1. A Brave New World
For three years now, I’ve been living in San Clemente, a little town on the Argentine coast. When I was a kid, in the 1950s and 1960s, I used to spend my vacations here. There were two movie houses and then, for a time, three. As a teenager, I frequented them daily during the summertime. I saw all kinds of pictures there – principally Hollywood movies – as double features: there were westerns, comedies, crime flicks; but there were also European films. Without even knowing who the directors were, I saw films by John Ford, Jerry Lewis (enormously popular back then), Orson Welles, but also Eric Rohmer, Jacques Tati and even Ingmar Bergman (when I managed to avoid age restrictions). I remember my most impressive afternoon at the movies, a Fritz Lang double-bill – The Indian Tomb and The Tiger of Eschnapur. Those theatres were not repertory or arthouses.

Nowadays there are still two movie houses in town, although one is seldom used. This is an extraordinary privilege for a city of 10,000 inhabitants anywhere in the world. But San Clemente is still a vacation spot. The movie theatre is open from January to March and certain weekends in the winter. Up and down the coast there are other similar towns, with some ten movie houses in total. They all belong to the same owner. And the movies he shows – that are passed on from one movie house to the next – are the big blockbusters, especially the ones aimed at children. The films exhibited during
summer do not number more than fifteen, as opposed to the 150 per season that were shown when I was a kid. These days, I subscribe to the most sophisticated cable/satellite system available in Argentina; and I have purchased all the film packages that are offered: the selection now available is only ten per cent of what used to be seen on pre-cable television in the 1960s. As for the town’s video rental store, it is so bad that it only offers pirated DVD and tape copies; and the selection of titles is sparse and poor.

Everybody knows the story that I’ve just told, but it really only made sense to me when I moved to San Clemente after having lived my whole life in Buenos Aires, a big capital city. The title of this story should be: Of How Cinema – A Cinema More or Less Copious, More or Less Diverse – Became Inaccessible for the Everyday Spectator Around the World. It is true that now, even in my town, there are individuals downloading movies off the internet – and on the streets pirated DVDs are sold. But such practices are not part of the experience of the average citizen. This state of affairs started to become definitive
around 1995, when the multiplexes were taking the place of the old movie houses and when most cities were being left without a movie theatre. It was around that time that film festivals started to grow and multiply. There is an evident correlation between these phenomena. Nowadays, the programme of a mid-sized festival (let’s say, about 200 films) is equivalent to what one used to be able to see throughout the year in first-run cinemas – excluding Hollywood pictures. Or at least that was the situation in countries, such as Argentina, where there was wide distribution. Given these changes in the exhibition and distribution sectors – including the issue of where the audience now goes to see non-mainstream movies – the question is not whether a city has movie houses, but whether it hosts a good film festival. (Of course, the great majority of cities do not have film festivals.) If one charts the points on a planisphere, the difference is apparent. In the old days, the map of cinema was a variegated swarm of points occupying the inhabited part of the planet. Nowadays the new map, the festival one, is a sparse aggregate in which each element is perfectly distinguishable. The interesting thing, however, is that those isolated points constitute an organic network, a significant system. A galaxy. This is where present-day cinema finds its expression, even though another galaxy – the one made up of every home and every computer – also defines the present (and the future), albeit in another sense.

Fifty years ago film festivals already existed. But, at that time, they were few and irrelevant in terms of film commerce apart from their contribution to publicity and glamour. Rather than forming a system, they were a collection of eccentricities. Festivals were born as an effort by European states to appropriate the life of the movies: like a world fair or the Olympics, festivals were conceived of as an opportunity to show off the power, real or symbolic, of the host country as opposed to that of other countries. It’s not by chance that the first important film festival, Venice, was created by Mussolini; nor was it by chance that Cannes was invented to counterbalance it. Nor that here, only a hundred miles from my town, Perón founded the Festival of Mar del Plata in 1954.

It’s curious that it’s only in the last few years that the Americans have established a major film festival such as Sundance. Since Hollywood was officially separated from the state, very early on it sketched out its own constellation on the world map. Over the years, the Hollywood circuit has become
more and more digital (and even virtual); and movie-houses have become less important in the grand scheme of things. Now, non-Hollywood cinema no longer shares any physical space with the studios; rather, it circulates on its own highways.

The film festival constellation underwent a notable change in the past decade. Several stars burst out of a black hole, such as Pusan which was founded in 1996 and nowadays is the biggest of the Asian festivals. Other festivals have expanded exponentially – Toronto, for example, not long ago a small independent event and today a giant. Even though several stars have lost some of their lustre, the decade was marked by multiple births and by general growth. Two years ago, as the movie world marvelled at a multi-million dollar festival in Dubai, a yet-bigger multi-million dollar festival was already being created in the nearby Emirate of Abu Dhabi. Throughout Europe, throughout Latin America, throughout Asia, there are few mayors who can resist the temptation to create a film festival in her/his city. Rome is the most impressive example – an event inconceivable not long ago that attempts to surpass Venice in terms of glamour and to promote the political ascent of the signore sindaco. In Argentina around 1990, there was no film festival. Nowadays, there are more than twenty, including two major events: a re-born Mar del Plata and the ‘independent’ Festival of Buenos Aires (BAFICI), currently, perhaps the most important festival on the continent. BAFICI was only created in 1999, but it has already inspired responses in Santiago de Chile and Mexico City, and even in Lisbon.

Even before film festivals started sprouting up – like mushrooms after a good rain – there had been an attempt to organise them, to halt the chaos, and to impose order on the young galaxy. It was a rather bureaucratic organisational scheme, Stalinist in effect, and one that signalled the transformation of state-run festivals into industry festivals. FIAPF, an international federation of producers, established hierarchies, rules and legitimacy requirements for festivals as well as systems for circulating films amongst them. Thus ‘Category A’ festivals were born. While no one ever knew what a Category B or Category C festival was, the Category A festivals were dedicated to assembling competitive sections that boasted international premieres of the most outstanding films. As the years went by, the result was curious. The three truly big festivals – Cannes, Venice and Berlin – became
even bigger while the second-tier festivals shrank. These second-tier Category A festivals – Karlovy Vary, San Sebastián, Moscow, Cairo, Mar del Plata, Montreal, Tokyo – all became less relevant because of one fundamental reason: there are not enough films to premiere in order to fulfill expectations, since the producers all attempt to get their films into Cannes first and secondly into Venice or Berlin. Beyond the first tier, producers don’t really care about A festivals, or, more precisely, they prefer opening elsewhere. The Category A festivals are the falling stars of the galaxy – they are dull, fading, provincial caricatures of the old red-carpet routines.

Another type of festival has also fallen into decline after having reached its zenith: the big regional event. Havana offers a notable example: formerly a Mecca for Latin American cinema, it is today a holdover state-run festival and a permanent reminder that the island remains under the control of a dictator. Or there is the case of the Ouagadougou Festival in Burkina Faso, a reminder of a time when the dream of a significant, abundant and exportable African film industry still existed. Then too, the culture of the pompous film festival, the festival overloaded with stars and bureaucrats continues in Guadalajara, in Shanghai, in Vladivostok, and in the many provincial events around the world in which the press and the authorities – usually the festival’s partial or full sponsors – cannot stand the idea of not having a figure of worldwide renown at the opening ceremonies. And, combined with other more contemporary formats, there still exists the Cinéma du Monde concept, of which Montreal continues to offer a perfect example. In this kind of festival, films from all countries are shown – generally bad, ‘official’ films – which represent a given country’s typical industrial output and which exemplify the greater portion of worldwide production.

Still, even the most mediocre or worst programmed festivals do not lack audiences. The reason is very simple: they show what cannot be seen elsewhere. This happens for two reasons. One is that, in effect, there are films that only circulate in the Galaxy of the Festivals. But it also happens with increasing frequency that the same film which causes a sensation in a festival often is not at all successful when it opens commercially, or when it is shown in a cinémathèque, or in a repertory house. This tends to happen because festivals, since they belong to an ‘event culture’, to a culture of the extraordinary, end up being more significant as social acts than for their
content. Furthermore, festivals do not merely disseminate a sizable portion of films produced each year; they also monopolise it. Therefore, the Galaxy becomes more and more substantial but more and more exclusive.

The proof of this dynamic is the following fact: film distribution is disappearing. International sales agents used to consider the festivals as beachheads in their efforts to sell film rights. Today those agents know that only happens in a few festivals: Cannes and Toronto, for example, and maybe Venice and Berlin. But this is generally not the case: the exhibition of a film at Pusan does not guarantee the film’s premiere in Korea, nor does playing at Rotterdam insure a premiere in Holland. Films are purchased in the great markets, and the reception by audiences in the festivals themselves is not so important for buying purposes. Since motion pictures are no longer sold for national distribution, international sales agents today make a big part of their money by asking for screening fees from festivals. So the Galaxy also represents an aggregate of potential clients. Therefore, festival screening fees have increased at an impressive rate in the past five years – from €200 to €2,000 in some cases. At the same time, the sales agents are the greatest powers in today’s Galaxy, the ones who possess the ability to determine the circulation of films. With the passage of time, this power has passed from government bureaucrats to producers and distributors, and, finally, to the agents. Now the Galaxy is more chaotic than in its previous phases; but its power is no less firm.

And, what’s more, the Galaxy has a centre: the Cannes Film Festival. The modern era of film festivals and of programming as a more or less transparent activity began when Cannes made the decision to become sovereign in its programming – that it was going to invite the films that its programming committee selected – thus ending the era when films were submitted by nation-states or by film industry organisations. But, since that time, Cannes has also increasingly become the place where the fate of all independent and non-Hollywood cinema is decided. Not the fate of Indian cinema, certainly, with its one thousand productions per year that seldom make it to the West, but of all cinema that aspires to be seen anywhere besides its country of origin. In addition, the evolution of film festivals marks a change in the idea of cosmopolitanism that had always been associated with international showcases of culture. The most important change during those years is that
festivals evolved from exhibiting the films that each country wished to show and began instead, and as if creating a new international language, promoting a notion of ‘international cinema’ based on works shown in festivals.

Getting back to Cannes: every year that festival exhibits as ‘world premieres’ approximately a hundred films (adding up the titles in all sections). These world premieres generate critical reaction that will influence the films’ prestige and acceptability and, in a very definitive manner, their movement through the Galaxy. The status of each individual film depends strongly on the assessment of the critics and on the fomentation of the distributors present in Cannes. The audience certainly does not influence the fate of films, since at Cannes there are hardly any audiences beyond the Côte d’Azur bourgeoisie invited to the gala events. But the careers of a good many directors from around the world depend on what happens to them at Cannes. There, some filmmakers achieve access to big-time production possibilities, to US money. Others simply guarantee their survival.

Once, while I was in Cannes, I had the task of interviewing Jean-Luc Godard who was presenting a film in competition. A bit surprised, I asked him what he was doing there. He responded that his producer had requested that he attend the festival in order to acquire funding for his next film. As is well known, Cannes is also a market and, above all, a marketplace into the future. But for people such as Manoel de Oliveira, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Lisandro Alonso, Béla Tarr or Albert Serra, survival in the motion-picture industry depends (or did very strongly at a given moment in their careers) on Cannes, on the reception of their films there, and on the contacts and agreements that they were able to achieve by attending that festival.

Vancouver and Vienna, Hong Kong and São Paulo, Lisbon and Yerevan will structure the programming of their own festival around a nucleus of films screened at Cannes. Cannes is a sun whose rays reach all sectors of the Galaxy, while Venice (especially), Berlin, Toronto and Rotterdam are lesser stars that likewise possess their own orbiting planets. Hundreds of programmers visit these festivals to select what they will show in their own festivals. It’s almost impossible for a medium-sized festival to have the means to discover a film, unless that discovery takes place in another festival. In order for a motion picture to be seen internationally, the only possibilities are to find an American studio that will take on distribution via
its worldwide affiliates, or to enter into circulation in the Galaxy by way of a festival that is more or less important.

Although infinitely interconnected, the Galaxy is not a cooperative network. Overpopulation creates a struggle for space and paranoia vis-à-vis neighbours. The struggle among festivals to be the first to present films, or to present them exclusively, is one of the wars in the Galaxy. Festivals are dying to get a premiere – a world, international, continental, national, provincial, municipal premiere – deploying seduction, bribery, pressure, and blackmail in order to succeed in their endeavours. It would seem that premières attract international press attention, even though it is not at all clear exactly why this presence is important to a festival that is only oriented towards a local audience – as the majority of festivals are. The rivalry with other film festivals becomes the most important concern for those in charge. Venice’s artistic director dreams about her/his peer at Cannes. But in Rome, they’re dreaming about Venice. And Locarno. And San Sebastián. And in Rotterdam, they’re dreaming about Locarno. And in Amsterdam (a documentary film festival), about Marseille (another documentary film festival). And in Marseille, about Cinéma du Réel in Paris (a third documentary film festival). And in Guadalajara, about FICCO in Mexico City. And in Mar del Plata, about BAFICI. And in Montreal the World Film Festival worries about Toronto – or the other festival in Montreal, the Festival Nouveau Cinéma. And in Valladolid, they dream about San Sebastián; and in San Sebastián, about Gijón, which is on the way up and is younger and more modern…

2. Being There
I don’t have a clear explanation for this widespread situation, which ends up being a nightmare. I participated in that nightmare during the four years that I was the director of BAFICI, from 2000 to 2004. In the beginning, it was easy: the national government, in charge of Mar del Plata believed that what a festival needed was pomp, government support, Category A status and, in passing, all sorts of deals with producers, embassies and liaison agents for stars, former stars or pseudo stars. Mar del Plata’s management paid Catherine Deneuve $50,000 to attend for two days and, by manipulating access to state support for production, put pressure on Argentine film-
makers to present their films at that venue. It was the typical festival from another era – official, antiquated, bureaucratic and tied to the red-carpet traditions and the trotting out of dubious stars on opening night. It was the notion of a film festival as dreamt up by cultural bureaucrats in Argentina and in so many other countries. At times, strictly by chance, some good films got shown. The festival that I was tapped to direct, BAFICI, was born under a good star in 1999. It was conceived by the municipal authorities to challenge Mar del Plata on the basis of a certain modernity, and bearing in mind the environment of a capital city, including certain cultural traditions which held sway amongst the citizenry, particularly the cinephiles. There had never been a festival in Buenos Aires, an enormous city with a significant middle class. BAFICI could not help but grow at a rapid pace. When I was appointed to direct it (after the previous director had been fired because of political pettiness, just as I would be eventually), the festival had already been launched; and it was on the verge of an explosion that was clearly inevitable. The day I began to work with a group of four programmers – a mere four months before the 2001 edition of the festival – I had no idea about such elementary things as the economic and physical trajectories that motion pictures follow before finally arriving on screen.

Nevertheless, it was a very easy task. We were able to choose 200 feature films with no restrictions or compromises whatsoever. Outside our doors was an audience waiting for us to show them something that they had not seen before. Pretty much anything they hadn’t seen before. Very few people in that audience had heard of Béla Tarr, Hou Hsiao-Hsien or Pedro Costa, or of new Korean directors like Hong Sang-soo, Lee Chang-dong or Bong Joon-ho. On the other hand, I knew perfectly well that Jia Zhangke’s Platform had to win the international competition (reserved for first and second works) in the festival’s up-coming edition. I knew this even though I had not yet seen Platform. In the first edition of BAFICI, in 1999, his outstanding first work, Xiao-wu, had been screened in a 16mm print but went unnoticed. The second film by that extraordinary director had to become emblematic of our first programme. It wasn’t a question of manipulating the jury towards that end; all that was necessary was to choose the jury members in an appropriate manner. So my first decision was to invite Jonathan Rosenbaum to be a jury member. Platform couldn’t lose. What I didn’t know was that it was not so easy
to succeed in finally getting the film exhibited, because it had changed sales
agents since its presentation at Venice. During the course of three months of
faxes (we still used those in the office), e-mails and phone calls, I discovered
what the really hard work of a festival was: negotiating with the holders of
the rights, especially when one has limited means.

In truth, I was always convinced that the critics were our secret weapons.
During the three months we had to prepare the festival, we were only able
to go to Rotterdam and see a limited number of films. However, a network
of friends gave us sufficient information and recommendations to be able to
mount the programme. Fortunately, in previous years, without ever think-
ing that we would some day be in charge of a festival, we had cultivated
the friendship of a group of critics and programmers – among them Simon
Field, then director of Rotterdam and another member of our first jury. Be-
ing individuals who were the most tuned-in, this group became the spoiled
guests of our following editions. Those who had been jury members wrote
for the catalogue and curated retrospectives for us gratis. The BAFICI cata-
logues from those years were written by some of the best pens in the cinema
business – I remember, among many others and in addition to Rosenbaum,
Adrian Martin, Mark Peranson, Nicole Brenez, Jim Hoberman, Kent Jones,
Olaf Möller. We even published several books under their names. Suddenly,
almost without having tried, and thanks to the festival’s guests, we had suc-
cceeded in creating an ambience that was passionately cinephile. That first year
was magic. Jim Jarmusch, a legendary figure in independent cinema worthy
of Mme Tussaud’s, attended. Olivier Assayas and Maggie Cheung, who were
an item at the time, came. I even had the pleasure of sending an e-mail to
Assayas telling him that I would be pleased if he came, but even more so if
Maggie (my favourite actress) could come. The Minister of Culture (and fu-
ture mayor of Buenos Aires) put a chauffeured automobile at the disposition
of Jarmusch; however, this nicety was not budgeted for in the case of Maggie
and Olivier, since the Minister had never heard of them. So my brother-in-
law was charged with driving them around in our ancient Volkswagen. Dur-
ing those four editions of BAFICI my wife Flavia worked elbow to elbow
with me – that was one of the greatest pleasures of those absurd years.

The little star in the south of the American continent had suddenly
grown in size in the Galaxy, and I had the sensation of having organised
a party. Audiences were enchanted and, against all the conservatism of the press and against the industry pundits, they were ready to watch what we put in front of them. The works of Johnny To and Takashi Miike, two filmmakers who were absolutely unknown to me, created a sensation. We discovered that an underground network of fanatics exchanged videos of their films. Bruce La Bruce had become an idol of the gay community in Buenos Aires and we had to schedule screenings of his films at three in the morning. There are many fond memories. I recall, for example, Naomi Kawase dressed in traditional Japanese attire the day her film won a prize. *The Mad Songs of Fernanda Hussein*, John Gianvito’s first film, had its international premiere in Buenos Aires and also won a prize. That last day I realised that we had achieved an extraordinary success.

*La libertad* by Lisandro Alonso had its world premiere in the third edition of BAFICI. A few months before, a timid and gawky youth had given me a cassette saying, ‘I’d like you to take a look at this stuff that I filmed.’ When I did so, I fell over backwards. It was the best film that I’d seen from the recent Argentine cinema, which was then undergoing a very interesting period. Immediately I thought that this film was going to be one of the highlights of the competition, a film that would justify any international critic or programmer making the trip to Buenos Aires. But several days later, Christian Jeune, a representative of the Cannes Film Festival, saw the film and selected it for Cannes’ *Un Certain Regard* showcase. This choice astonished the head of INCAA (the official film institution in Argentina) and also local producers, who contended that *La libertad* exemplified the sort of elite cinema whose production should be discouraged in Argentina. In fact, the project had not received any sort of official support. Once the film was selected for Cannes, the rules prohibited it from being shown in other festivals, even in Argentina. It was only after lengthy negotiations that I succeeded in getting permission for a single screening during BAFICI – and this only on the condition that it be shown out of competition. That’s when I understood that Cannes was so powerful that it could even block the screening of films in their own countries of origin. The Galaxy was flexing its hierarchical muscle.

In 2002, Argentina crashed. The economy had been rapidly declining, and it underwent a shock. Argentine currency lost two-thirds of its value; bank accounts were frozen; unemployment soared to 25 per cent; people
protested in the streets, and they were bartering goods in makeshift markets. The Festival’s budget was reduced to some $150,000, a fifth of the previous year’s. Nevertheless, our popularity in the Galaxy remained high: we had managed to please everybody. Particularly Jacques Gerber (at that time programmer for Cannes’ Directors’ Fortnight) – he organised a campaign of economic support for us. Various festivals transferred funds to us; sales agents did not charge us their screening fees; many people personally paid their travel costs in order to attend; and, even though the ATM machines of Buenos Aires were not paying out any bills and businesses were not accepting credit cards, the festival came off perfectly. Spectators flocked to see films by Straub & Huillet and Pedro Costa, while the world outside was going up in flames. It was as if cinema had become a site of resistance to adversity, a place of hope – as if cinema had recovered a status lost long ago. Those days were some of the strangest of my life.

Afterwards, everything became a little duller. Slowly, the country began to get its economy back on track; and, once the Festival had assured its position in the Galaxy, its novelty wore off. What, precisely, was this status that we had achieved? A wide range of answers was possible. For our part, we had carved out a vanguard position in the Galaxy: we were showing the edgiest cinema that could be seen at that time, we had contracted no obligations, and our relationship with the audience was splendid. Instead of waiting for the same old things, every year people would ask us what new and strange things we were going to dream up for them; and the press stopped asking which celebrities would be invited. We differed from other festivals in that we attempted to have the outer reaches of international cinema occupy our festival’s centre stage on an equal footing. We banished categories such as ‘documentary section’, ‘midnight movies’, and ‘experimental cinema’ – mere ghettos for a certain sector of the audience. Nor, of course, did we allow ‘gala’, ‘masterpieces’, or anything of the kind that might imply the recognition of a pre-established hierarchy for the films that we were showing. The challenge was to outdo ourselves, and we were, I have to admit, inching a bit in the direction of the snobbishness that had changed BAFICI into a place to be – something that happens in many other parts of the Galaxy. Film festivals are almost always ‘cool’. This is not a cynical expression: after all, the audience that fills up the theatres does not consist exclusively
of cognoscenti nor of hardcore cinephiles. But, in turn, it’s no good making concessions in order to fill up theatres. In the offerings of film festivals there are no true blockbusters, unless one programmes the very movies that are going to open in commercial cinemas the following week.

3. Goodfellas
Not long ago, someone told me that the most pleasing thing about BAFICI was that, when going to breakfast in a festival hotel, one did not meet disagreeable people. Some days later, a member of a panel in Austria defined the work of a festival director as a series of actions aimed at strengthening what she labeled ‘a nice mafia’. Both perspectives contain elements of truth. Because the true war in the Galaxy – far more significant than the disputes amongst festivals – is the battle amongst tribes that resembles a metaphysical struggle between good and evil. It’s not that good is only found on one side, but rather that evil is found on many sides. In the final instance, what distinguishes one guest from another at the breakfast table is the same thing that separates a noble film from a film that pretends to be noble and thus, by pretending nobility, participates in the circuit of films more or less detached from the mainstream of festival films. It’s the difference that exists between Taste of Cherry by Abbas Kiarostami and Irreversible by Gaspar Noé. It’s clear that, even though they live together day to day in the Galaxy, essentially, admirers of one film share very little in common with those who admire the other. Both films competed at Cannes, and that’s where the problems start.

I clearly remember various conversations I had with Thierry Frémaux, the délégué artistique from Cannes. His conception of the official programme required the representation of all types of film production and, therefore, the type of films made by Kiarostami, Hong Sang-soo, Pedro Costa, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Jia Zhangke, or even Oliveira. However, this type of film can only have limited space in the competition – at most two or three slots – while all the other slots have to be for movies that are more conventional, narratively orthodox, and that present ‘important’ subjects or perhaps even mildly scandalous themes (that’s where Irreversible would come in). The aforementioned films by Kiarostami et al. can even win the Palme d’Or; but they never receive a gala screening since they are usually shown just once, at four o’clock in the afternoon to a half-empty house.
Frémaux’s argument is that the most difficult films, the most rigorous ones, need the cannoise paraphernalia in order to exist. Frémaux argues, in short, that the flashiest and most commercial movies end up protecting works that are more fragile, because the latter benefit from the attention of the press and from the framework of glamour that the festival offers. It’s possible that he may have a point there. Nevertheless, given that Cannes has succeeded in imposing on the world an idea of cinema that certainly encompasses very diverse and even opposing aesthetic tendencies, it would be interesting to know if a radicalisation of the Cannes selection process might improve the quality of what the Galaxy has to offer. Or, must we heed the voices clamouring from all quarters that Cannes continue to bow before the populist altar of a supposed market, one that ‘shows the public what it wants’? In fact, it’s unusual for a film in Cannes, even a winner, to make money unless a studio takes an interest in distributing it. As we have already indicated, in Cannes there is no audience; but the majority of those who attend the gala events in the Lumière Theatre believe in that sort of mythology.

In other words, if a change in the demographic makeup were to leave the tribe of those who believe in Gaspar Noé outside of the Galaxy and only include the tribe of Kiarostami aficionados, the Galaxy would become a much less populated but more agreeable place, something like the breakfast room that we had successfully created in BAFICI. It seems as if that would be really easy, if Cannes would only take the initiative. But that is unlikely to happen. It was even difficult in Buenos Aires. Let me explain. On the one hand, it is not very easy to distinguish between a cinephile and a ‘body snatcher’ of a cinephile, i.e. one of those persons who appears agreeable and knowledgeable, but who turns out to regard cinema with the mentality of a Harvey Weinstein. And, on the other hand, there are the funding problems. When I assumed the directorship of BAFICI, we had the idea of inviting producers, distributors and managers of economic development funds to Buenos Aires and of organising co-production meetings that included workshops, seminars, and so on. All this in order to assist the New Argentine Cinema. That’s how a parade of supposedly well-intentioned individuals came to Buenos Aires, all quite concerned that Latin American filmmakers be able to gain access to international financing. This is, in fact, what happened; and today
there are many Argentine directors who, in addition to government assistance from their own country, are benefitting from co-production arrangements with France, Germany, Switzerland and particularly Spain. This has not improved the quality of the films, but has enormously increased their cost. The films of the young Argentine directors are no longer fresh and original, as they were ten years ago; and their films have now become part and parcel of the rather colourless mediocrity produced by economic development funds and co-production money.

An additional consequence of this process is that the Argentine filmmakers, who in other times used to attend festivals in order to enjoy the trip and find out what was being done elsewhere, are today preoccupied with obtaining money. The spiritual deterioration of the Rotterdam festival is notable in this regard ever since Cinemart, its co-production market, took over the event, and the place filled up in a few years with sales agents, distributors and representatives of television networks on one side, and, on the other, with mendicant filmmakers attempting to sell their projects. This all adds up to an infernal machine dedicated to constantly churning out counterfeits of interesting, free-spirited, edgy and rigorous films. These days I believe a festival is better if it doesn’t have markets of any kind and producers don’t insist.

The Galaxy harbours one of its principal enemies within its own reproductive apparatus. Festivals are plagued with people who represent a ‘bad mafia’ that conspires to produce conventional and mediocre cinema while concealing that same cinema’s impoverishment, thanks to the consensus of those who manufacture similar products and thanks to critics schooled in complacency. Unlike the old movie houses, which were completely separate from the places where pictures were financed, film festivals are also the itinerant base of the new cinema merchants with their mechanisms that control and dominate the production and reproduction of an adulterated art. If there is one thing I regret during those years with BAFICI, it’s having allowed access to a part of the ‘bad mafia’ – the part dedicated to this kind of new colonisation of the Third World. It’s too late for regrets. At any rate, San Clemente continues on without a festival; and for three years now, I have been out of the Galaxy. Maybe things have changed a lot since I left.