Published in Encyclopaedia of Modern Optics (Diffractive Systems), 281-290, 2004
which should be used for any reference to this work

Applications of Diffractive and Micro-Optics in Lithography

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Introduction

Most aspects of modern life are thoroughly influenced by the micro-electronics industry through microchips, such as microprocessors and memory chips. Optical lithography has been a key factor in the rapid pace of integration that drives the development of the micro-electronics industry. The photolithography process not only facilitates the fabrication of the chips, but also directly influences the limits of the obtainable chip performance in terms of speed or storage capacity, through the minimum feature size that can be created in the lithography steps. The increasing resolution demands of the IC industry, outlined in the International Technology Roadmap for Semiconductors as technology nodes, mean continuing demand for improvements in the photolithography systems.

The challenges to the improvements are encapsulated in the equation for the resolution of an optical lithography system:

$$R = k_1\lambda/NA \qquad [1]$$

which expresses the resolution R in terms of the smallest resolvable half-pitch as a function of the wavelength λ, the numerical aperture NA of the exposure system and the unit less constant k_1, which is used as a measure of lithographic difficulty, with smaller values indicating a more challenging process. Traditionally, the increase in the resolution has been obtained by decreasing the used wavelength, with the current mark for volume production systems currently standing at 193 nm. Within each wavelength, further reduction has been traditionally obtained by increasing the numerical aperture towards the mathematical limit of 1. Finally, several so-called Resolution Enhancement Techniques (RET) have been introduced to reduce k_1, in order to reach subwavelength technology nodes within each lithography wavelength generation. It is in connection with these techniques that micro-optics has found a role in modern lithography systems.

In this chapter we discuss the ways micro-optics are being utilized in lithography systems. We will start with a brief overview of conventional lithography systems, of the essential parts of such systems as well as the special resolution enhancement techniques utilized in the systems. We will then discuss the utilization of micro-optics within the context of lithography systems, along with the unique challenges in terms of design and fabrication that are associated with such applications. Finally, we will briefly discuss nonconventional lithography applications, especially those based on utilization of micro-optics. It should be noted that the motivation of this article is to describe the issues related to the use of micro-optical elements in a modern lithography system and is not intended as a review of the modern lithography systems, nor is it a review of micro-optics.

Overview of Conventional Lithography Systems

Photolithography is a process whereby a specified pattern or mask is transferred onto a wafer using photons. In the process a photosensitive material, commonly known as a resist, is initially used to record the pattern that is generated when the mask is illuminated. After exposure, the resist is developed. The resist is referred to as positive or negative, depending on whether it is removed or remains, respectively, after the development of the irradiated regions. After its development, the pattern in the resist is then transferred onto the wafer using suitable chemical processes, such as wet chemical etching or dry plasma etching.

Several different lithographical techniques exist. The oldest and simplest is contact printing, where a photomask is brought into contact with a layer of photoresist on the wafer. Although this technique can reproduce high-resolution features, the contact between the wafer and the mask can lead to problems with cross contamination, and can damage either the wafer or the mask. Contact printing is mainly used nowadays in laboratory environments for small series of photolithography steps. A slightly more complicated technique is proximity printing, in which the photomask is held in close proximity to the surface of the wafer without actual contact. This avoids the problems of contamination and damage, but due to diffraction effects, reduces the maximum resolution of the process. Nevertheless, proximity printing remains a valuable technique for lithography applications, that do not require the highest possible resolution.

Modern volume production photolithography systems are based on the use of a projection system to image a mask onto a wafer through a complex system of lenses. There exist several variations of the basic idea. In some systems the entire mask is imaged at once onto the wafer. This approach works only when the feature size on the mask is reasonably large, in the range of a few microns. Reproducing smaller features with this approach is generally not possible, as the demands on the optical quality of the projection system, in the form of allowed aberrations, become extremely difficult to meet, especially when the physical size of the optical components increases with the reducing feature size. Therefore, so-called wafer steppers are used in modern microchip fabrication. The basic idea of a wafer stepper is to image only a small region of the mask onto the wafer, and pattern the entire surface area in consecutive steps.

The centerpiece of a wafer stepper is the exposure system. Its task is to image desired patterns from the photomask to their proper positions on the surface of the wafer. In many systems this process includes a size reduction between the patterns on the photomask and on the wafer. This reduces the dimensional accuracy requirements, such as feature size and positioning for the mask fabrication by whatever is the de-magnification of the lithography system. However, it also increases the complexity of the exposure system, as significance of aberrations is increased. The requirements of microchip production mean that the image of the photomask with submicron features must be reproduced on the wafer with a dimensional accuracy of only a few tens of nanometers and aligned to a specific position within a fraction of the linewidth. Furthermore, these tolerances must be guaranteed over the entire exposure field that is typically several square centimeters. It is not surprising that the resulting complex piece of optics costs several millions dollars.

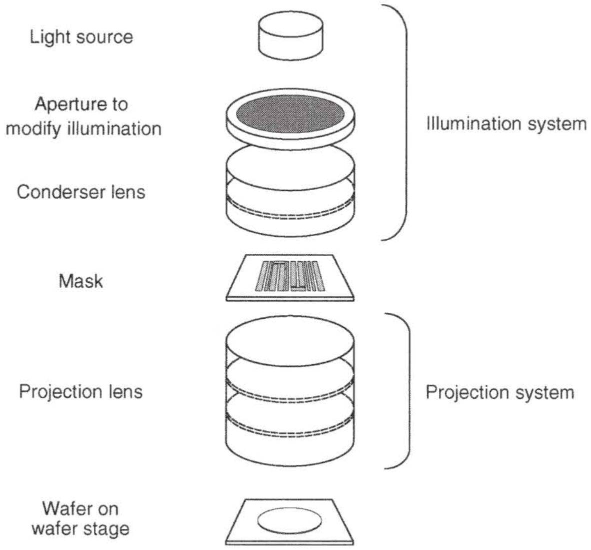

Figure 1 Schematic illustration of the exposure system.

The exposure system consists of a projection lens, illumination system, and wafer management system, as illustrated schematically in **Figure 1**.

A typical projection lens is a complicated lens system. As the resolution of a lens system is inversely proportional to the diameter of the lenses, the lenses in photolithographic systems can have diameters up to 250 mm, and the whole system is arranged inside a massive barrel-frame. The aim of the projection lens in the entire exposure system is to image the pattern from the photomask to the wafer. The projection lens is primarily responsible for the resolution and must therefore fulfill the highest optical requirements. To produce the smallest possible image, diffraction effects alone must essentially limit the resolution of the system. This means that the optical aberrations over the exposure field of several square centimeters must be virtually eliminated, by the wavefront deviations being less than a fraction of the wavelength.

The illumination system transfers the illumination source through the photomask to the entrance of the projection system. The main requirements for the illumination system are to collect most of the light into the system and to ensure that the irradiance of the photomask is uniform to within a few percent. In addition, resolution enhancement techniques, based on off-axis illumination, require that the illumination pattern on the photomask has a specific shape. We will discuss these requirements later in more detail. In general terms, the illumination system is less complicated than the projection system, especially with regard to the elimination of aberrations, due to the fact that precise imaging is not required in the illumination system.

Although the wafer management system is outside the scope of this article, we note in passing that it maintains the position, orientation, and movement of the wafers through the exposure system. Again, high precision is required to ensure the successful exposure of the desired pattern to the wafer.

Resolution Enhancement Techniques

In most modern lithography systems the achievable maximum resolution is increased via the use of one or more special resolution enhancement techniques (RET). These are essentially creative refinements of the lithography technology, based on theoretical optics papers published often decades before their first application in the lithography process in the late 1980s and early 1990s. There are essentially three RET approaches: Off-Axis Illumination (OAI), Optical Proximity Correction (OPC), and Phase Shifted Masks (PSM).

In optical proximity correction the basic idea is to predistort the mask pattern in order to overcome the proximity effects caused by the optics and the different processes. This is done either using a set of pre-existing rules describing the connection between a mask pattern and its realization on the wafer, using advanced models to predict the proximity effects during the lithography process, or with some combination of both. The key difficulties with OPC are related to the fabrication of the predistorted mask and to the accuracy of the used distortion rules or proximity effect models. Finally, it should be noted that OPC is strictly speaking not a true resolution enhancement technique, as it only enhances the effective resolution and not the theoretical resolution limit of the process defined by the optics.

In phase shifted masks the improvement in the resolution is obtained by altering the phase of light passing through different portions of the mask, creating regions of destructive interference in the image. This leads to higher contrast, which helps to improve the effective patterning resolution. However, as with OPC, there is no true resolution enhancement in terms of the theoretical resolution limit. There are two main difficulties with application of PSM. First, it is not straightforward to introduce required phase shifts into an arbitrary design layout, because some geometrical shapes, such as junctions are harder to realize than others. Another problem lies with the mask fabrication, which requires careful calibration of the material layers and can be very complicated and costly compared to fabrication of conventional binary masks.

For the purposes of this article, only off-axis illumination is discussed, as both OPC and PSM are essentially mask-based techniques and thus provide no opportunity for micro-optics. Off-axis illumination refers to any illumination scheme that significantly reduces or eliminates the light hitting the mask at near normal incidence, leading to the diffraction pattern of the mask being shifted on the projection lens. The principle behind the resolution enhancement, obtained by introducing such a shift, is schematically illustrated in **Figure 2** for periodic pattern.

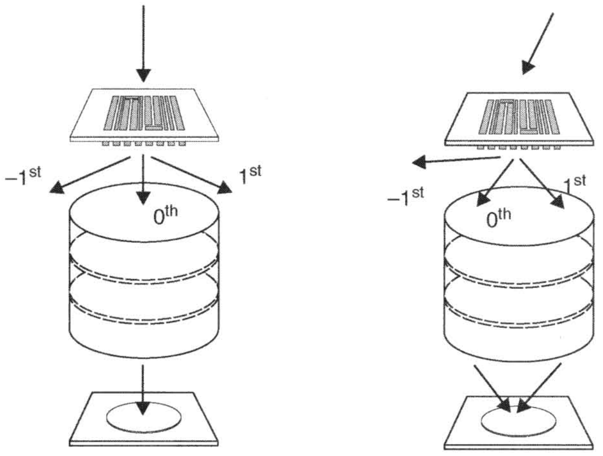

Figure 2 Schematic illustration of effect of off-axis illumination on image formation.

The mask pattern can be imaged if at least two diffraction orders generated by the mask pass through the pupil of the projection lens. Using on-axis illumination, the minimum feature size of the system is reached when the period of the mask pattern is so short that the ± 1st diffraction orders can no longer pass through the pupil. If the illumination is moved off-axis, the diffraction pattern is shifted and the second diffraction order (in this case + 1st) again passes the pupil. Thus the resolution has been increased. A secondary improvement in contrast may be obtained by shaping the diffraction orders falling onto the pupil, such that the filling of the pupil is optimized, i.e., such that less unwanted light contributing to the background illumination passes the pupil. Finally, the depth of focus of the system can be optimized by ensuring that the contributing orders (in this case 0th and + 1st) are symmetric with regards to the optical axis.

The conventional way to realize off-axis illumination schemes is to introduce a suitable aperture to the illumination optics between the source and the mask. In order to effectively use off-axis illumination, the shape and size of the aperture, i.e., the illumination pattern, must be optimized for the specific mask shape and pitch. This optimization leads to four basic shapes, as illustrated in **Figure 3**. In most modern lithography systems these shapes

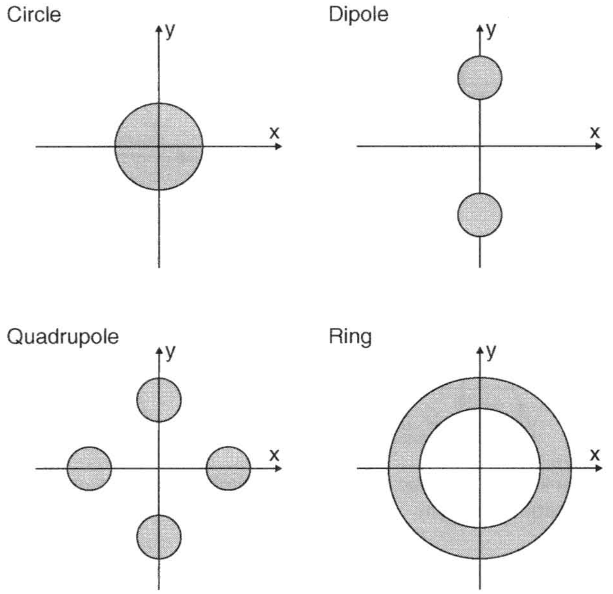

Figure 3 The four typical illumination patterns: disk, ring or annular, quadrupole, and dipole.

are available with different values of partial coherence factor, governed by the ratio of the numerical aperture of the illumination lens and projection lens, allowing control of proximity effects and edge sharpness.

Overview of Micro-Optics

There exists no generally agreed definition of micro-optics, but it typically means optical systems built to significantly smaller scales than conventional table-top systems, using components such as microlenses and microprisms with physical dimensions in the range of a couple of millimeters at most. Micro-optical systems also include so-called diffractive optical elements, which are usually optical components whose operation cannot be explained by Snell's law or the law of reflection. Such elements are usually macroscopically planar microstructures, consisting of features with dimensions from a couple of wavelengths to a few tens of microns, and are designed by advanced numerical algorithms based on diffraction theory.

In the past decade, micro-optics has emerged as a powerful new addition to the field of optics and optical systems, following improvements in micro-optics fabrication techniques, both via adaptation from established microelectronics fabrication processes and development of novel approaches, such as variable dose direct writing using either UV light or an electron beam. Additionally, emergence of replication techniques, such as injection molding or UV casting, allows the low-cost mass production of micro-optical elements, making micro-optics economically feasible for a wide range of consumer applications. Consequently, micro-optical elements, utilizing either refractive or diffractive surfaces, are now found in industrial applications such as material processing, in the optical telecom field, and in consumer electronics such as the digital video camera.

One of the major strengths of micro-optics, as compared to conventional optics, is their ability to realize complex optical functions into a compact form. This is especially true for micro-optics using diffractive optical elements, as diffractive elements may be designed to realize several optical functions such as focusing, filtering, or beam splitting at once allowing integration of several classical optical components into a single diffractive element.

Micro-Optics in Conventional Lithography Systems

The simplicity of contact or proximity printing means that there is little need or opportunity to incorporate additional functionality through inclusion of micro-optical elements. The only exception to this will be discussed in the final section of this article, where we will consider a nonconventional technique, which utilizes micro-optics and can be incorporated into proximity printing systems. However, in this section we will limit the discussion to projection-based lithography systems such as wafer steppers.

Let us consider the possible uses of micro-optics in the three main parts of the exposure system identified in the earlier section. It is obvious that the wafer management system, which is essentially mechanical, cannot be enhanced by inclusion of micro-optics. In principle, micro-optics could be incorporated into the projection system to reduce its weight and, to a lesser degree, complexity. However, it is important to note that using micro-optics to reduce the physical size, i.e., the diameter of the lenses in the projection system is not possible, as such reduction would increase the theoretical minimum feature size the system can resolve which is inversely proportional to the lens diameter. In practical terms, even the most advanced fabrication approaches used to realize micro-optical elements cannot yet produce elements with the precision and quality sufficient to meet the optical requirements associated with a lithographic projection lens. In general, the state of the art in micro-optics is such that it does not make sense to replace refractive lenses with diffractive ones unless the weight of the optics is a critical parameter in determining the merit of the system. This is not the case for wafer steppers.

Even though the optical requirements for the lenses in the illumination system are not as high as in the projections system, they are in practice still far too demanding for micro-optical elements. Therefore, the only area where micro-optics could be used in the illumination system is the generation of various illumination patterns needed for the off-axis illumination schemes used for resolution enhancement, as well as overall homogenization of light. An element meeting these goals is essentially a custom-designed diffuser, where both the generated angular range and the relative intensity of illumination in any given angular direction are controlled to a high degree.

Custom Diffusers for Illumination

As mentioned earlier, one of the strengths of micro-optics lies in its ability to combine different optical functions into a single element. When used in lithographic illumination systems, micro-optical elements can serve a dual purpose. The element can serve as an artificial aperture, effectively distributing the light over some predetermined angular range and at the same time minimizing light outside the range, allowing generation of various illumination patterns needed for the resolution enhancement via off-axis illumination. Unlike conventional solutions based on the use of actual apertures to generate the desired illumination patterns, distribution of light using micro-optical elements can be done with efficiencies up to 95%, with typical target efficiency being in the range of 90%, depending on the pattern complexity. At the same time, the element can be used to smooth the light distribution, improving the uniformity of the illumination. Typically the required uniformity error, i.e., allowed variations from the average illumination, is in the range of 5%, but can be as low as 1%.

In addition to the above-mentioned high-efficiency and -uniformity targets, optical quality requirements of modern lithography systems introduce unique challenges to the micro-optics used in such systems. First, micro-optical elements used in lithography systems must also exhibit low amounts of stray light, especially in formation of hot-spots. Typically, hot-spots are allowed to be only a few percent of the average illumination level. Because of the fact that the size, shape, and profile of the illumination beam can vary, partly due to variations in the source and partly because such variations improve the functionality of the lithography system, by, for example, controlling the partial coherence factor, the micro-optical elements must be virtually space-invariant. The elements must perform the same function regardless of where and how the illumination coming from the source hits the element. Furthermore, the elements themselves must have very low absorption, because the high power used could otherwise lead to destruction of the elements. This means that the materials must be carefully selected. Finally, the optical wavelengths used in advanced lithography systems are 248 nm or less. Because the feature size of a diffractive element scales down with the wavelength, the features in elements used are much smaller than in the case of elements used for applications in the visible region. Consequently the accurate fabrication of such elements becomes a formidable challenge, because most fabrication errors, such as mask misalignment, etch depth error or the way the sharp corners in diffractive elements get rounded during fabrication, increase in significance when the feature size is decreased.

There exist two distinct approaches for obtaining such custom-designed diffusers. We will now discuss the benefits and weaknesses of these two techniques in terms of efficiency, pattern uniformity, stray light, and ease of fabrication, in order to illustrate the trade-off a designer creating micro-optical elements for a lithography system has to consider.

Aperture Modulated Diffusers

One approach to acquire custom diffusers for illumination systems is to use an array of refractive or diffractive micro-lenses. More generally, the lens phase can be replaced by any phase obtained by geometrical considerations, i.e., by a geometrical map transform between the input and output planes of the optical system. The basic principle of an aperture modulated diffuser is to use the phase function to accurately control the angular divergence of the diffuser, while the shape of the desired intensity distribution is created by introducing a properly shaped aperture in which the phase function is contained. This basic principle is shown in **Figure 4**.

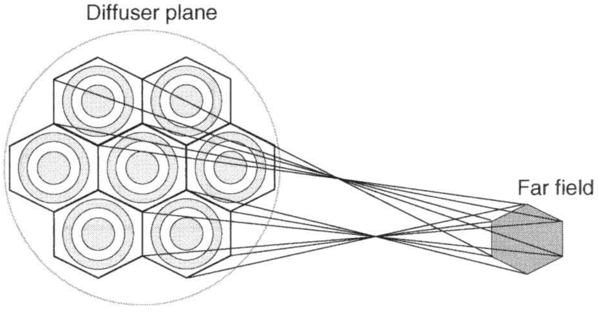

Figure 4 Basic principle of aperture modulated diffuser. The lens f-number determines the angular extend of the far field pattern, while the lens aperture shape determines the shape of the pattern.

The main benefit of using a lens phase lies in the ease of the design process, which essentially consists of selecting the numerical aperture of the lens to meet the angular size of the desired pattern, while more complicated phase profiles can be used to improve some aspects of the performance of the diffuser.

In terms of optical performance, aperture modulated diffusers typically achieve efficiency of up to 95% and low levels of stray light, easily fulfilling the target specifications outlined earlier, especially when refractive surfaces are used. However, since the lens aperture in the element plane controls the shape of the intensity distribution, the range of intensity distribution shapes is limited. This is necessary because it must be possible to tile the required aperture shape in order to realize an array of elements with high fill factor, i.e., to realize a space-invariant diffuser. Furthermore, introducing an aperture into the element plane means that intensity oscillations, due to boundary diffraction at the edge of the apertures, cannot be avoided. Consequently, the uniformity of the generated intensity distributions suffers. This is especially true in cases where the desired intensity pattern has sharp corners, where the intensity oscillations due to boundary diffraction, can easily be up to 50% of the average intensity of the desired intensity pattern. **Figure** 5 illustrates a typical far field intensity distribution obtainable with aperture modulated diffusers.

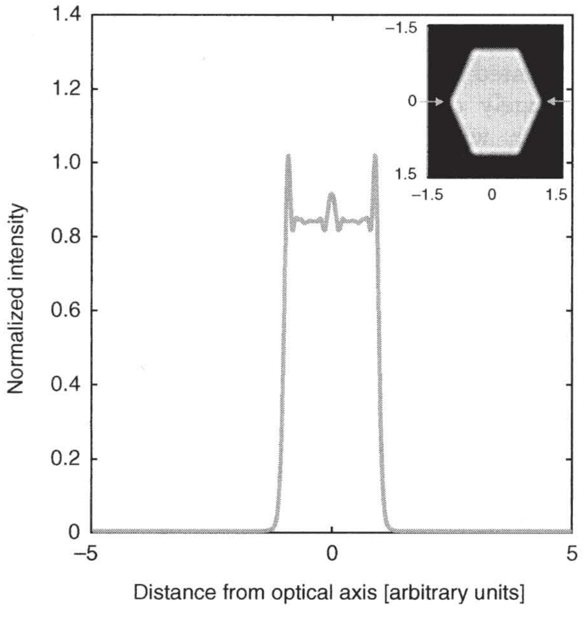

Figure 5 Typical intensity distribution obtainable with an aperture modulated diffuser. The overall distribution is smooth apart from the slow intensity oscillations at the edges resulting from diffraction at the aperture boundary.

One needs to consider several issues with regard to the fabrication of aperture modulated diffusers. For refractive aperture modulated diffusers, the main issue is the accurate realization of the required surface profile. The fabrication of large arrays of refractive elements having arbitrary surface profiles is still challenging. Resist reflow techniques, where the micro-lenses are realized by melting small islands of resist, lead to a spherical lens profile. Complicated and hard-to-control profile reshaping techniques are required if dramatic alterations from the spherical lens profiles are needed. Even though fabrication through direct writing techniques, such as laser writing offers more freedom, realization of arbitrary refractive surface remains a challenge. Therefore, use of refractive elements is mainly limited to cases where the lens profile can be close to the spherical shape. The most important of such cases are patterns with uniform circular or rectangular distributions. The former can be realized by proper selection of the numerical aperture of the lens, while the latter can be realized by combining two properly selected cylindrical lenses on opposite sides of the substrate.

For diffractive aperture modulated diffusers there are considerably less limitations in terms of what phase profiles can be attained. As long as the opening angles, i.e., the angular size of the pattern is below 10 degrees, the phase can be realized as a diffractive element. With diffractive elements, the main issue to consider is therefore the effect of typical fabrication errors such as profile depth and shape errors. First, the typical consequence of fabrication errors in the element is loss of efficiency via increase of stray light. Fortunately the errors do not generate sharp stray light peaks, with the obvious exception of the axis hot-spot. This results from the fact that both lens functions and more complicated phase functions designed by geometrical considerations, exhibit locally periodic structures, and the introduction of common fabrication errors then leads to redistribution of light away from the desired signal orders of these local structures to higher or lower orders. On the level of the whole intensity distribution, such redistribution appears as a constant rise in the background noise level, but will not lead to sharp intensity fluctuations.

Another issue related to the fabrication of aperture modulated diffusers appears when diffuser elements are fabricated using a series of photomasks, as it is typically the case with a relatively large size of the element. Although mask misalignment is essentially a random error, i.e., the direction and amount of the error are difficult to predict before hand, it easily leads to systematic and partly symmetric uniformity problems with aperture modulated diffusers.

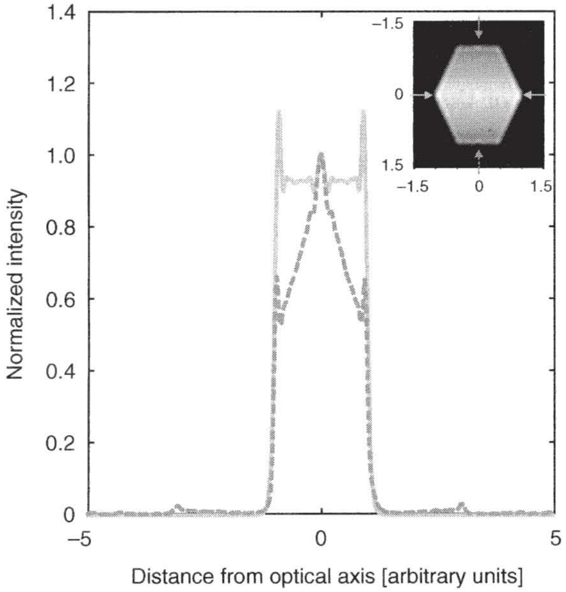

Figure 6 Effect of mask misalignment on the intensity distribution with aperture modulated diffusers. Essentially random error leads to symmetric and systematic uniformity error due to locally periodic nature of the design.

Again the reason for this lies in the locally periodic nature of the elements. A single mask misalignment along some direction results in an erroneous profile shape in the structures, which are periodic in the direction of the alignment error. Consequently, the relative intensity distribution along that direction is changed. On the other hand, structures, where the period is perpendicular to the misalignment, are realized correctly. Furthermore, the local period of the phase function is often changing from the center of the element to the edge, meaning that the relative magnitude of the mask misalignment is different in different parts of the element. These facts lead to asymmetry in the overall intensity distribution, which is especially harmful with off-axis illumination patterns, as the asymmetry results in loss of the resolution gain obtained with off-axis illumination. Furthermore, as the source of the asymmetry is essentially a random error, compensation in the design is very difficult. **Figure 6** illustrates the above-mentioned phenomena.

Fan-Out Based Diffusers

An alternative technique uses specially designed fan-out elements to produce a large number of closely spaced diffraction orders arranged in a desired pattern, as illustrated in **Figure** 7. Such an approach offers all the flexibility of diffractive elements, allowing generation of nearly arbitrary intensity distributions, especially if the elements can be realized as so-called multilevel elements, i.e., if the surface profile can have more than two distinct levels.

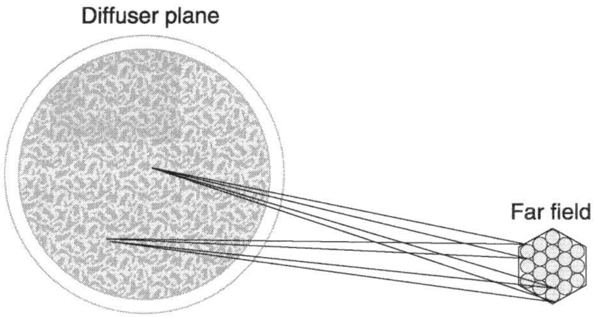

Figure 7 Basic principle of fan-out based diffusers. A grating is used to generate a high number of closely spaced diffraction orders arranged in the shape of the desired pattern.

The flexibility in the design comes at a cost, where specially developed design tools, such as the iterative Fourier transform algorithm, are required. Fortunately such tools are starting to become commercially available as emphasis and interest in wave-optical engineering, an extension of the classical optical engineering approaches, increases.

In terms of optical performance, fan-out based diffusers offer high uniformity as there are no boundary diffraction effects as with aperture modulated diffusers. Furthermore, by choosing the beam separation of the fan-out to be clearly smaller than the divergence of the incidence beam, it is possible to average out any local intensity variations from order to order, leading to a smooth overall intensity distribution. The remaining variations in the intensity distribution generated by a fan-out based diffuser can be as small as 1% of the average intensity.

As a trade-off for the improved performance in terms of uniformity compared to aperture modulated diffusers, fan-out based diffusers typically exhibit lower efficiency and, consequently, higher levels of stray light, even when no fabrication errors are present. This is a result of additional design freedoms being used to remove unwanted intensity oscillations from the far field regions, belonging to the desired intensity distribution, by introducing some noise outside these regions. Typically the efficiency of a fan-out based diffuser is in the range of 85–90%, or 5–10 percentage points lower than the efficiency of a comparable aperture modulated diffuser (should one exist). Furthermore, unlike aperture modulated diffusers, fan-out based diffusers can have stray light that forms hot-spots. If care is not taken during the design, these hot-spots may be up to 10% of the average intensity of the illumination pattern, even in the absence of fabrication errors. **Figure 8** illustrates

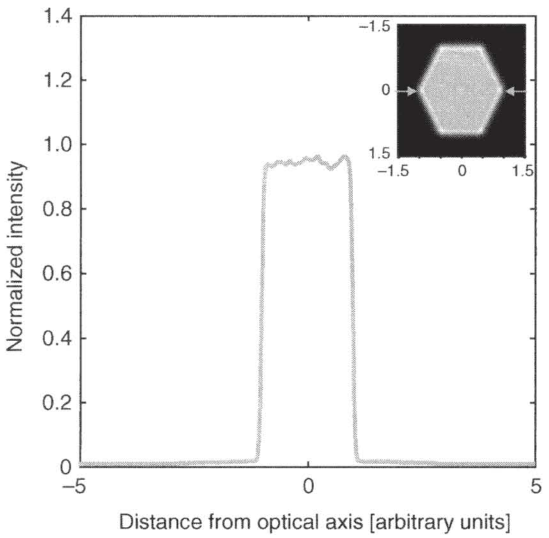

Figure 8 Typical intensity distribution obtainable with a fan-out based diffuser. Overall distribution is smooth, but stray light appears outside the main pattern.

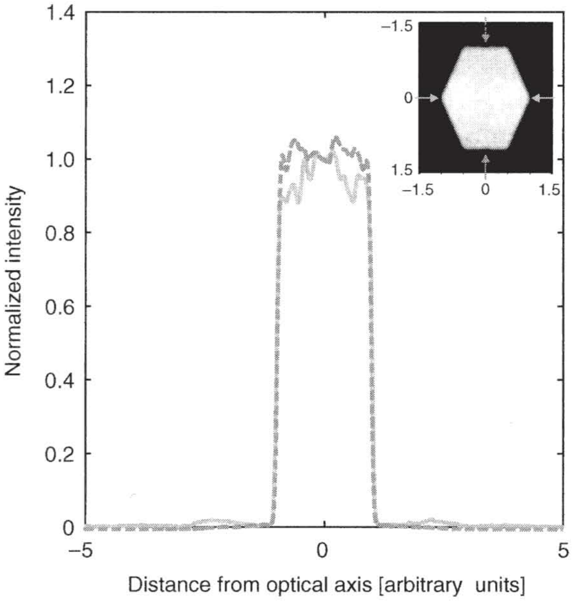

Figure 9 Effect of mask misalignment on the intensity distribution with fan-out based diffusers. The uniformity error appears randomly, allowing statistical compensation schemes.

a typical far field intensity distribution obtainable with fan-out based diffusers.

Fan-out based diffusers offer several advantages in terms of fabrication compared to mapping based diffusers. First, random errors, such as mask misalignment, do not lead to symmetric or systematic uniformity problems, but instead result in random local oscillations in the intensity pattern as illustrated in **Figure 9**. This allows special compensation schemes where the element is divided into segments, each of which has different fabrication tolerances but generates the same far field intensity distribution. If the fabrication tolerances of the individual designs are balanced correctly against the typical fabrication errors of the used fabrication methods, the loss of uniformity due to fabrication errors can be eliminated almost entirely. Furthermore, the flexibility of diffractive design allows for fabrication error-tolerant designs. This follows from the ability to combine several optical functions in a single optical element. The typical trade-off with designs with relaxed fabrication tolerances is that the optical performance of the element in terms of efficiency is worse than that of a conventional design if fabrication errors are not present.

Micro-Optics and Non-Conventional Lithography

In the previous section we have considered micro-optics in connection with conventional lithography approaches and shown that micro-optical elements can find a significant role in such systems. We conclude this article by considering briefly nonconventional lithography systems, focusing especially on a technique called micro-lens lithography, which is fundamentally based on the use of micro-optical elements.

The most straightforward way to improve existing lithography approaches is to further reduce the wavelength used in the exposure process. In X-ray lithography, the light source used in conventional lithography approaches is replaced by a cyclotron emitting light with wavelengths deep in the X-ray region. This leads to minimum resolution far lower than achievable by conventional techniques, but with the additional difficulty and cost of maintaining and running such a source.

The techniques that are currently considered as serious alternatives for conventional photolithography approaches are based on the use of particles other than photons in the fundamental exposure process. Techniques such as electron- or ion-beam lithography are routinely used to realize structures with feature size and positioning resolution of some tens of nanometers for use in both micro-electronics and micro-optics. The main drawback of these approaches is the cost involved in patterning large surface areas. Unlike optical lithography techniques, particle beam lithography cannot expose large surface areas at once, instead requiring painstaking scanning of the surface area with a relatively small writing beam. This leads to processing times that scale linearly with the required surface area, and consequently the throughput of such techniques is small. Therefore, particle beam lithography is not yet widely used in commercial fabrication of micro-electronics. However, it is worth noting that especially electron beam lithography is widely used in the origination of micro-optical components, as the relatively high cost of creating the master component can be offset in the final product by the inexpensive replication process. Such an approach allows the replicated end-product to meet the high optical requirements achievable only by high resolution surface control, yet remain affordable for use in, for example, consumer electronics. This has lead some in the micro-optics community to conclude that electrons are better suited for fabrication of components controlling photons, while photons are better suited for fabrication components controlling electrons.

In addition to particle beam lithography, other noteworthy techniques exist. For our purposes, the most interesting technique is the so-called micro-lens array lithography, where one or more micro-lens arrays are used to image the pattern of the photomask to the resist layer on the substrate. Although the resolution of this approach is limited to 3–5 microns, for applications such as with flat panel displays, micromechanics, or multichip module fabrication, this technique is of considerable interest.

It is well known that the geometrical aberrations scale down proportionally with the physical lens size. Thus, large areas can be imaged favorably by use of arrays of micro-lenses, where each lens images only a small section of the whole field. Such a setup is shown in **Figure 10**.

With this setup it is possible to expose a comparatively large area with a single exposure, thus eliminating the need for costly stepping operations and therefore increasing the throughput of the system. Analysis of the basic system shows that an array based on spherical micro-lenses of 1 mm focal length and 300 micron aperture can produce a nearly diffraction limited resolution on the order of 3–5 micrometers over a 300 micron field.

In terms of conventional lithography systems, the micro-lens array lithography has most in common with proximity printing. Both techniques achieve comparable resolutions, yet avoid damaging the mask or substrate by keeping the two separated by some finite working distance. However, micro-lens array lithography offers two distinct advantages over conventional proximity printing. First, the working distance between the imaging system and the substrate surface can be much larger, which further minimizes the risk of mask or substrate damage. Furthermore, added working distance allows lithography steps on nonflat surfaces, e.g., inside holes or grooves where conventional proximity printing would not be possible. Another advantage of the micro-lens array lithography is the larger depth of focus. With proximity printing, the resolution rapidly decreases with increasing distance. In micro-lens array lithography, the optimum resolution is obtained at the image plane, while a region of reasonable resolution extends forward and backward from this plane (**Figure 11**). This extension means that in the depth of field, resolution is less sensitive to changes in the working distance, which makes it better suited for practical applications.

In addition to the optical benefits of micro-lens array lithography, there also exist other practical benefits. Many micro-devices have a repetitive and

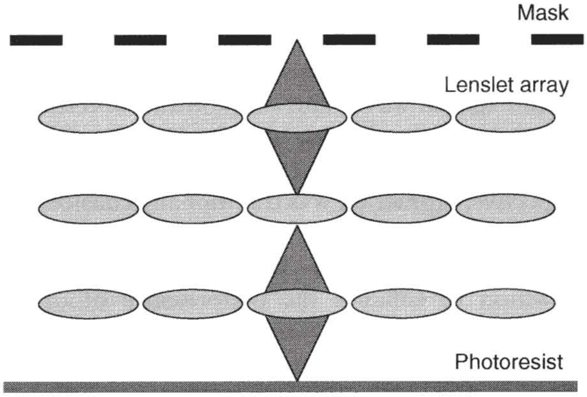

Figure 10 Basic geometry of micro-lens array lithography.

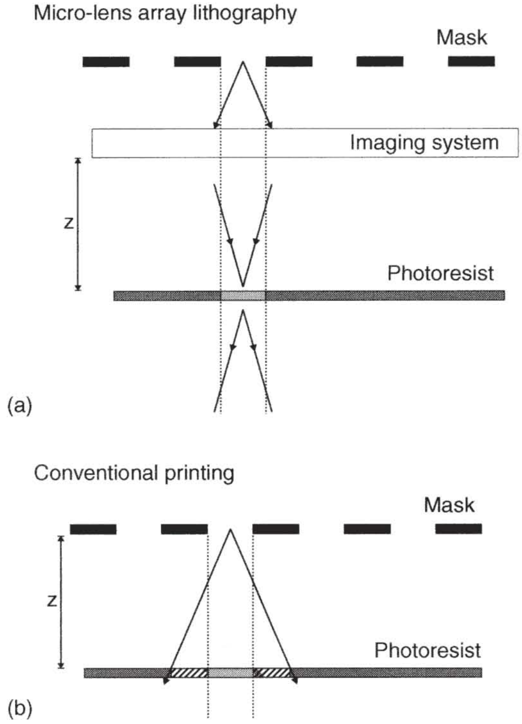

Figure 11 Depth of focus with micro-lens array lithography and conventional printing. (a) With micro-lens array lithography, the image of the mask is extended both forward and backward from the working plane at distance *z*. (b) In conventional printing, the resolution is rapidly reduced with increasing working distance *z*.

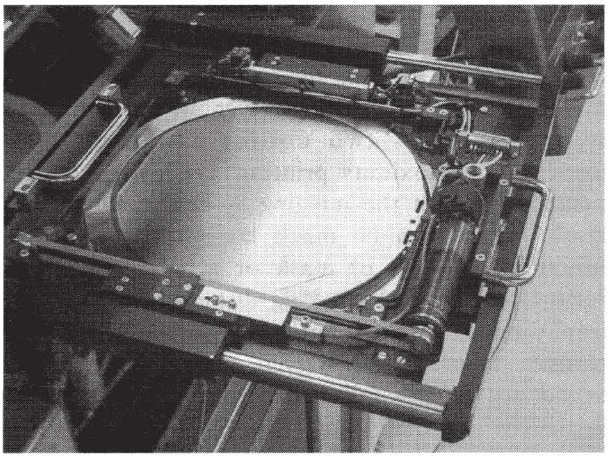

Figure 12 Ultra-flat micro-lens projection system (courtesy of R. Völkel, SUSS MicroOptics, Neuchâtel, Switzerland).

discrete nature with respect to some unit element. Such a unit element lends itself well to the imaging properties particular to lens arrays, as each lens of the array can be made to correspond to the unit cell of the particular micro-device making the imaging highly efficient. A photograph of a micro-lens projection system is shown in **Figure 12**.

One could also imagine that instead of an array of imaging systems, an array of pattern generators is used that generates a specific pattern, such as lines or points. In the ideal case such a system would replace the mask and the imaging system altogether. However, this approach is only possible for simple patterns and large production series.

Outlook

As long as optical lithography stays attractive, micro-optics will be used as beam-homogenizers and sophisticated diffusers to generate optimized illumination patterns. How far micro-optics will be used in the imaging system is difficult to predict. However, it can be assumed that the difference between micro-optics and macro-optics fabrication technology will disappear.

Recent research is also investigating near-field optics to further reduce the resolution limit. Micro-optics technology is well suited to realize such systems. A serious problem of near-field optics is the short distance (10 nm–100 nm) between the optical element and the interface to be patterned. In addition, near-field optics is based on scanning systems, which increases the exposure time considerable. However, there is still room for improvements or as Richard Feynman said 'there is plenty of room at the bottom'.

Further Reading

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