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## Leonor Will Never Die

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## Leonor Will Never Die

### Abstract

This is a film review of *Leonor Will Never Die* (2021), directed by Martika Ramirez Escobar.

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### Author Notes

John Lyden is Professor of Religious Studies and the Blizek Professor of Religion and Film at University of Nebraska Omaha. He has been the Editor of the *Journal of Religion & Film* since 2011. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (NYU Press), and the editor of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Film* and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture*. He also co-edited, with Ken Derry, *The Myth Awakens: Canon Conservatism, and Fan Reception of Star Wars* (Wipf and Stock 2018).



**Leonor Will Never Die (2021), dir. Martika Ramirez Escobar**

In her feature film debut, director Escobar has created a whimsical tale of Leonor Reyes, an aging screenwriter who has written several action films that show regularly on Philippine television but who now lives in a simple home with her son Rudie, feeling useless as she tries to finish one last screenplay. Rudie is increasingly impatient with his mother, and hopes to leave the country for a job elsewhere. But plans change after a stray television falls on Leonor's head, and she falls into a coma in which she keeps writing the screenplay, but now has become part of the story herself.

Slippage between reality and her fantasy pervades the film, and we are often unsure of what is real and what is only in her imagination. In her screenplay, Ronwaldo seeks to avenge his brother's death at the hands of gangsters, but Leonor actually had a son named Ronwaldo who died accidentally on a movie set. To complicate matters, the ghost of Ronwaldo interacts with the

characters throughout the film, and Rudie and Leonor's ex-husband Valentin can see him (although he is transparent) and converse with him. The real Ronwaldo's death hangs over all of them, and it seems that Leonor is attempting to deal with it through her fictional Ronwaldo's heroic story.

The doctor overseeing Leonor's care advises Rudie that if he wants his mother to recover, he should spend time talking with her, and soon he begins to believe that finishing her screenplay will bring her back to life. But no one knows how the story should end, not even Leonor, who has entered the story and is now conversing with her own characters in the film within the film, telling them what to do and anticipating their dialogue. When Leonor awakes and escapes from the hospital, no one knows where to look until she appears on the television in the waiting room, within her own story, and the family and hospital staff watch eagerly until Rudie decides to enter the television set himself. At this point, we are in full-out surrealist absurdism, but the film now moves into a third meta-level as we see the actual filmmakers (Escobar included) editing the footage and debating how to end the film. We see multiple versions, with Escobar then saying, "It keeps changing; we'll never finish." But it is Leonor's characters who finally decide the action, opting not for tragedy but the joyous musical ending that Leonor would prefer. "You write your own lives," Leonor says, and she clearly wants to do the same. Perhaps Escobar is telling us that we all have that ability to write our own stories, as fiction gives us that freedom, and that power—a power which cannot solve all problems with violence, but which can let us sing and dance, even in the face of death.