 If the objective is to optimize lipid productivity  $P_l$ , then

$$\psi(t, \mathbf{x}(t), f_i(t)) = f_o(t) x_l(t). \tag{15}$$

160 For the sake of clarity, we will call  $CP_x$  the optimal controller that maximizes biomass  
161 productivity and  $CP_l$  the optimal controller that maximizes lipid productivity.

162 The model equations (1)-(5) were used for the optimization study. The influent nitro-  
163 gen concentration  $s_{in}$  was set to 50 g N m<sup>-3</sup>. This value is an operational concentration  
164 used in Algotron. The volume was assumed to be constant, so  $f_o = f_i$ .

165

166 The Matlab toolbox DOTcvsSB [17] was used for solving the optimal control prob-  
167 lems numerically. DOTcvsSB uses the approach of sequential discretization (control  
168 vector parametrization) to solve the non-linear programming (NLP) problem. In the  
169 optimization stage, the stochastic algorithms developed by [31] and [36] were used.

### 170 3.2. Quasi optimal closed loop control

171 As it was mentioned in the Introduction section, solving the optimal control problem  
172 (13) (with the functional objective defined by (14) or (15)) might be computationally  
173 expensive and difficult to implement in practice. For a real implementation, it will be  
174 desirable to identify a controlled variable that when regulated towards a set point will  
175 ensure that the system operates close to optimality. In this respect and since light transfer

176 is a crucial phenomenon of the process of microalgal growth, we propose the efficiency of  
177 light absorption ( $\eta_L$ ) to be such a controlled variable.

$$\eta_L = \frac{I_0 - I_L}{I_0} = 1 - \exp(-\xi L). \quad (16)$$

178 As it will be shown hereafter, this simple controller has a very good ability to maintain  
179 the system close to the optimal solution. In fact, several strategies were tested based on  
180 preliminary studies, and  $\eta_L$  turned out to present the best trade-off between simplicity  
181 and efficiency.

182 For a given microalgae, there exists a set point  $\eta_L^*$  that maintains the system near to  
183 optimal productivities. The value  $\eta_L^*$  depends on the characteristics of the microalgae,  
184 namely optical properties and light affinity. In this study a set point  $\eta_L^* = 0.95$  was  
185 selected. Note that regulating  $\eta_L$  implies the regulation of the optical depth  $\lambda$ . Given the  
186 form of the attenuation factor (7), regulating the optical depth is equivalent to regulating  
187 the Chlorophyll concentration. For  $\eta_L^* = 0.95$ , the set point for Chlorophyll concentration  
188 is  $\text{Chl}^* = 4.95 \text{ g Chl m}^{-3}$ . This result is very convenient because during darkness the  
189 efficiency of light absorption can not be defined but we can still regulate the Chlorophyll  
190 concentration to  $\text{Chl}^*$  in such a way that when  $I_0 > 0$  the efficiency of light absorption  
191 will be close to  $\eta_L^*$ .

192 In the following, we show by means of numerical simulation, the performance of the  
193 raceway by regulating  $\eta_L$  to the set point  $\eta_L^*$ . This regulation can be achieved by any  
194 adequate feedback controller. In this work, we use a standard PI controller. Since our  
195 premise is that this controller brings the system to work almost optimally, we call it a  
196 quasi optimal (QO) controller.

## 197 4. Results

### 198 4.1. Comparison of the QO controller to optimal strategy

199 Figure 2 displays the responses of the state variables and the lipid and biomass pro-  
200 ductivities ( $P_l, P_x$ ) when applying the QO controller and the optimal  $\text{CP}_x$  controller for  
201 a time period of 30 days. To calculate the productivities, it was assumed that carbon  
202 contributes to the 56% of ash-free dry weight [38]. The productivities are divided by the

203 surface of the raceway and the time. The QO control controller brings the efficiency of  
204 light absorption very close to the defined set point. At  $t = 6.5$  d,  $\eta_L$  is 95% of  $\eta_L^*$ . The  
205 maximal biomass productivity obtained with the optimal controller  $CP_x$  is 168 tons dry  
206 weight  $\text{ha}^{-1} \text{a}^{-1}$ . This value is consistent with productivities reported in the literature  
207 [5, 38]. Importantly, the biomass and lipid productivity provided by the QO controller  
208 were both 98% of those given by the controller  $CP_x$  (Table 2). After 25 d, the final lipid  
209 quota ( $q_l = x_l/x$ ) oscillates with a maximal value of 16%. This relative low level of lipids  
210 is due to the fact that many of the parameters used in the model were taken from studies  
211 with *I. galbana*, which is known to have a low lipid content.

212 To have an assessment of the maximal lipid productivity that can be attained, the  
213 optimal controller  $CP_l$  was calculated. For the model parameters used in our case study,  
214 it resulted that optimizing lipid productivity was equivalent to optimizing biomass pro-  
215 ductivity. Thus, the response of the system behaviour when applying the  $CP_l$  controller  
216 was very similar to the response obtained when applying the  $CP_x$  controller. This result  
217 is interesting because it is often claimed the conflict between optimizing lipid productivity  
218 and optimizing biomass productivity. Indeed, such a conflict occurs when light is con-  
219 stant. Figure 3 shows the system response for the optimization of the two performance  
220 indexes ( $P_x, P_l$ ) when the system was set to operate at constant temperature ( $21^\circ\text{C}$ ) and  
221 constant incident light ( $250 \mu\text{mol photons m}^{-2}\text{s}^{-1}$ ). It is observed that while the optimal  
222 strategy for biomass productivity provides a higher biomass concentration, the optimal  
223 strategy for lipid productivity drives the microalgae to increase its lipid content, which  
224 in turn is detrimental for attaining high concentration of biomass. While the difference  
225 between the biomass productivities obtained by the two controllers is very small, the  $CP_l$   
226 controller provides a lipid productivity that is 10% higher than that obtained with the  
227  $CP_x$  controller. These differences may become more important for microalgae with high  
228 potential of lipid accumulation.

229 For a diurnal light cycle, however, our results suggest that there is not discrepancy  
230 between optimizing lipid productivity and optimizing biomass productivity. For both  
231 performance indexes, the cells should growth as much as they can in the light period  
232 to accumulate enough carbon. The higher the biomass the concentration, the higher

233 the available carbon source that can be potentially directed to the lipid pool. To as-  
234 sess whether our indication was independent on the properties of lipid accumulation of  
235 the microalgae, the coefficients of fatty acid synthesis ( $\beta$ ) and fatty acid mobilization  
236 ( $\gamma$ ) were modified to represent a microalgae with high lipid level ( $\approx 40\%$  of the total  
237 carbon). The optimal controllers  $CP_x$  and  $CP_l$  were further calculated with the new pa-  
238 rameters. The system dynamics were specific to each applied controller  $CP_x$  and  $CP_l$ , *e.g.*,  
239 the biomass concentration for the  $CP_x$  exhibited a different dynamics that the biomass  
240 concentration provided by the  $CP_l$ . However, such differences were not significant and  
241 both controllers provided similar biomass and lipid productivities. Hence, we confirm the  
242 previous suggestion that optimizing lipid productivity is almost equivalent to optimizing  
243 biomass productivity for a photobioreactor with diurnal light cycle.

244 The results presented here are very promising. We show that the QO controller per-  
245 forms as well as the optimal controllers, confirming our hypothesis that controlling the  
246 efficiency of light absorption ( $\eta_L$ ) makes it possible to attain high productivities both in  
247 lipid and biomass. The response of the QO controller suggests that an optimal strategy  
248 consists in driving the biomass concentration to a certain value and to allow it oscillate  
249 around this point. This result is consistent with the work developed by [6] and the the-  
250 oretical results presented by [16], where an optimal controller was developed by forcing  
251 the biomass concentration to fulfill a periodicity condition.

#### 252 4.2. Comparison of open loop configurations to optimal strategy

253 We were interested to assess the performance of the raceway in open loop (OL) config-  
254 uration. To this end, the model was simulated initially with an input flow rate  $f_i = 5.13$   
255  $\text{m}^3 \text{d}^{-1}$  (dilution rate  $D = 0.30 \text{d}^{-1}$ ), which is a typical value [5, 22]. The lipid and biomass  
256 productivities were, respectively, 54% and 59% of those obtained with the optimal con-  
257 trollers  $CP_x$  and  $CP_l$ . This means that for an open loop configuration, a wrong choice  
258 of the input flow rate will imply an unsatisfactory performance. To perform a fair com-  
259 parison, in addition to the optimal controllers previously calculated, the optimal control  
260 problem (14) was solved by setting a constant flow rate. The optimal flow rate was found  
261 to be  $3.22 \text{m}^3 \text{d}^{-1}$  ( $D = 0.19 \text{d}^{-1}$ ) and the resulting biomass productivity was 93% of the

262 one obtained with the optimal controller  $CP_x$ . Table 2 summarizes the comparison of the  
263 performances of different controllers and configurations evaluated (including the QO con-  
264 troller) relative to the optimal productivities. Additionally, Fig. 4 shows the dependency  
265 of the biomass and lipid productivities on the dilution rate. The curves are normalized  
266 to illustrate that the both productivities reach their maximal value at the same dilution  
267 rate.

268 The relative high productivity obtained with the optimal constant flow rate is not  
269 surprising, since experimental studies on artificial photobioreactors [9, 10] have shown  
270 that with an adequate constant flow rate it is possible to attain high productivities. This  
271 result may suggest that, when the microalgae are not nutrient limited, the environmen-  
272 tal conditions, namely light intensity and temperature exert such a strong influence on  
273 the system behaviour that the improvement of the performance that can be reached by  
274 manipulating the dilution rate is only marginal. This finding might, at first sight, dis-  
275 courages the endeavour of developing any control strategy for raceways systems, since it  
276 appears that even with a constant flow rate, a satisfactory performance can be attained.  
277 This result, however, must be taken with caution. Indeed, we argue in favor of the QO  
278 controller over the other control strategies and, of course, over open loop operation. The  
279 arguments supporting our decision are developed in the following.

#### 280 *4.3. Robustness of optimal strategies and QO controller*

281 The previous results that indicate that an adequate constant flow rate leads to near  
282 optimal operation are derived from very well controlled systems (closed photobioreac-  
283 tors) or from mathematical models that do not take into account model uncertainty and  
284 potential disturbances. Since the QO controller operates in closed loop fashion, it has  
285 many practical advantages. For instance, it can be easily tuned for a real scenario that is  
286 subjected to disturbances and technical failures. The optimal controllers can also be in  
287 closed loop fashion. However, its implementation is more demanding than that of the QO  
288 controller. If the optimal controllers are used in open loop, the system can be directed to  
289 suboptimal operation. Figure 6 displays the productivities given by the QO controller and  
290 the optimal controller  $CP_x$  considering uncertainty in the model parameters. The value

291 of  $\tilde{\mu}$  was decreased 30% of the value used originally to calculate the optimal controller.  
292 It is observed that the QO controller provided a biomass productivity that is 17% higher  
293 than that provided by the controller  $CP_x$ . It should be noted that this result was achieved  
294 with a simple PI controller. We expect that by using a nonlinear controller based on the  
295 light efficiency, the productivity might be even better. The design of such a nonlinear  
296 controller is one of the perspectives of this work.

#### 297 *4.4. Is the strict compensation condition relevant for diurnal light cycles?*

298 The strict compensation condition (implying that the working illuminated fraction  
299  $\chi = 1$ ) has been identified as a necessary condition to attain maximal productivities in  
300 closed photobioreactors under light constant regime [37]. The light intensity at which the  
301 compensation occurs is often expressed as a constant parameter. Indeed, if the incident  
302 light intensity is constant, there exists one value of light intensity at the bottom of the  
303 reactor at which the productivity is maximal [21]. However, we might notice that for a  
304 varying light system, the light of compensation depends on the actual state of the system  
305 and thus there is not a fixed value that will bring the system to operate under the strict  
306 compensation condition.

307 For outdoor raceways, where microalgae are exposed to long periods of darkness,  
308 respiration affects negatively growth. It is clear that in the dark period, the compensation  
309 condition do not play any role on the reactor performance. When the incident light is  
310 higher than zero, the strict compensation condition is such that  $\mu_L = R$ . The light of  
311 compensation is thus a dynamic operational variable that depends of the state of the  
312 system. The optical depth of the reactor must then be adjusted accordingly to reach  
313 the light of compensation at the rear of the reactor. Note that if the reactor volume is  
314 constant, the regulation acts on the attenuation factor  $\xi$ . This strategy, however, may  
315 suffer of reachability problems, as experienced in the study of [9], where the light at the  
316 bottom of the photobioreactor could not be maintained at the defined set point due to the  
317 dynamic boundary imposed by the growth rate. To enlarge the discussion in this point,  
318 we assess by means of simulations if the strict compensation condition could be fulfilled  
319 in a diurnal light cycle and if it is relevant to attain such a condition to achieve maximal

320 productivities. The following optimal control problem was defined

$$\min_{f_i(t)} \int_{t_0}^{t_f} (\mu_L - R)^2 dt. \quad (17)$$

321 The controller optimizing (17) is called  $CP_c$ .

322 Figure 5 shows the ratio between the growth rate at the rear of the raceway ( $\mu_L$ )  
323 and the respiration rate (R). The results are given for the optimal controller  $CP_c$ . It is  
324 observed that, for the light period, the growth rate at the rear of the raceway is higher  
325 than the respiration rate and that the compensation condition is not strictly fulfilled all  
326 the time  $\chi > 1$ . The results indicate that attaining the strict compensation throughout  
327 the day might be no physically possible due to the dynamic bound imposed by the growth  
328 rate.

329 The optimal controller  $CP_c$  resulted in biomass and lipid productivities that were,  
330 100% of those obtained with the optimal controllers  $CP_x$  and  $CP_l$ . Our results suggest that  
331 the closest the system is to the compensation condition the closest the system operates  
332 optimally. However, the results also indicate that for a photobioreactor subject to the  
333 diurnal light cycle, the strict compensation condition is not a necessary condition to be  
334 fulfilled for achieving maximal productivities. We have also verified that trying to impose  
335 a compensation condition valid around the midday light peak could be inefficient resulting  
336 in low productivities.

337 We must note that when the respiration rate is very low, the strict compensation  
338 condition became  $\mu_L \approx 0$  implying that  $I_L \approx 0$ . Here, the compensation condition im-  
339 plies almost full absorption of light which is rather difficult to maintain throughout the  
340 day. Due to the limitation of reachability of the strict compensation condition and the  
341 difficulty associated to the online determination of  $\mu_L$  and R, we suggest that the strict  
342 compensation condition is not a practical criterion for the design of control strategies. By  
343 contrary, the strategy that we proposed of controlling the efficiency of light absorption  
344  $\eta_L$  is technically feasible for real implementation and provides almost optimal productiv-  
345 ities. In the near future, an optimal framework of harvesting strategies will be proposed  
346 complementary to the QO control.

## 347 **5. Conclusion**

348 To summarize, controlling the efficiency of light absorption makes it possible to attain  
349 maximal productivities. The overall performance of the QO controller developed here and  
350 its practical advantages for real implementation makes it a suitable control strategy for  
351 optimizing microalgae production in raceways.

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## 357 **References**

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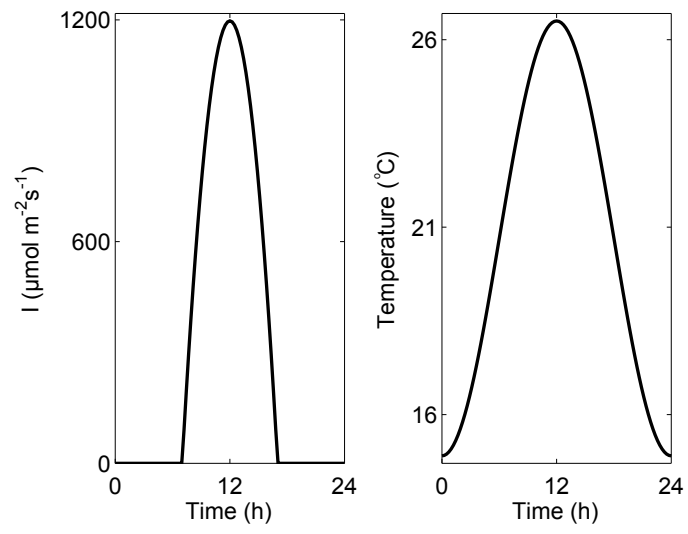


Figure 1: Typical diel variation of light intensity and temperature for the location of Narbonne in June.

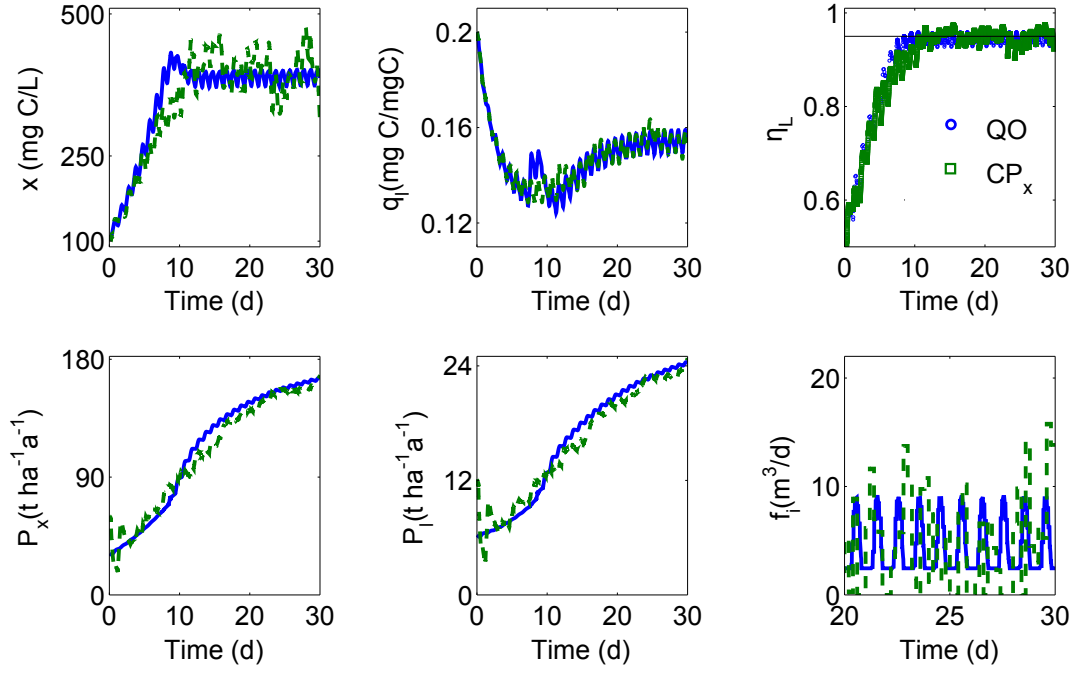


Figure 2: Trajectories of state variables and productivities given by the QO controller (solid blue line) and by the optimal controller  $CP_x$  (dashed green line). The productivities are given in dry weight basis. The biomass and lipid productivities given by the QO controller are both 98% of those provided by  $CP_x$ . The top right plot shows the evolution  $\eta_L$  during the light period. The horizontal continuous line corresponds to the set point  $\eta_L^* = 0.95$ .

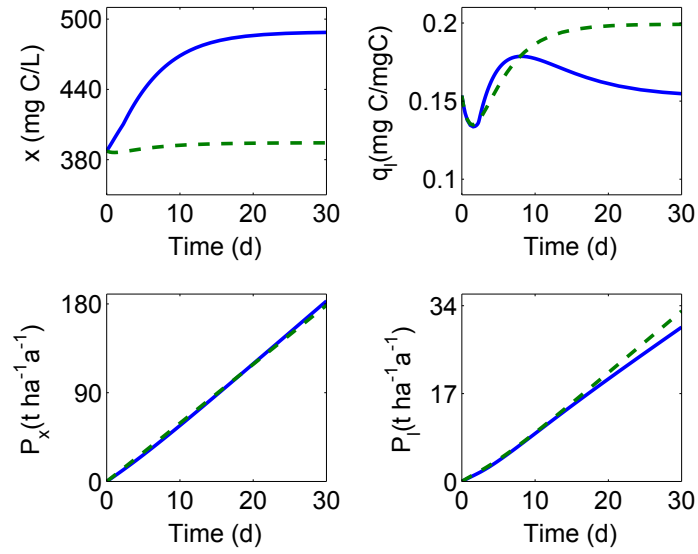


Figure 3: In a photobioreactor with constant incident light, the response of the system when applying a controller to optimize lipid productivity (dashed green line) differs of the response provided by a controller optimizing biomass productivity (solid blue line). Maximizing biomass productivity favors high biomass concentration, while maximizing lipid productivity favors high lipid quota.

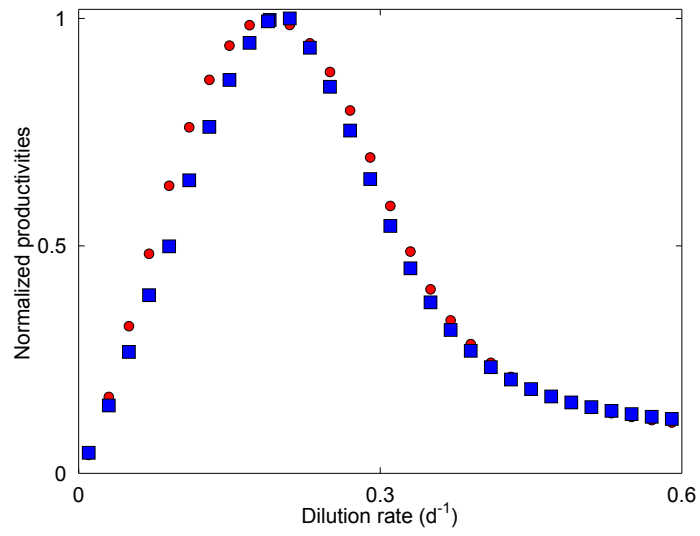


Figure 4: Normalized productivities at different dilution rates. In a raceway reactor, the biomass productivity (circles) and the lipid productivity (squares) reach their maximal value at almost the same dilution rate.



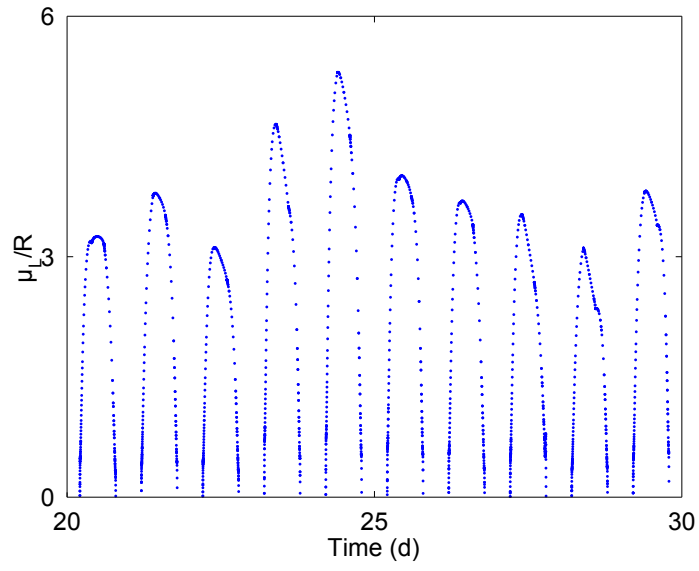


Figure 5: The strict compensation condition ( $\mu_L/R=1$ ) is not attained along the day. Response obtained for the optimal controller  $CP_c$ .

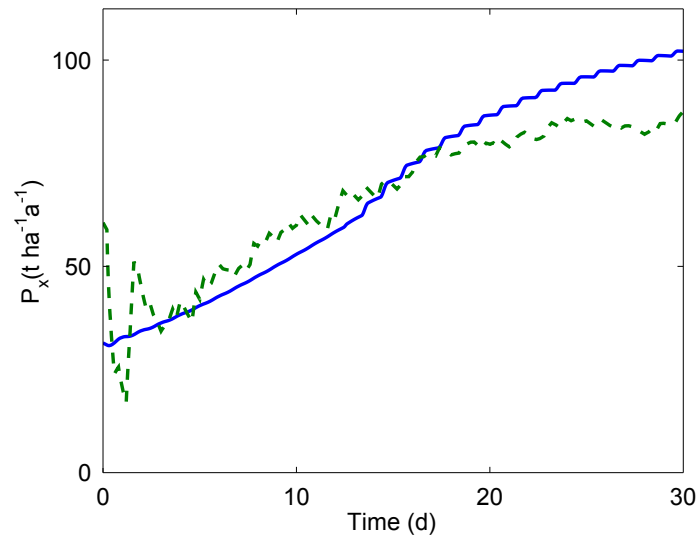


Figure 6: Productivities provided by the QO controller (solid blue line) and the optimal controller  $CP_x$  (dashed green line) under parameter uncertainty. The value of  $\tilde{\mu}$  was decreased 30%.

Table 1: Model notation and parameter values.

|                          | Definition                                   | Units                                       | Value |
|--------------------------|--|---|-------|
| Variables                |  |   |       |
| $s$                      | Nitrogen concentration                       | $\text{g N m}^{-3}$                         |       |
| $q_l$                    | Neutral lipid quota                          | $\text{g C (g C)}^{-1}$                     |       |
| $q_n$                    | Nitrogen quota                               | $\text{g N (g C)}^{-1}$                     |       |
| $x$                      | Carbon biomass concentration                 | $\text{g C m}^{-3}$                         |       |
| $x_f$                    | Functional carbon concentration              | $\text{g C m}^{-3}$                         |       |
| $x_g$                    | Carbohydrates carbon concentration           | $\text{g C m}^{-3}$                         |       |
| $x_l$                    | Lipid carbon concentration                   | $\text{g C m}^{-3}$                         |       |
| Chl                      | Chlorophyll concentration                    | $\text{g Chl m}^{-3}$                       |       |
| $G_c$                    | Compensation light intensity                 | $\mu\text{mol photons m}^{-2}\text{s}^{-1}$ |       |
| $I_0$                    | Incident light intensity                     | $\mu\text{mol photons m}^{-2}\text{s}^{-1}$ |       |
| $\bar{I}$                | Average light intensity                      | $\mu\text{mol photons m}^{-2}\text{s}^{-1}$ |       |
| $I_L$                    | Light intensity at the bottom of the raceway | $\mu\text{mol photons m}^{-2}\text{s}^{-1}$ |       |
| $I_z$                    | Light intensity at depth $z$                 | $\mu\text{mol photons m}^{-2}\text{s}^{-1}$ |       |
| $T$                      | Raceway temperature                          | $^{\circ}\text{C}$                          |       |
| Functions and parameters |  |   |       |
| $\chi$                   | Working illuminated fraction                 |   |       |
| $\eta_L$                 | Efficiency of light absorption               |   |       |
| $\phi_T$                 | Temperature factor affecting growth kinetics |   |       |
| $\lambda$                | Optical depth                                |   |       |
| $\mu$                    | Growth rate                                  | $\text{d}^{-1}$                             |       |
| $\bar{\mu}$              | Average growth rate                          | $\text{d}^{-1}$                             |       |
| $\rho$                   | Nitrogen uptake rate                         | $\text{g N (g C d)}^{-1}$                   |       |
| $\theta_N$               | Chl:N ratio                                  | $\text{g Chl (g N)}^{-1}$                   |       |
| $\xi$                    | Attenuation factor                           | $\text{m}^{-1}$                             |       |
| $D$                      | Dilution rate                                | $\text{d}^{-1}$                             |       |
| $f_i$                    | Feeding flow rate                            | $\text{m}^3 \text{d}^{-1}$                  |       |
| $f_o$                    | Effluent flow rate                           | $\text{m}^3 \text{d}^{-1}$                  |       |
| $f_r$                    | Rain flow rate                               | $\text{m}^3 \text{d}^{-1}$                  |       |
| $f_v$                    | Evaporation flow rate                        | $\text{m}^3 \text{d}^{-1}$                  |       |
| $R$                      | Overall respiration rate                     | $\text{d}^{-1}$                             |       |

|                  |  |  |        |
|------------------|--|--|--------|
| $\alpha$         | Protein synthesis coefficient                    | $\text{g C (g N)}^{-1}$  | 3.0    |
| $\beta$          | Fatty acid synthesis coefficient                 | $\text{g C (g N)}^{-1}$  | 3.80   |
| $\epsilon_I$     | Dissociation light constant.                     | $\mu\text{mol photons m}^{-2}\text{s}^{-1}$                          | 50     |
| $\varphi$        | Biosynthesis cost coefficient                    | $\text{g C (g N)}^{-1}$  | 1.30   |
| $\gamma$         | Fatty acid mobilization coefficient              | $\text{g C (g N)}^{-1}$  | 2.90   |
| $\nu$            | Reduction factor of nitrogen uptake during night |  | 0.19   |
| $\tilde{\mu}$    | Theoretical maximum specific growth rate         | $\text{d}^{-1}$  | 2.11   |
| $\bar{\rho}$     | Maximum uptake rate                              | $\text{g N (g C d)}^{-1}$  | 0.10   |
| $a$              | Light attenuation due to chlorophyll             | $\text{m}^2(\text{g Chl})^{-1}$                                      | 2.0    |
| $b$              | Light attenuation due to background turbidity    | $\text{m}^{-1}$  | 0.087  |
| $g_1$            | Coefficient Eq. (12)                             | $\text{g N (g Chl)}^{-1}$  | 16.74  |
| $g_2$            | Coefficient Eq. (12)                             | $\text{g N (g Chl } ^\circ\text{C)}^{-1}$                            | 0.39   |
| $g_3$            | Coefficient Eq. (12)                             | $\text{g N (g Chl } \mu\text{mol photons m}^{-2}\text{s}^{-1})^{-1}$ | 0.0014 |
| 460 $g_4$        | Coefficient Eq. (12)                             | $(^\circ\text{C})^{-1}$  | 0.0015 |
| $K_s$            | Nitrogen saturation constant                     | $\text{g N m}^{-3}$  | 0.018  |
| $K_{sI}$         | Light saturation constant                        | $\mu\text{mol photons m}^{-2}\text{s}^{-1}$                          | 150    |
| $L$              | Pond depth                                       | $\text{m}$   | 0.30   |
| $m$              | Hill coefficient                                 |  | 3.0    |
| $Q_l$            | Saturation cell quota                            | $\text{g N (g C)}^{-1}$  | 0.20   |
| $Q_0$            | Minimal nitrogen cell quota                      | $\text{g N (g C)}^{-1}$  | 0.05   |
| $r_0$            | Maintenance respiration rate                     | $\text{d}^{-1}$  | 0.01   |
| $s_{in}$         | Influent nitrogen concentration                  | $\text{g N m}^{-3}$  | 50     |
| $S$              | Pond surface                                     | $\text{m}^2$   | 57     |
| $T_{\min}$       | Lower temperature for microalgae growth          | $^\circ\text{C}$   | -0.20  |
| $T_{\max}$       | Upper temperature for microalgae growth          | $^\circ\text{C}$   | 33.30  |
| $T_{\text{opt}}$ | Temperature at which growth rate is maximal      | $^\circ\text{C}$   | 26.70  |
| $V$              | Raceway volume                                   | $\text{m}^3$   | 17.10  |

Table 2: Productivity performance of open loop (OL) configuration and closed loop controller. The resulting performance is presented relative to the optimal strategy.

|   | $100P_x/P_x^*$ | $100P_l/P_l^*$ |
|---|----------------|----------------|
| QO  | 98%            | 98%            |
| CP <sub>c</sub>                               | 100%           | 100%           |
| OL: $f_i^* = 3.22 \text{ m}^3 \text{ d}^{-1}$ | 93%            | 91%            |
| OL: $f_i = 5.13 \text{ m}^3 \text{ d}^{-1}$   | 54%            | 59%            |

\* stands for the productivities obtained by the optimal controllers CP<sub>x</sub> and CP<sub>l</sub>. ★ optimal constant flow rate.