Unraveling the Mechanism of Maskless Nanopatterning of Black Silicon by CF₄/H₂ Plasma Reactive-Ion Etching

Francesco Ghezzi,* Matteo Pedroni, Janez Kovac, Federica Causa, Anna Cremona, Mariano Anderle, Roberto Caniello, Silvia M. Pietralunga, and Espedito Vassallo

ABSTRACT: The process of deep texturization of the crystalline silicon surface is intimately related to its promising diverse applications, such as bactericidal surfaces for integrated lab-on-chip devices and absorptive optical layers (black silicon—BSi). Surface structuring by a maskless texturization appeals as a cost-effective approach, which is up-scalable for large-area production. In the case of silicon, it occurs by means of reactive plasma processes (RIE—reactive-ion etching) using fluorocarbon CF₄ and H₂ as reaction gases, leading to self-assembled cylindrical and pyramidal nanopillars. The mechanism of silicon erosion has been widely studied and described as it is for the masked RIE process. However, the onset of the erosion and the reaction kinetics leading to defined maskless patterning have not been unraveled to date. In this work, we specifically tackle this issue by analyzing the results of three different RIE recipes, specifically designed for the purpose. The mechanism of surface self-nanopatterning is revealed by deeply investigating the physical chemistry of the etching process at the nanoscale and the evolution of surface morphology. We monitored the progress in surface patterning and the composition of the etching plasma at different times during the RIE process. We confirm that nanopatterning issues from a net erosion, as contributed by chemical etching, physical sputtering, and by the synergistic plasma effect. We propose a qualitative model to explain the onset, the evolution, and the stopping of the process. As the RIE process is started, a high density of surface defects is initially created at the free silicon surface by energetic ion sputtering. Contextually, a polymeric overlayer is synthesized on the Si surface, as thick as 5 nm on average, and self-aggregates into nanoclusters. The latter phenomenon can be explained by considering that the initial creation of surface defects increases the activation energy for surface diffusion of deposited CF and CF₂ species and prevents them from aggregating into a continuous Volmer–Weber polymeric film. The clusterization of the polymer provides the self-masking effect since the beginning, which eventually triggers surface patterning. Once started, the maskless texturing proceeds in analogy with the masked case, that is, by combined chemical etching and ion sputtering, and ceases because of the loss of ion energy. In the case of CF₄/H₂ RIE processes at 10% of H₂, the onset of the erosion and the reaction kinetics leading to defined maskless patterning have not been unravelled to date. In this work, we specifically tackle this issue by analyzing the results of three different RIE recipes, specifically designed for the purpose.

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of black silicon (BSi) refers to the silicon surface being patterned into high-aspect ratio nanopillars, conferring excellent optical absorption and antireflection properties (black appearance) due to efficient light trapping.³ This quality may strongly contribute to the overall efficiency of Si-based optoelectronic detectors and photovoltaic cells.⁴−⁶ In totally diverse application fields, the BSi morphology results in antibacterial properties that make it appealing also for biological and medical applications.⁷–⁹ Surface nanopatterning of silicon can be obtained with the aid of several techniques, namely, laser ablation,⁹ metal-assisted chemical etching,¹⁰ electrochemical wet etching,¹¹ and—last but not least—dry plasma reactive-ion etching (RIE).¹²–¹⁴ Fabrication by wet chemical etching is simple and economical, but the increasing costs of waste treatment disposal and environmental concerns made it less attractive over recent years. Furthermore, since wet etchants are active preferentially along a specific crystal orientation,¹⁵ they are not adequate to pattern the surface of multicrystalline silicon (mc-Si), as it is typically the case, for example, for photovoltaic mc-Si solar cells. Such a limitation

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can be overcome by surface laser ablation via laser scanning, which however is a rather slow technique and not very well suitable for large-scale production. Besides, laser patterning can lead to material damage and defects that can affect electronic transport properties. In this context, maskless dry RIE has emerged as a sustainable and cost-effective method to fabricate BSi on a wafer scale. Typically, a fluorine-based RIE process is used, which employs SF₆ and O₂ gases to generate fluoride and oxygen radicals (F* and O*) in the plasma phase, with a mean lifetime longer than the bed residence time so that ions reach the substrate while still being reactive. Successful ultrablack silicon has been already obtained in a maskless RIE process by using SF₆ and O₂ gases. As F* radicals react with Si, the volatile compound SiF₄ is formed and removed, resulting in surface etching. At the same time, aggregates of the SiO₂F₆ polymeric film are also formed and randomly deposited over the surface. The polymeric film acts as a thin protection layer from etching, thereby generating an automasking effect. However, the passivation layer is then partly removed and perforated by the simultaneous, biased ion bombardment. The trade-off between the formation of the passivation layer and its removal typically limits its thickness to around 2.5 nm, a value at which the chemical etching of the Si surface with F* can still proceed. The competition between deposition of the passivation layer and its removal by energetic ion bombardment also causes local variations in the etching rate of the Si surface ending in random nanostructuring. The BSi morphology can be adjusted by changing the RIE parameters, such as gas mixture composition, flow rates, temperature, reaction time, substrate bias, and RF power. Different fluorine-based RIE processes are also successful in obtaining BSi, provided that they are still able to generate F* and passivation layers. Different RIE recipes can also be used to fabricate BSi surfaces, which make use of a CF₆/H₂ gas mixture, as described in a previous work by some of the authors. In the case being considered, while F* remains the etching agent, O₂ is replaced with H₂ that acts as the passivating agent and a scavenger for F*, so that volatile HF is formed and the formation of a CF₆ passivation layer is promoted. However, although it is possible to form nanostructures on the Si surface with different gases and to control their growth by adjusting plasma parameters, the detailed mechanism of the BSi maskless formation by RIE in a CF₆/H₂ mixture has not yet been identified. Thus, in this work, we present an experimental investigation on the growth of nanostructures as a function of the process time, focusing mainly on the initial steps of the process. We aim at unravelling the key role of surface and interface chemistry in setting the initial conditions for developing nanostructured morphology with a CF₆/H₂ gas mixture without a masking step. The study was carried out by using the already optimized process parameters as described in ref 19, that is, 200 W RF power, a reactive atmosphere at 10% H₂ and 9 Pa as the working pressure. To prove our rationale, we carried out three different experimental procedures. By the first one, we investigated the evolution in nanopatterning by analyzing samples obtained at different process times. In the second one, we run a RIE process 20 min long but in a “start-and-stop” way, by stopping it every 1 min to exhaust the plasma created during the single time step before turning on the process again. In this way, we could monitor the evolution in the composition of the plasma via optical emission spectroscopy (OES), and we confirmed that the nanostructurization is due to pure surface reactions and that the compositional evolution of plasma plays no role. Accordingly, we focused our characterization on the surface only. The third procedure consisted in placing the Si specimen on the non-powered electrode and revealed the key role of ion sputtering in the formation of the nanostructures since no structurization occurred in the specimen positioned on the powerless electrode. Based on the results of the experimental characterizations of samples as they will be described in the next session, namely, scanning electron microscopy (SEM), atomic force microscopy (AFM), surface profilometry, X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS), and time-of-flight secondary mass spectrometry (ToF-SIMS), it was possible to infer the physical chemistry of the maskless RIE process. In addition, UV–visible reflectance spectroscopy was used to test the optical properties of the final BSi morphology, and this was correlated to the simulation results from a simple model, by taking into account the shape of nanostructures.

2. EXPERIMENTAL AND RESULTS

2.1. RIE Procedure no. 1. We name here as the first procedure the study of the evolution in the outcomes of the RIE process as its duration is varied while keeping the same settings for the parameters. In this way, we investigated the evolution in maskless nanopatterning by performing experimental characterizations of samples obtained at different process times. The experimental characterizations not only include morphological
and chemical—physical analysis of the etched Si surface but also the assessment of the chemical composition of the reactive plasma.

2.1.1. Optical Emission Spectroscopy. The evolution in the chemical composition of the reactive plasma has been monitored along the etching procedure by OES, focusing on the content in polymerizing precursor species (CF$_2$)$_n$ and in etching precursor species (F atoms). Results are shown in Figure 1. Figure 1a shows a spectrum in the 246–272 nm range, from which it is evident that the main features belong to the CF$_2$ (A'B'–X'A1) difluorocarbene band system, while the continuum emission band underlying the CF$_2$ bands is assigned to the CF$_2^*$ (4b$_2$–6a$_1$) electronic transition. The presence of CF$_2^*$ continuum emission suggests that a significant population of energetic electrons (16.4 eV) is responsible for the ionization of CF$_2$ radicals by direct electronic impact from the ground state. In addition to CF$_2$ and CF$_2^*$ bands, F emission was observed in the 662–678 nm range, and the results are shown in Figure 1b. The CF$_2$ and CF$_2^*$ bands and the atomic F lines were monitored continuously in the second procedure process case. Their intensities were almost constant ($\pm$12%).

2.1.2. Profilometry of the Etched Area. The etching rate was evaluated by measuring an average value of etching depth using a stylus profilometer. With this aim, the thickness value on the etched area was compared to a reference value taken in correspondence to a shielded portion of the specimen where the RIE was not effective. Figure 2 is a schematic cross-sectional representation of the status of the sample at any process time, although reported values are relative to the case of 20 min etching. The smooth and thick dark gray area represents the shielded portion of the sample, and the rough and light gray part is the cross-section of the RIE-treated area. An averaged etching depth of about 1.5 $\mu$m is reported, with a peak-to-valley height of the pillars in the 250 nm range.

An averaged etching depth of about 1.5 $\mu$m is reported, with a peak-to-valley height of the pillars in the 250 nm range. As the process time increases, the etching rate is not constant, as shown in Figure 3. Higher etching rate values are measured at short process times (from 30 s to 1–2 min), and values decrease monotonically as the process time increases, halving in 20 min.

2.1.3. Surface Morphology by High-Resolution SEM. The evolution in surface morphology has been monitored from the HiRES SEM images taken at different process steps and is shown in Figure 4a (top views) and 4b (cross-sectional views). As shown in Figure 4a, at 30 s of the plasma process, an “island-like” morphology is visible, featuring a clustered nanostructurization in a few areas and a low density of isolated nanostructures. After 60 s of etching, surface patterning becomes more homogeneous over the surface, although nanostructures are still quite small. The shape and height of nanostructures can be observed in SEM cross-sectional images and tilted views in Figure 4b. After 6 s of RIE, the height of the structures can be evaluated in the 10–40 nm range, while their shapes are not clearly defined yet.

After 2 min of RIE, nanostructures turn into pyramid-like pillars of defined morphology, although of uneven height, with an average value of about 40 nm tall and a few pillars exceed 100 nm. As RIE proceeds, patterning gains homogeneity in both pyramidal shape and height, and an average height of about 100 nm is reached (5 min of RIE). As the etching time is increased above 15 min, the pyramids start to widen at their bases as it is clearly visible in top-view and cross-sectional images of Figure 4b. For instance, after 15 and 20 min of etching, the pillars measure, respectively, 190 and 200 nm in height and about 80 and 100 nm in width at their bases. A pillar growth rate (nm/min) can therefore be estimated by dividing the pillar height, as estimated from the cross-section images, by the process time. Similar to the trend in the etching rate, the pillar growth rate also decreases with process time, with a halving time of about 20 min.

2.1.4. Surface Morphology by AFM. A better insight into the process of nanopatterning has been obtained by AFM inspection of the sample surface at 30 s, 60 s, 5 min, 15 min, and 20 min process times. Figure 5 reports the AFM morphological surface maps taken over a 5 $\times$ 5 $\mu$m$^2$ probed area. A uniform growth of nanostructures can be directly appreciated, apart few exceptions.
2.1.5. Chemical Analysis on the Surface by XPS. XPS was performed to provide a chemical analysis of the textured Si surfaces after RIE processing. Survey and high-resolution spectra of C, F, Si, and O were acquired and then deconvolved to obtain information on the chemical species deposited. C, F, Si, and O were the only elements detected in the survey spectra. The evolution of C 1s, F 1s, Si 2p, and O 1s core-level lines with process time, along with their components, is presented in Figure 6a−d. By assigning a chemical species to each component of the fitting as presented in Table 1, it was possible to observe a shift in the binding energy (BE) of the species of the order of 0.2−0.3 eV at different times along the RIE process. Besides, it is well known that CFx and C−CF components are fingerprints of a fluoropolymer deposition, while SiFx components can only be the fingerprint of a chemical etching. There is also the presence of intermediate species Si−CO and SiC−OH throughout the process time. Although the levels of oxygen and silicon decrease progressively with time, the levels of carbon and fluorine increase. The relative concentration of each species has then been calculated by using the atomic sensitivity factor, and the respective trends are reported in Figure 7. As shown in Figure 7a, the ratio (SiF + SiF3)/(CF + CF2) increases almost linearly in time. More complex trends are instead shown by the ratios F/Si, C/Si, and F/C in Figure 7b and for the ratios SiF/Si, SiF3/Si and SiO2/Si in Figure 7c.

2.1.6. Chemical Analysis by ToF-SIMS. It is well known that SIMS technique is complementary to XPS for the ease of getting depth profiles and because it can reveal directly the presence of hydrogen. The mass spectra from the BSi samples obtained at different process times show the presence of variety of ions, molecular ions, and clusters such as SiO2−, SiOF−, SiC−, SiCO−, C2F−CF−, CF−, SiF−, CH−, C2H−, SiH−, H−, C2H5−, C2H3−, SiHO−, SiOC−, and Si++, in addition to Al+, Na+, and F−, as surface contaminants. The surface chemical characterization is in agreement with the finding of XPS. In addition, ToF-SIMS spectra reveal the ions and molecules containing H and show the interaction of H2 with the surface.

ToF-SIMS analyses of the two-dimensional spatial distribution of different species on the surface was performed in all samples over an area of 10×10 μm2. Figure 8 reports the results for the 20 min-treated sample, as SIMS maps of the F−, SiF3−, and CF2− signals, for an analyzed depth of 1−2 nm. The heterogeneous distribution of F-related signals reveals the presence of F-covered agglomerates of diameter 0.5−1.5 μm. Besides, the agglomerates of F− and SiF3− species are spatially coincident. In spite of the low sensitivity for the CF2 cluster, the spatial coincidence between map (c) and maps (a) and (b) can also be inferred. It has to be noticed that the presence of an island-like distribution of the fluorinated species becomes evident only in the 20 min treated sample due to limited spatial resolution of SIMS technique. Therefore non-uniform deposition of C−F species and heterogeneous surface chemistry, under the present experimental conditions, must occur right from the beginning ending with subsequent nanostructuring.

ToF-SIMS depth profiling reveals the molecular structure of the pillars. Depth profiles for all samples were carried out using a 30 keV Bi+ beam for analysis and with a 2 keV Cs+ beam for sputtering. Figure 9 shows a typical ToF-SIMS depth profile of the signals of the CF−, CF2−, and CF3− ions obtained for the BSi sample treated for 10 min. The sputtered depth is
calculated from the sputtering rate measured on a reference sample. The CF\(^+\), CF\(_2\)\(^+\), and CF\(_3\)\(^+\) signals are evidently originated from the region of nanopillars, showing that the pillars are covered with the C–F layer. On the top of the pillars, there is a layer about 4 nm thick enriched in CF\(_2\) and CF\(_3\) molecules, which can be recognized from high peaks in the CF\(_2\) and CF\(_3\) curves in Figure 9. The CF\(_2\) molecules may cover also a side wall of pillars as it can be inferred from the plateau of the CF\(_2\)\(^−\) signal in the depth region between 5 and 50 nm. The plateau in the CF\(_2\) signal at a depth of about 55 nm suggests that a deposition of this type of molecules may occur at the bottom of the valley. The CF\(^−\) curve indicates a gradient concentration dependence of the CF\(^−\) molecules along the pillar length. From the ToF-SIMS depth profile in Figure 9, the thickness of the pillar layer may be estimated to be about 80 nm, which roughly corresponds to that measured by SEM (120 nm). The difference may be attributed to the sputtering yield of the Cs\(^+\) ion beam on the Si–F–O–C mixed material, which may differ from that measured on the reference SiO\(_2\) material. In Table 2, we report the thickness of the C–F layers coating the pillars, as obtained from SIMS depth profiles similar to those shown in Figure 9. The CF layer reflects the thickness of the pillar layer since this species cover whole length of the pillar. The thickness of the CF\(_2\) top layer reflects the covering of the nanostructured surface. As such, one has to think that, once the ToF-SIMS starts to probe the surface at time 0, the CF\(_2\) detected is the sum of the contributions present at the top layer of the nanopillars and in the valleys in between.

2.2. Procedure 2. In the second procedure, an RIE process 20 min long was run in a “start-and-stop” way, characterized by 1 min-long active time steps and intervals to exhaust the plasma created during the single time step before turning on the process again. This enabled us to monitor the reactive plasma via OES to check for a possible evolution in its composition that might affect surface nanostructurization.

2.2.1. Surface Morphology by AFM. Figure 10 shows the AFM topographic image of the sample obtained after a 20 min “start-and-stop” procedure, compared to what is obtained in samples exposed to a 15 min and a 20 min continuous RIE process (first procedure). The mean size of the nanostructures in the “start-and-stop” sample is comparable to that obtained in the 15 min case, whereas the heights are comparable to those obtained in the 20 min case.

2.3. Procedure 3. The third RIE procedure consisted in placing a reference Si specimen on a non-powered (grounded) electrode and comparing the results between powered and non-powered electrodes to check the definite role of ion sputtering in the formation of the nanostructures.

2.3.1. Morphology by High-Resolution SEM. Figure 11 shows SEM images of the surface morphology and cross-section of a sample placed on the grounded electrode and exposed to the reactive gas, after a 10 min-long RIE process at the same parameters as for the powered electrode case. Again, a portion of the sample was shielded from the RIE using a narrow strip of silicon (2 mm wide and 20 mm long) to compare treated and non-treated zones. In the composite cross-sectional view of Figure 11a, three different morphologies are noticeable in correspondence to three zones: the shielded area (left) shows a smooth Si surface, and the surface in the transition zone located at the edge of the mask (center) has an overall rough appearance, similar to that of the treated zone (right). Peak-to-peak roughness in the tens of nanometer range can be estimated. We speculate that in the transition zone, the silicon might have been locally etched with F atoms, able to leak in the gap between the mask and the silicon. The treated surface exhibited the same surface morphology, but in this case, a thin fluorocarbon layer might have grown and covered the roughened Si. The deposition of a fluorocarbon layer of a few tens of nanometer thick is actually confirmed from the SEM cross-sectional image of Figure 11b. The top view in Figure 11c refers to a region where nano-scratches in the cover film unveils the underlying roughened surface of the Si wafer.

3. DISCUSSION

Since the intensity of the monitoring OES signals from the reactive plasma remains constant during the process time and similar surface morphologies are issued from the 20 min RIE process run in procedure n.1 (continuous) and n.2 (“start-and-stop”), we derive that the nanopatterning of Si is not ascribable to changes in plasma chemistry but merely to phenomena occurring on its surface. Therefore, our discussion will focus on the chemical and physical interactions of the species on and with the surface.

3.1. Etching Rate. The black solid line in Figure 3 plots the measured evolution in the etching rate with the duration of RIE. It is experimentally evident that the etching rate slows along the RIE process. Under 10% H\(_2\) in the plasma mixture, the etching rate measured at 10 min (80 nm/min) matches the results by Coburn.\(^{29}\) The present results can be discussed in the light of studies previously reported in the literature by assuming that the overall etching rate is contributed by both

![Figure 5](https://example.com/image5.png)

*Figure 5. AFM topography images for samples obtained after 30 s, 1, 5, 10, 15, and 20 min of plasma processing.*
the chemical etching and the physical sputtering. The major contribution to the chemical etching is given by the neutral F atoms. Assuming a F concentration of $10^{15}$ cm$^{-3}$, typical for the RIE process with CF$_4$ plasma and a substrate temperature of 300 K, an etch rate of about 95 nm/min is obtained by applying the Flamm formula. With regard to the physical sputtering, it was demonstrated via mass spectrometry by Booth and co-workers that, in a pure CF$_4$ plasma at 200 mTorr and 100 W, the two most abundant ionic species are CHF$_2^+$ and CF$_3^+$. They estimated a total ion flux at the powered electrode of the order of $8 \times 10^{15}$ cm$^{-2}$ s$^{-1}$. On the other hand, Lejeune showed that for a CF$_4$ plasma at much lower pressure...
(10^{-4} \text{ mbar}), the predominant species is CF_{3}^{+}. With the only purpose to estimate the physical sputtering rate, we assume that the predominant species in our mixture is CF_{3}^{+} and that the physical sputtering is given by this ionic species only. In our case, the ion flux could not be directly measured via a Langmuir probe due to the relatively high pressure. However, thanks to the above simplification, it can be estimated with the aid of the following formula suggested by Booth:

\[ P_{\text{in}} = 0.2 \alpha \Gamma_{\text{ion}} V_{\text{bias}} \]  

(1)

In eq 1, \( P_{\text{in}} \) is the power dissipated into the discharge, \( \alpha \) is the power electrode area, \( \Gamma_{\text{ion}} \) is the ion flux, and \( V_{\text{bias}} \) is the dc self-bias of the electrode. Taking into consideration that the real power dissipated into the discharge is much lower than the input power, according to Booth, we can admit that \( P_{\text{in}} \) is about one-third of the input power. For a 200 W discharge at \( V_{\text{bias}} = 830 \text{ V} \) and a round electrode of diameter equal to 10 cm, we have \( \Gamma_{\text{ion}} = 6.06 \times 10^{15} \text{ cm}^{-2} \text{ s}^{-1} \) or a current density of 0.96 mA cm^{-2}. The simulation run by Mayer and Barker at \( V_{\text{bias}} = 860 \text{ V} \) gave a sputtering rate of less than 20 nm/min/ (mA/cm^2) and that in our case issues a value of \( \sim 10 \text{ nm/min.} \)

The sum of the two factors accounts for a total etching rate of 105 nm/min at the onset of the process (reported as a straight blue line as a guide for the eye in Figure 3). The difference in reaching the experimental value is ascribed to synergistic effects typical of RIE processes.

\[
\begin{array}{ccccccc}
\text{element} & \text{BE (eV)} & \text{BE (eV)} & \text{BE (eV)} & \text{BE (eV)} & \text{BE (eV)} & \text{BE (eV)} \\
\text{C 1s} & 283.9 & 285.1 & 286.5 & 288 & 289.8 & 293.2 \\
\text{C—C} & 99.7 & 100.6 & 102.1 & 103.5 & \\
\text{Si 2p} & 685.3 & 686.7 & 688.1 & 689.4 & \\
\text{Si} & 531.5 & 532.7 & 534 & \\
\text{O 1s} & & & & & \\
\end{array}
\]

Figure 7. Atomic concentration ratios as functions of plasma processing time (a) (SiF + SiF\textsubscript{3})/(CF + CF\textsubscript{2}), (b) F/Si, C/Si and F/C, (c) SiF\textsubscript{3}/Si, SiO\textsubscript{2}/Si and SiO\textsubscript{2}/Si. LFP: low-fluorine polymer growth regime following the definition in ref 32. See text below.
the actual surface area. As such, the final chemical etching contribution at the end of the process can be estimated simply by assuming a uniform growth of perfect cylindrical pillars of 200 nm height with a radius of 100 nm, which gives an increase in the exposed surface of 3.8 cm$^2$ every cm$^2$ of the initial sample surface, reducing the chemical etching to 19.7 nm/min. However, a more precise estimate must take into account the increase in the area covered by the passivation layer along the process time that reduces the chemical etching. The difficulties arise because there is no technique with the lateral resolution

Figure 8. ToF-SIMS images of the distribution of secondary ions from the surface of the 20 min-treated sample recorded from a 10 $\times$ 10 $\mu$m large area. (a) Distribution of $\overline{F}^-$ ions (signal at mass 19 total count 8.662 $\times$ 10$^6$), (b) distribution of $\text{SiF}_3^-$ ions (signal at mass 103 total count 1.589 $\times$ 10$^5$), and (c) distribution of $\text{CF}_2^-$ ions (signal at mass 50 total count 8.396 $\times$ 10$^3$).

Figure 9. ToF-SIMS depth profile of the $\text{CF}^-$, $\text{CF}_2^-$, and $\text{CF}_3^-$ ions obtained on the BSi sample treated for 10 min. Only relevant signals are shown in the profile.

Figure 10. Comparison of AFM topography images among the start-and-stop test (left) and 15 min (center) and 20 min (right) continuous process times. One can immediately notice that the mean size for the start-and-stop case is in agreement with that of the 15 min case, while the height size is closer to that for the 20 min case.

Figure 11. High-resolution SEM images of surface morphology of a Si sample exposed on the ground cathode and processed for 20 min. (a) Cleaved cross-sectional images refer respectively to a masked zone (left), showing a smooth polished surface of pristine Si wafers, to the transition zone (center), showing an increase in surface roughness, and to a coated region (right), again showing roughness of comparable quality. (b) Cross-section in the coated region, where the deposition of a layer a few tens of nanometer in thickness is evident. (c) Top-view image, showing the evident texturization of both the coated surface and of the Si underneath it.
able to detect such small areas covered with the fluoropolymers.

The decrease in the physical sputtering rate with the pillar growth is not as straightforward to be evaluated as for the chemical etching. If only the decrease in the chemical etching rate is considered and by adding the same initial contribution for synergistic effects, the total etching rate at the end of the process is about 65 nm/min. This is indicated by the bottom red line in Figure 3. Generally speaking, one can say that the initial and final global etching rates are within the range estimated on the basis of available data and simplifications of the case. However, it is opinion of the authors that some values of the parameters used above may lead to overestimation of the etching rate. In fact, a concentration of the F neutral atoms of 10\(^{15}\) cm\(^{-3}\) refers to a pure CF\(_{3}\) plasma and does not take into account the scavenging effect of the H atoms for a CF\(_{3}\)/H\(_{2}\) mixture to form HF neutrals. Finally, the pyramid-like shape of the pillars described in Section 3.1 is likely to increase the net surface area with respect to the cylindrical-shaped pillar used to estimate the increase in the surface area.

### 3.2. Evolution in the Chemical Composition on the Surface.

#### 3.2.1. XPS.

The results of XPS characterization reveal that in addition to the CF\(_{x}\) species, also C–O–Si, SiC, and C–C components are always present, meaning that both Si and SiO\(_{2}\) are continuously being etched. This suggests possible reactions like

\[
\text{SiO}_2 + 4\text{F} \rightarrow \text{SiF}_4 + \text{O}_2
\]

(2)

\[
\text{Si} + \text{O}_2 \rightarrow \text{SiO}_2
\]

(3)

to be always present during the process. However, the intensity of the O 1s core line decreases with the process time, corresponding to the sputtering away of SiO\(_2\) on the Si surface and suggesting that the contribution to O\(_2\) as impurities does not play a major role.

Regarding the evolution of the fluorocarbons, even though from Figures 4 and 7 one can deduce that fluorocarbons are continuously deposited during the process, it appears from Figure 7a that the coverage of the area etched with F increases with respect to that of the fluoropolymer (CFP) deposited. A further insight into the evolution of the process is provided by the atomic ratio F/C presented in Figure 7c. According to the classification by Marks,\(^{32}\) our process can be identified as starting with a low-fluorine polymer and ending as a true RIE process. However, our maskless process ends with an overlay of such a fluoropolymer. This, along with the fact that a fluoropolymer thickness of 2.5 nm still allows Si to be etched with F, suggests that the coverage of Si and SiO\(_2\) is with a fluoropolymer overlay not thicker than 2.5 nm. This coverage increases with the process time by the etching of F. Figure 9c indicates that a transient regime sets on (2 min) before a steady state is reached. The occurrence of such transients is known and explained by the occurrence of non-linear phenomena where deposition and removal rates of CF by ion sputtering depend only on its thickness. When the dose of the predominant sputtering species is below 10\(^{17}\) cm\(^{-2}\), like in our case, etching of SiO\(_2\) with few nanometers of the C–F overlay occurs.\(^{42,53}\)

The distribution of the CF\(^{-}\) and CF\(_{2}\)\(^{-}\) species along the depth profiles was provided by ToF-SIMS analysis.

As one can see from Table 2, CF\(_{3}\) never extends beyond 5 nm, while the CF\(_{2}\) species seems almost distributed along the whole depth. Besides this, it is also worth noticing that the

| treatment time (min) | F\(^{-}\) (nm) | CF\(_{2}\)\(^{-}\) (nm) overlay | CF\(_{2}\)\(^{-}\) (nm) overlay | layer (nm) by SEM |
|----------------------|--------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------|
| 0.5                  | 3            | 0.5                           | 0.5                           | 0.5              |
| 1                    | 6            | 3                             | 3                             | 3                |
| 2                    | 19           | 5                             | 3.5                           | 40               |
| 5                    | 46           | 17                            | 3.9                           | 100              |
| 10                   | 78           | 32                            | 4.2                           | 190              |
| 15                   | 108          | 49                            | 4.2                           | 200              |
| 20                   | 205          | 84                            | 5.2                           | 200              |
| 20 start-stop        | 154.7        | 94                            | 5.8                           |                  |
difference in the depth distribution is established starting from the case of the 5 min-long process and for longer cases.

3.3. Growth Model for the Onset of BSi Texturing. By combining the results from XPS and from ToF-SIMS analyses, a growth model for the BSi patterns is proposed. In Figure 12, a schematic representation of the chemistry of the structures at the end of the process is sketched by assuming for simplicity that regular cylindrical pillars are formed.

At the beginning, a fluoropolymer layer of CF and CF\(_2\) about 5 nm thick is deposited on the surface in the form of islands, as defined by the fluorocarbon deposition regime. The lateral surface of the pillars may be covered with a thin layer, so that the etching with F to proceed (fluorocarbon suppression regime).

The defined aspect ratio is reached at the point when the loss in density and energy of etching ions, caused by multiple reflections at the walls, is such that the physical sputtering of the fluoropolymer deposited on the valleys ceases. Again, a 5 nm-thick fluoropolymer layer of CF and CF\(_2\) is deposited on the valley too and chemical etching at the valleys stops.

A detailed study on the ion energy loss at the valley, which is necessary to observe the etch stop at high aspect ratios, can be found in ref 44. Even though the simulation reported therein refers to a masked process, once the morphology of the nanostructurization is defined, the mechanism of ion energy and density loss at the bottom of the features proceeds, regardless of whether the process started masked or maskless, so that the same mechanism can be invoked to explain the etch stop.

By assuming this growth model, one can notice that the morphology of the structures is defined, the mechanism of ion energy and density loss at the bottom of the features proceeds, regardless of whether the process started masked or maskless, so that the same mechanism can be invoked to explain the etch stop.

3.4. Rationale for the Pyramid-like Shape of the Nanostructures. We ascribe the formation of this type of structure to the different effects of ion bombardment on the top and on the side walls of the growing nanostructures. In fact, the top of the pillars is exposed to the full angular distribution of the ion trajectories, whereas the side walls can be reached only by ions with trajectories closely perpendicular to the side walls. Therefore, since the sides of the structures are subjected to a less efficient ion sputtering, they become covered with a thicker CF\(_2\) layer, so that the etching with F\(^+\) is reduced. As the aspect ratio increases, the etching of the lower part of the structures becomes increasingly less efficient, resulting in a pyramidal shape. This also confirms the prevailing role of the F radical and thus of the etching process within the first few minutes.

The pyramid structure permits also to explain the reduced reflectivity typically observed with BSi in Figure 14. The reflectivity curves measured from unprocessed Si wafers and BSi wafers are presented in Figure 14a. A simple cascaded-matrix model was used to calculate the optical reflectivity of the wafer in the visible and near-infrared range. The pyramid structure on a semi-infinite Si substrate was modeled using the effective medium approximation, considering that the dimensions of the nanostructure are smaller than the wavelength of interest. The corresponding calculated curves are presented in Figure 14b, where significant reduction in reflectivity is observed when the Si multilayer includes a layer whose effective index represents 200 nm-high pyramids, qualitatively reproducing the experimental results. A more detailed optical modeling of the geometrically non-regular nano-structured layer obtained with a maskless process would require a sophisticated and time-consuming numerical analysis. On the other hand, the simple method considered here permits the assessment of the reflectivity by varying the layer thickness.
Black silicon samples have been obtained by a maskless RIE process using a CF$_4$ + 10% H$_2$ gas mixture with 200 W RF power. In order to elucidate the mechanism of surface nanopatterning, three different exposure procedures have been run, and their results have been compared. The first procedure consisted in exposing the samples to the reactive plasma for different times up to a maximum of 20 min. The second one consisted in treating the samples for 20 min altogether, but stepwise, 1 min at a time and pumping away the exhausted mixture at the end of each step while keeping the same process parameters at each step. The purpose of the second procedure was to avoid exposure to reactive species possibly formed by the plasma–surface interactions that could themselves contribute to the nanopatterning process. The third procedure consisted in exposing a sample placed over the grounded electrode for 20 min, under the same parameters as of the first procedure, in order to remove the etching contribution due to the physical sputtering of the accelerated ions. AFM results on samples exposed via the first and second procedure showed the same morphology. This fact, along with the OES results, allowed us to say that there were no changes in the plasma chemistry during the treatment, which could contribute to the change in surface morphology during the nanostructurization.

Therefore, we could focus our attention only to what occurred on the surface of the samples at different process times. A thorough investigation by SEM, AFM, XPS, and ToF-SIMS suggested that surface texturing in a maskless process proceeds and ceases via the same mechanisms as for a masked process, provided one can explain the mechanism of initial formation of the islands of fluoropolymers, which eventually trigger the nanostructurization.

Combining the XPS and ToF-SIMS results, we propose that CF and CF$_2$ islands of fluoropolymers about 5 nm thick are initially deposited in a Wolmer-Weber-type scheme. Such a thickness is sufficient to stop the fluorine chemical etching of silicon on the surface below the islands, while on the free silicon surface, chemical etching and physical sputtering are very effective and nanostructurization can take place. Meanwhile, the energetic ions impinging on the free silicon surface could induce a high enough density of surface defects to increase the activation energy for surface diffusion of CF and CF$_2$ species, thus preventing coalescence and the formation of a uniform fluoropolymer layer. Instead, the SEM inspection clearly showed that in the case of silicon samples exposed on the grounded electrode, a thin uniform layer is formed and no nanostructurization took place.

The net process is of erosion. The erosion is due to three contributions. One is due to chemical etching, one due to physical sputtering, and one due to the synergistic effect by the plasma. The erosion rate and the pillar growth rate decrease rapidly with time. Thanks to the fact that the plasma chemistry does not change during the exposures, one can assume the contribution of synergistic effects to remain unvaried. A simple estimate of the final etching rate was carried out by evaluating a decrease in the chemical etching rate due to the increase in the surface area because of the growth of the nanopillars. The addition of a constant contribution of synergistic effects leads to estimation of a final erosion rate that is in accordance with the experimentally measured value. This further corroborates the model proposed where physical sputtering ceases at the end of the process. As time increases along the process, the shape of nanopillars deviates from cylindrical to pyramid-like. This can be explained on a simple rationale based on the different ion bombardment effects on the top and on the side walls of the growing nanostructures. Present findings contribute detailed knowledge of the mechanisms that rule maskless RIE patterning of black silicon surfaces, therefore providing a tool in view of fully mastering and exploiting the process.

5. EXPERIMENTAL SECTION/METHODS

5.1. Experimental Apparatus. An RF plasma system$^{47}$ was used to produce a physical structuring of silicon (type P, dopant B, ⟨100⟩, 0.01–0.02 Ω cm, 1 × 1 cm$^2$, and thickness = 400 μm). The experimental apparatus consists of a parallel plate, capacitive-coupled system, in a cylindrical stainless-steel vacuum chamber with an asymmetric electrode configuration. The powered electrode (3 in. diameter) was connected to an RF (13.56 MHz) power supply, coupled with an automatic impedance matching unit, while the other stainless-steel electrode (3 in. diameter) was grounded. Si substrates were...
placed on the powered electrode at 6 cm away from the ground electrode. Before starting the process, the Si samples were cleaned with ethanol and dried with dry compressed air to remove surface contaminants. The process chamber was pumped to a base pressure below $1 \times 10^{-5}$ Pa; then, high-purity CF$_4$ (99.9%) and H$_2$ (99.99%) gases (10% H$_2$) were introduced into the chamber using a mass flow controller to achieve the desired working pressure, which was fixed at 9 Pa.

5.2. Methodology. In order to understand whether the nanostructuring depends exclusively on the surface morphology or also on the formation of new reactive species in the plasma phase, created by the interaction with the surface, two different experimental procedures were followed to study the effects of the plasma chemistry on the growth of the nanostructures. The first one was to treat the Si surface with the plasma continuously at different exposure times (0.5, 1, 2, 5, 15, and 20 min). The second one was to expose the Si surface to the plasma for a net total time of 20 min but with cycling between 1 min of plasma treatment and 1 min of pumping of the exhaust mixture (start-and-stop test). In this second case, it was possible to remove the reactive species formed in the plasma phase before regenerating the plasma. Then, by comparing the samples obtained from the two procedures, it was possible to discern whether a possible change in the species in the plasma phase can contribute to the nanostructurization process. The 1 min plasma exposure time was chosen as a good compromise between the time needed to start up the plasma operation and the time where neither the surface morphology nor the chemistry on the surface reached a steady state. Of course, the choice was made upon the SEM and XPS results on the samples exposed with the first procedure (see discussion below). The 1 min pumping time was adopted for the pressure in the RIE chamber to reach a base pressure of $10^{-2}$ to $10^{-3}$ Pa during pumping of the exhaust mixture, after starting from a value of initial pressure of 9 Pa.

A third procedure was also used to show that the onset of the nanostructures is triggered by the energetic ions reaching the powered electrode. The procedure consisted in exposing a sample placed over the grounded electrode for 10 min under the same parameters as of the first procedure and comparing the respective morphologies. We did not exceed 10 min of process in order to avoid possible delamination of the polymeric film.

5.3. Diagnostics. The plasma phase was characterized by OES.

The samples were characterized by SEM, AFM, surface profilometry, XPS, and ToF-SIMS.

### AUTHOR INFORMATION

**Corresponding Author**

Francesco Ghezzi — Istituto per la Scienza e Tecnologia dei Plasmi CNR, Milano 20125, Italy; orcid.org/0000-0003-3363-5187; Email: francesco.ghezzi@istp.cnr.it

**Authors**

Matteo Pedroni — Istituto per la Scienza e Tecnologia dei Plasmi CNR, Milano 20125, Italy

Janez Kovač — Jozef Stefan Institute, Ljubljana 1000, Slovenia; orcid.org/0000-0002-4324-246X

Federica Causa — Istituto per la Scienza e Tecnologia dei Plasmi CNR, Milano 20125, Italy

Anna Cremona — Istituto per la Scienza e Tecnologia dei Plasmi CNR, Milano 20125, Italy

Mariano Anderle — Istituto per la Scienza e Tecnologia dei Plasmi CNR, Milano 20125, Italy

Roberto Caniello — Istituto per la Scienza e Tecnologia dei Plasmi CNR, Milano 20125, Italy

Silvia M. Pietralunga — CNR, Istituto di Fotonica e Nanotecnologie, Milan 20133, Italy; Center for Nano Science and Technology@Polimi, IIT, Milan 20133, Italy

Espedito Vassallo — Istituto per la Scienza e Tecnologia dei Plasmi CNR, Milano 20125, Italy

Complete contact information is available at: https://pubs.acs.org/10.1021/acsomega.2c02740

**Author Contributions**

F.G. is the first author. He carried out the XPS measurement, collaborated in the ToF-SIMS measurements, and drafted the manuscript. S.M.P. carried out the SEM measurement and collaborated in the discussion and revision of the manuscript. M.P. carried out the sample deposition and AFM measurements and collaborated in drafting of the manuscript. R.C. helped in the sample preparation and revision of the manuscript. A.C. carried out the OES measurements. F.C. carried out the software simulation, suggested the start and stop procedure and helped with the revision of the manuscript. J.K. carried out the ToF-SIMS measurements and collaborated in the discussion. E.V. collaborated in the sample preparation and optical measurements. M.A. was involved in the results and discussion and revision of the manuscript.

**Notes**

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

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