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Critical Insight

Korean filmmaker Park Kiyong relates a story of having met key “Nouvelle Vague” figure Agnes Varda in Paris three years ago, shortly after she had shot the documentary *The Gleaners and I* on Betacam and DV. In the film, you can see that Varda has her final cut pro editing system next to her kitchen, and she runs back and forth editing while cooking a meal. Inspired, Kiyong approached Varda and asked her if she could give a DV Master class at the Korean Academy of Film Arts, of which he is the director. Varda humbly refused his request, “I’m 73, I’m old, and will die soon” she said, “I must spend my time making films.” Before leaving she grabbed Kiyong’s hand, and said, with a smile, “Isn’t DV wonderful!”

Digital Video is rapidly changing the way movies *can* be made. What started as early Digital “experiments” have evolved into a vibrant and thriving art form, one aesthetically distinct from the film format, but that can effectively be called *cinema*. The immediacy of the images, simplicity of use, and cost-effectiveness have endeared Digital Video to filmmakers around the world regardless of age or region of origin.

The [Asia-Europe Foundation \(ASEF\)](#), passionate promoters of cultural exchange, has been a strong supporter of independent cinema from Europe and Asia. In April of 2005, ASEF, in cooperation with the [Singapore International Film Festival](#) and the [School of Media and Film Studies](#) at [Ngee Ann Polytechnic](#), organized the [Asia-Europe Digital Film Workshop](#). Six experienced and talented young digital filmmakers, Roel Mondelaers (Belgium), TinTin Wulia (Indonesia), Noh Dong Seok (Korea), Tan Chui Mui (Malaysia) Khavn de la Cruz (Philippines) and Piotr Rosolowski (Poland) each worked with a team of graduating students from Ngee Ann Polytechnic, mentoring them through pre-production, shooting, and editing of a (maximum 10-minute) short film in a four-day intensive digital filmmaking workshop; the product of which was to be screened as a Fringe Event in the [Singapore International Film Festival](#).

How does the use of DV in Asia differ from that of Europe? Why, when, and how do filmmakers in Asia and Europe use DV technology?

Two resource speakers, Swedish film critic and filmmaker Stig Bjorkman, author of several books including *Trier on von Trier* and *Dogme 95, Esthetics and Economy*, and filmmaker and Korean Academy of Film Arts Director Park Kiyong, were brought in to give a talk and shed some light on contemporary digital filmmaking trends in their region. What was especially fascinating to see and hear from these two men, who are of distinctly differing backgrounds and spoke and showed clips of many distinctly different films, was how their philosophies behind the use of medium, its aesthetic differences from film, and even the landmark works cited by each, were in fact very similar.

Bjorkman, presenting on the Swedish and Danish Digital film movement showed clips of the works of Lars von Trier (*Dogville*), and Lukas Moodysson (*A Hole in My Heart*), illustrating some of the aesthetic considerations that one must make when shooting with the DV, and presenting examples of how it has been used in recent works. Often cited for its affordability, established filmmakers in Europe (such as the two listed above) for whom acquiring a budget to shoot on 35mm film would not be difficult, have, for reasons of look, ease, and intimacy with actors, chosen to work in digital.

In his talk on “Easy-filmmaking” Kiyong cited Danish director Tomas Vinterberg’s *The Celebration* (incidentally the first credited Dogme film) as the first DV feature he saw. Watching the film in a small

(incidentally the first created Dugme film) as the first DV feature he saw. Watching the film in a small art-house theater in Korea with barely fifteen people in the audience, *The Celebration*, with its minimalist approach, had a profound effect on Kiyong, “... it was new, striking and a different kind of experience. It was rough but full of energy, introducing the possibility of another kind of film making”. When his 1997 debut feature, the Christopher Doyle shot *Motel Cactus*, bombed at the box office, Kiyong was, in his own words, “blacklisted”. Itching to make another film, Kiyong then raised \$30,000 US Dollars, picked up a DV camera, the Sony PD100A, and made the film *Camels*; which won the Fipresci Prize Special Mention at the Viennale and the Grand Prix award at the Fribourg International Film Festival. “Using a smaller camera relaxes actors, especially if you are working with non-professionals, and gives room for improvisation. It is also advantageous for shooting in public spaces”.

While turning to DV may be a *choice* for some established European filmmakers rather than an *economic alternative*, as it is for many independent filmmakers in Asia, Bjorkman and Kiyong both stressed the importance of acknowledging that digital is a different medium of cinema, and must be treated differently from shooting on film. Everything, from the camera, to the lighting, to the acting, to the narrative style is different, and must be treated as such. Just how similar are Asian and European perspectives of digital filmmaking? In their lectures, both Bjorkman and Kiyong cited Abbas Kiarostami’s film *10*, a film shot entirely in a car from only two angles (two DV cameras were set-up, one facing driver, and the other the passenger), as a prime example of when the medium (DV) fit the aesthetic of the work.

TinTin Wulia, a scorer, short film and animation director, short film distributor (and short girl) based in Jakarta, found both speakers to be inspiring, “especially when they say that when the choice of camera has to be changed (because of budget) from celluloid to video, the story and the film has to change as well”.

DV filmmaking has taken off much faster in technology-crazed Asia than it has in Europe. While many of the larger European countries have celebrated cinematic histories, many Asian countries, still reeling from the *Asian Economic Crisis*, are only now finding, or in some cases re-discovering, their cinematic footing. While mainstream filmmaking, especially in Southeast Asian countries, churns out cliché film after cliché film, many exciting things are happening on the independent front. In diverse Malaysia, Digital filmmaking is; with the production of the first Tamil-language film, *Gravel Road*, and the proliferation of Chinese-language films independent films, by the likes of James Lee and Ho Yuhang among others, breaking down cinematic language barriers, and helping to redefine what a ‘Malay’ film is; in the Philippines, two scriptwriting contests were held and seed money for production given, ensuring at the very least, eighteen new independent digital films by the mid-way point of the year, in Korea ten theaters will be equipped with digital projection by the end of 2005.

For the workshop students of [Ngee Ann Polytechnic](#), whose final graduate films were shot on 16mm (super 16mm for one group) and prepared over a much longer period of time, working with DV and shooting and editing in four days was a drastic but necessary change, especially should they want to pursue filmmaking in Singapore, with its small and difficult-to-break-into film industry. To quote Park Kiyong: “DV films are the poor man’s medium. For the hungry filmmaker who can not stop himself from saying what he wants”. And in the end, whether you are from Asia or Europe, Africa or South America, whether shooting on 16 or 35mm, DV or HD, that is what it comes down to: the need to express oneself and relate to the world. For many young filmmakers drowning in economically driven film industries, Digital Filmmaking has been a lifesaver thrown into the ocean, rescuing them from the depths of stagnation, and challenging their creativity

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