The e-mail message from South Korea was not exactly reassuring: “Missiles or not, the fest will go on!” The event in question, the Puchon International Fantastic Film Festival, aka PiFan, marked its 10th anniversary this July—at a time when the real world was testing out new forms of old-school chaos. The press had just revealed that Iranian observers were present at the recent North Korean missile tests, Israel was shelling Lebanon in retaliation for the Hezbollah attack, torrential floods were causing massive evacuations and innumerable deaths throughout Asia, and a heat wave in NYC had caused a power outage that left over 100,000 people in the dark—for over a week. All in all, a pretty good time for a guy from Brooklyn to fly to the Far East and check out some of the 250 oddball films the festival had on offer. For consideration, here’s an abbreviated three-course tasting menu:

From the vast array of ridiculous titles, Meatball Machine takes the cake. It turned out to be an industrial sci-fi splatterfest by Japanese directors Yudai Yamaguchi and Junichi Yamamoto. The quick pitch would be: Tetsuo meets The Transformers on (cliché alert) really bad acid. It begins with a blistering mano a mano battle sequence, quickly introduces a young human introvert and his equally mum object of desire, and then, to round out the main cast, produces a mad-scientist figure and his alluring daughter who sports an eyepatch and a bandage on her neck that throbs with eerie come-hither palpability. The film proceeds to shred the screen with continuous jaw-to-the-floor cyborg carnage. Particularly compelling are the metallic softball-shaped parasites attached to each creature. Periodically the camera cuts to each orb’s interior to reveal a gooey, multi-pronged, biological whatsis. By observing their quivering “body” language it becomes apparent that these slimy creatures are puppet masters controlling the moves of the hapless host bodies upon which they ride. Eventually the narrative strands of mute amour fou and mutant mayhem coagulate into a screaming, overwrought battle of the sex-starved. This one’s definitely for geek-grade aficionados of the kind of gags found in Carpenter’s The Thing and Cronenberg’s The Fly—in other words, it’s a film for anyone who likes B-genre sustenance served up with gory inventive gusto. (That it was done for a fraction of the cost only adds to the appeal.)

Genre, or the concept of genre, is one of the elements that makes Philippine director Rico Maria Iarde’s Beneath the Cogon so intriguing—i.e., what the devil is it? The very title makes you reach for your Webster’s and find, “co-gon: any of several tall grasses of southeastern Asia used especially for thatching, fodder, and erosion control.” At first glance the
