

# THE LOVE ON YOUR SHOULDERS, THE WORLD IT SUSTAINS

A Conversation between *Martika Escobar & Davy Chou*

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Artists may yearn for standalone revenues from their birthplaces, but to rely on a local pipeline is a pipe dream for most Southeast Asian filmmakers. In 2019, the Social Weather Station estimated that 93% of Pinoy constituents could be classified under consumer class terminology as Class D to E: the masses and those way under the poverty line. Budgets for Southeast Asian productions are a fraction of Western releases, rendering shorter theatrical runs and measlier dividends.

Yet those films must be made and, importantly, be seen. The two directors highlighted here achieved that not just on a local scale but throughout the globe, popping up in numerous festivals, screenings, and press features. They're among Southeast Asia's indie darlings of the decade thanks to their potent visions exemplified in their 2022 films—Martika Escobar's *Leonor Will Never Die* and Davy Chou's *Return to Seoul*.

The hardships of whittling a living out of film don't end with resting on one's laurels. Neither Escobar nor Chou seemed petulant or ruffled when imparting personal experiences on piracy and distribution through a Zoom call last September. When productions end and crews return home, directors and producers remain on half-finished bridges. Neither have called "Cut!". The cameras, their internal panopticons, still roll. They remain vigilant and attentive, keeping love alive by the seams.

I doubt this non-chronological synthesis of the conversation we had, warmed by their withstanding decade-long friendship, solved their issues à la Aladdin. But I like to think that the seeds of what could be possible were planted in their subconscious during that moment through listening to one another.

Always you are with

To save up for movie tickets, Escobar downloaded Japanese dramas through Limewire, bought bootleg Jarmusch boxsets in Thailand, and stole DVDs from Video City in Manila. At first, she believes that she's never purchased a legitimate DVD. Then she remembers that she owns some from local filmmakers. Among her fond memories include watching sellers from Quiapo, Manila's piracy mecca, push *karitons* stacked with bombas down the street. Her college friends passed her hard drive around, copying from her digital collections which were sorted by title, director, origin, and year. One film from that drive was *Big Time* (2005), produced

by Monster Jimenez, who would also produce her first narrative feature, *Leonor Will Never Die*.

Escobar has moved onto the convenience of streaming platforms, but Chou still torrents movies to fuel his creative processes. The silver lining during the pandemic was his discovery of La Loupe, a fleeting Facebook group for downloading obscurities like *The Cherry Orchard* (1990) and *Earth Light* (1970). Pirated paraphernalia was difficult to come by in France, where he grew up. Instead, he had access to public libraries, their shelves brimming with audiovisual material and tomes on cinematic movements. “Each film was a new world that opened up itself,” marvels Chou.

Escobar’s enchantment with the moving image comes from a similar reverence. She has fond memories of crowded cinemas with only standing rooms in the aisles. As the audience poured out, sometimes she stayed inside the theater and rewatched the film. Her favorite spot in the Metro during freshman year was Cine Adarna, where university students had free or cheap access to the theater’s programs. Even now, as a professional filmmaker, she never sees more than ten people inside the air-conditioned sanctum.

“Maybe this special experience isn’t for everyone,” she says. “But why are there more people in other countries who want to watch films in cinemas?” And earlier on: “I might sound like a stubborn, privileged person, but of course I want to make films for the big screen.”

Jimenez would have sold the rights of *Leonor* to major cinemas, which usually shoulder the press coverage, booking fees, and other expenses. But the idea of showing her first film in a hundred malls to five people for less than a week disappointed Escobar—let alone shutting it direct to streaming.

Her romanticism for the cinema as a space fueled the impetus behind Escobar and Jimenez’s microcinema strategy. Jimenez acquiesced to her director’s request for an independent release on the condition that they’d try something else for her next film. They formed partnerships with regional cineplexes, traveled for one or two pocket screenings a month, and encouraged sponsorships for their events. Transparency and reassurances from one another bolstered their professional relationship.

I attended one organized in 2022 prior to our acquaintance. Before the theater stood a merch booth with bold totes, stickers, and t-shirts. The energy and excitement in the audience and the crew during the post-screening Q&A was palpable. All the above still netted them figures in the red. Revenue came from overseas pipelines, such as screenings in the US or the Middle East.

“Are we doing something wrong?” ponders Escobar. “Maybe you have thoughts and tips, Davy. You seem to have a good run everywhere!”

Chou cedes to that remark—he’s proud of the 118,000 attendees for *Return to Seoul* in France—but clarifies that he started out with austere numbers for *Golden Slumbers* (2011), his debut. While he acknowledges his privileges from his dual nationality and upbringing that make European funding and support a smoother process, he’s also put in the groundwork for a long-term payoff to “make this lie continue.” The so-called falsehood pertains to his previous uncertainties and insecurities in becoming a director.



Smiles from Istanbul and Phnom Penh, where Escobar and Chou were during the encounter, 2023



At the age of twenty-six, before leaving for Cambodia in 2009, he co-founded the production company Vycky Films in France with only the concept of the documentary in mind. This allowed him to have a legal basis to find partners abroad and distribute *Golden Slumbers* commercially in France. All these personal relationships strengthened his artistic convictions and were stepping stones to bigger distributors who took on *Return to Seoul*, such as Sony Pictures Classic and MUBI.

Escobar craves depth in the public discourse. She’s grateful for everyone that attends their screenings: the cool kids, the Letterboxd cinephiles, and the scant adult lured in by *Leonor*’s Sundance affiliations. However, she admits to searching for reviews that explored her film further. Many Filipino critics found her film “too cute.” She thinks that mindset prevented, say, an informative analysis of the eighties’ action flicks referenced in *Leonor*, which in turn limited the demographics that sought it out in cinemas.

When Escobar describes her audiences, Chou laments the death of hipsters within local screenings. The issue isn’t a lack of appeal, at least for *Return to Seoul*. The bulk of the audience for

the film's Paris premiere belonged to a demographic outside of what he, his producer, and his distributor expected. Instead of the usual arthouse crowds—ex-teachers, journalists, and retirees—cool kids, like his protagonist Freddie, occupied every seat in the theater.

Only a handful of Khmer attendees as young as *Return to Seoul's* international audiences frequent film-related events or engage in online and offline discourse over arthouse movies. Chou's forays into neighboring countries' film scenes—in Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines—lead him to believe that the youth are the lifeblood of any thriving community, of any industry. Their absence within Phnom Penh concerns him, especially with the emergence of Cambodia's middle class. "Maybe they don't know that film is cool yet," postulates Chou, often to his team. "But how do we find them?"

The *je ne sais quoi* that Chou cannot find back home is an everyday reality for Escobar in Manila. According to her, filmmaking and cinephilia tread hand-in-hand. Intersecting circles of friends, including Escobar's, collaborate on shorts and features underneath the banner of their own studios.

An unpublished interview that I conducted with Sam Manacsa, another filmmaker, for QCinema corroborates Escobar's perspective. Escobar has worked as a cinematographer for Manacsa's *Cross My Heart and Hope to Die* (2023). Manacsa refers to Escobar, her senior in college, by her nickname, Marty. She says, "I met [them] almost at the same time. They were all friends. I joined one of their hangouts. Those relationships have lasted for a long while. Even when I don't make a film, we'll still be friends. But it's just nice to know that I have them for my next projects."

Chou is an equally fervent supporter of fostering and transforming spirits through gatherings. He describes cinephilia as a lonely hobby, only having his mother and a best friend to share his passions with during school days. Finding Mediacritik alleviated his loneliness and propelled his growth as a creative. The domain now leads to a content mill, but it was once a forum for French cinénerds like Chou. From 2003 to 2006, Chou met up three times a year with Mediacritik friends who would become his collaborators, such as Jacky Goldberg, his producer on *Golden Slumbers*, and Christoph Musset, a composer for *Return to Seoul*.

According to a friend of Chou's, all that a community needs to grow are venues that can accommodate everyone and consistency. This informal tastemaking imbibed in the Anti-Cine-Club—weekly film screenings hosted by Anti-Archive, spearheaded by Chou—cultivates the interests of those who participate in it. Escobar shares a similar anecdote later on: the friend that her producer drank and partied with during the Busan International Film Festival became their sales agent.



Poster of Leonor Will Never Die (2022)



Poster of Return to Seoul (2022)



At the time of the conversation, the last film screened at Anti-Cine-Club was *Spring in a Small Town* (1948). Through a smile Chou confesses that this and a bevy of other titles were procured for the club through the high seas. He's taken by an amused surprise when Escobar reveals that she, in turn, enabled the pirating of *Diamond Island* (2016). She forwarded the screener that Chou had sent her in private to a friend. Little does she know that he also pirated *Leonor* prior to the meeting.

Both directors are amenable, even pleased, to have their films pirated. Circumstances came "full circle" for Escobar when she heard that YIFY made *Leonor* available on torrent, though she would have been dismayed had it leaked during its Sundance run. Chou expresses a slight injury to his ego when *Diamond Island* had been unavailable from piracy circles for a while. To him, that was an indicator that no one cared about the film. He understands the thrill of piracy and its subcultures of sharing.

In discussions of distribution, I've never seen any director talk about uploading their own films to public spaces like Vimeo or YouTube. Escobar is active in the former site, hosting seventeen short films, music videos, and teasers. Curious, I asked her what fueled this impulse. To her, each film is its own person with its own life. When she senses that a film's lifespan has lapsed, she uploads it online for its potential resurrections, hoping that it would be noticed by others.

Chou has a less sentimental take. Upon my request, a week earlier he had sent me links to his short films scattered across different Vimeo accounts, including those never mentioned in name online. He considers the question and says that he's never dwelled on his past films. The future stresses him out too much for retrospection.

His answer there contrasts with the final piece of advice he offers filmmakers embarking on their first slice of the distribution pie. "It's a complex and coded game which will come with some rules. It's a bit boring, actually...but your first film will always be your first film." He recommends finding trustworthy partners and figuring out which places or festivals are best suited for one's film. "Take the time to experiment while there isn't a huge pressure on your shoulders. Don't be afraid to go out and make new films."

Escobar's? "It's very cheesy, but keep the love alive." The sincere support from people who see *Leonor* beyond its financial merits keeps her going. Because of their sincerity, she's able to walk past that culvert—that gateway which immortalizes her films—to the other side and ensure that the world pays attention to them. Perhaps she would agree to pirates sustaining that love for cinema in their own way. After all, she's been one herself.