

Introduction

A 2005 Russian made-for-TV documentary, *Kiss Me Stronger or Operation Bésame Mucho* (*Tselui menia krepche ili operatsiia Bésame Mucho*, Maksim Vasilenko, 2005), begins with a reconstruction of the 1976 attempt at hijacking a Soviet airliner. Officially, hijackings and other terrorist activities were not supposed to take place in a country of developed socialism, so stories of these and other such events were persistently suppressed in the Soviet media. And yet, as the film reveals, contrary to what one might expect, this particular attempt lacked the political motivation that characterized the spree of international hijackings that reached a pinnacle in the 1970s. Unlike most Soviet citizens who attempted to escape to “the West” via Europe or the US, this hijacker bizarrely demanded that the plane take him to Mexico so that he could finally meet the composer of the song “Bésame Mucho,” Consuelo Velázquez. In the film, this episode becomes an occasion for early-2000s Russian musicians, producers, and cultural critics to reflect on the song’s enormous popularity, extraordinary emotional charge, and enduring resonance in the Soviet Union. The escapist romantic sensibility embodied in “Bésame Mucho,” all the interviewees in the film claim, felt at once exotic and familiar. It provided an exotic imaginary destination, tapping into the sense of a continuous longing for escape that characterized the everyday affect of life under the Soviet regime, while resonating with local vernacular musical traditions that survived the impositions of official communist culture. Rather than waning over time, this particular sensibility found new outlets in post-Soviet culture, and thus, the critics interviewed in the film affirm, the “phenomenon of ‘Bésame Mucho’ transformed into the phenomenon of Latin American telenovelas.”¹

Indeed, when the TV documentary aired in 2005, Latin American serials had reached a distinctive cultural ascendance across the former Socialist Bloc, from China and Eastern Europe to Cuba—competing for airtime with the kind of cultural-analysis-cum-sensationalist-fare that this documentary itself epitomizes. And just like the story of the airliner hijacking that sets the documentary's narrative into motion (deviating as it does from conventional characterizations of “the West” as an alternative to Soviet society), the popularity of Latin American romance, from its musical to television forms, calls attention to a different and wholly unexpected global trajectory of media fandom. *Operation Bésame Mucho* inadvertently highlights its affective power as unpredictable, unruly, and potentially subversive—albeit in ways that also defy conventional understandings of Cold War politics and dissent. After all, wasn't it the Beatles (or the Scorpions, depending on which US media source you prefer) that brought down the Berlin Wall?²

In all these aspects, the focus of this Russian TV documentary surprisingly resonates with discussions that emerged in the North American cultural sphere in the past decade, foregrounding the unanticipated force of popular culture produced across the Global South and increasingly consumed all over the world (as the title of one recent book suggests).³ From Latin American telenovelas and Latin pop, to Bollywood, Nollywood, Japanese anime, K-pop, K-drama, and Turkish *dizi*, the immense popularity of these cultural products circumvents and, in many cases, rivals Hollywood and other entertainment behemoths of the Global North. As such, it re-diverts the conventionally anticipated directionality of entertainment media's global flows and the modes of its consumption.

Scholars have traced the origins of these new global media flows to the beginning of globalization and to the neoliberal restructurings of the entertainment industries that took place throughout the late 1980s and 1990s, in conjunction with technological developments.⁴ It is therefore assumed to be a relatively late twentieth-century phenomenon, born of the global media over the past forty years. In the post-Cold War world, audiences' habits and preferences have been radically altered as they opened up to popular forms from distant parts of the world. Bishnu-priya Ghosh and Bhaskar Sarkar have theorized this cultural phenomenon as “the global-popular”; its impact is undeniable, its politics ambiguous at best.⁵

The emergence of this essentially neoliberal global culture thus appears to fold neatly into a deterministic post-Cold War historiography. But could longer genealogies of the global-popular be constructed to challenge this reified conventional historiographic understanding? How would it alter our conceptualization of global media circuits and their origins? And could such earlier histories change how we think of the continuities and ruptures, as well as the politics and ideologies, of the global-popular today? This book considers one such historical precedent: the unexpected and mostly unexamined popularity of the Mexican film *Yesenia* (Alfredo B. Crevenna, 1971) in the Soviet Union. Set during the Second Franco-Mexican War, this unassuming movie melodrama was based on a successful

television series, itself an adaptation of a popular women's romance graphic novel, a genre that was extremely common in mid-century Mexico. Screened in the Soviet Union in 1975, *Yesenia* became the highest-grossing film in the history of Soviet film exhibition, unsurpassed by any movie, foreign or domestic. Based on ticket sales alone, it was seen by an astounding 91.4 million viewers in only the first year of its release.⁶ *Yesenia's* popularity in the Socialist Bloc, largely unbeknown to its Mexican producers, continued for decades as the film migrated from cinemas to television screens and video. Boosted by its success with Soviet audiences, the film enjoyed a similarly spectacular exhibition history in China in the late 1970s, when the country was opening itself up to more international media, paving the way for other Mexican and Latin American production broadcasts on Chinese television in decades to follow.

Approaching this period retrospectively, cognizant of more contemporary developments in the global media, I conceive of this episode in film history through the framework of television culture as well as fashion and music industries whose combined impact, I argue, shaped both the film's Mexican production and its subsequent reception within the Socialist Bloc. I also argue that *Yesenia's* popularity carved out a crucial node within the global circuit of cultural and industrial networks, further enabling Latin American media's transcontinental reach. The longer history of this circuit began with the reception of Argentinian tango and Mexican boleros in the 1920s, expanding to Mexican Golden Age film classics and Argentinian musicals in the 1950s and 1960s, and to Mexican historical melodramas in the 1970s that circulated in the Soviet Union and China, and culminating in the triumphant march of the Brazilian telenovela *The Slave Isaura* (*A Escrava Isaura*, Globo, 1976, hereon *Isaura*) through European, Cuban, Chinese, Soviet, and Algerian television screens in the 1980s. Sold to 104 countries, *Isaura* is widely understood to be the most dubbed show in the history of television, with accumulative worldwide viewership in the billions. Its international success signaled the rise to global power of Brazilian and Mexican TV conglomerates Globo and Televisa, opening the floodgates to the Latin American telenovelas that came to dominate the TV screens of the former Socialist Bloc in the 1990s. Thus, in 1991, Soviet viewership of the Mexican telenovela *Los ricos también lloran* (Televisa, 1979–80) considerably surpassed that of the contemporaneous US soap opera juggernaut *Dallas* (1978–1991), when both were broadcast on television in the last months of the Soviet Union's existence.⁷ This process accelerated further in the early 2000s, pointing not only to audiences' already-formed preference for Latin American melodramatic media but also to the potential for a truly global fandom for melodramatic serialized television originating from Turkey, South Korea, and India today.

With this broader backdrop in mind, this book focuses on the reception of Mexican melodrama in the 1970s as a crucial transitional moment whose culture and politics have informed our global-popular present in hitherto unattributed ways. The four chapters analyze different facets of *Yesenia's* production,

international circulation, and reception, maintaining a dual focus on the Mexican and Soviet cultural and political milieux of the 1970s.⁸ Because the titular protagonist is a young woman raised in the Roma community, Yesenia's Mexican identity in the film is mediated through transnational markers of the Romani culture, in particular music and dance associated simultaneously with Spanish/Andalusian and Eastern/Southern European origins. The book argues for the centrality of the figure of "the gypsy"—and of "gypsy music" and "gypsy fashion"—as the space of mutual articulations and negotiations of the sentimental cultures and forms of affective and political belonging and non-belonging in the Soviet and Mexican contexts of the 1970s.

However, to set the stage for the exploration of this history, the book's prelude offers a snapshot of an earlier moment of the late Soviet 1950s, when post-Stalinist liberalization allowed for a powerful entry of foreign influences, setting in motion many of the cultural dynamics of the subsequent decades. This new cultural opening and popular enthusiasm over all things foreign included the influx of Latin American cinema and music, epitomized by the popularity of Argentinian actress-singer Lolita Torres, who became an idol for Soviet audiences. Although it constitutes a distinct case study, placing Torres's Soviet stardom as a starting point for the book's narrative draws out some of the key aspects governing the Soviet reception of Latin American melodramatic media in their historical development, tracing their transformations from the period of hopeful exuberance of the 1950s to the global crisis of the 1970s.

What ultimately guides my analysis of *Yesenia* as an early instantiation of a global-popular icon is the way it brings into relief some of the key social, cultural, and political conflicts of its era: namely, the gradual transition in the 1970s from versions of state socialist, nationalist, and internationalist formations to the early emergence of neoliberal ideologies on the global scale. Although rarely considered in relation to each other, both Mexico's and the Soviet Union's twentieth-century histories were rooted in the experiences of their respective revolutions—revolutions that ultimately were incomplete at best or, at worst, totally failed in their original ambitions for a truly emancipatory social transformation. Without undermining the continuous practices of organized state violence and repression, both the Soviet Union in the period of late socialism and Mexico in the last decades of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI)'s rule could perhaps be described as *dictablanda*—a "milder" kind of dictatorship (especially as compared, in the Soviet case, to its Stalinist past, or, in Mexico's case, to the military dictatorships of the countries of the Southern Cone): a single-party institutional political hegemony that emerged through the reification of the earlier radical revolutionary rupture.⁹ In both the Mexican and Soviet cases, the impending collapse of the system was inseparable from the advent of global neoliberalism in the 1980s. And yet, I argue, in its transitional nature the 1970s was a period not yet overdetermined by the impending neoliberal globalization, containing instead multiple possibilities

for political and cultural development, however unrealized. In my analysis, discussions of aesthetic tastes and the material conditions for their reproduction provide necessary entry points into broader historiographic questions, and their transnational context suggests their relevance beyond local specificities.

Inseparable from aesthetics and material infrastructures are the affective registers triggered by the global-popular sensibility associated with *Yesenia*, characterized by the excess of feeling, sentimentality, and sensuality. While projecting conservative models of gender and sexuality, such melodramatic expressions speak to the overwhelming shared feelings of social and political injustice that both countries' progressive elites (whether associated with the state or the intelligentsia) failed to address. Melodrama in both contexts carved out a socially legitimized space for articulating such sensibilities, and its contemporary critical discussions themselves reflect the historical shifts this book investigates. However, melodrama—whether understood as a specific genre or as a cultural, aesthetic, or affective mode—is not the primary object of this book. I largely understand melodramatic sensibility and the cultural works that embody it—whether films, graphic novels, TV series, or songs—as enabling producers, consumers, and critics to stage particular social conflicts and leverage their positions (including, but not necessarily, counterhegemonic ones). In the case of the cultural flow of Latin American melodramatic media in the socialist world, it gave rise to new transnational communities of feeling. Such imaginary sentimental communities, however, did not necessarily fully rely on either universalist or pre-constituted cultural affinities. I argue that they functioned, instead, as an avatar of a new shared form of global populism, one that went against the grain of official ideologies and the taste criteria of the intelligentsia in both countries. This new form, I argue, was tied to changing models of femininity and consumer culture, linked to informal and DIY production and circulation practices that reflected and reshaped conflicting notions of individual and collective agency in both Mexico and the Soviet Union. These consumer practices, in turn, both reflected and were triggered by transnational circulation of media at large, and melodramatic media in particular.¹⁰

Certain genres of music were crucial for this global melodramatic media sensibility. “Bésame Mucho,” with which we started, is indeed a perfect case in point: the Mexican bolero that became the most recognizable Latin standard of the postwar period worldwide, used frequently in film soundtracks from this period (from the 1940s well into the 1980s), ubiquitous and yet with a fanbase that, on the extreme end, would hijack a plane to meet its maker. As we’ll see, in the Soviet Union this was equally true both of Lolita Torres’s renditions of Luso-Iberic songs and of the Russian and “gypsy” romance songs (*romansy*) whose resurgence accompanied *Yesenia*’s reception and whose aesthetic regime, I argue, further resonated with that of Latin popular romantic music.¹¹

The connection between music and melodrama (formally underscored by their shared etymologies—*melos* means music), in terms of aesthetics and affect

as well as the intertwining of the film and music industries, has a long history, in which “melodrama became more and more closely identified with an auditory imagination that conditioned the responses of listeners to melodramatic scenarios in lyrics and music.”¹² Similar to their Indian and Egyptian counterparts, sound technologies and practices in Latin America historically were integral to the establishment of the melodramatic cinematic ethos.¹³ Music production specifically was embedded in the story of the success of the leading Latin American film industries of the twentieth century (Argentina, Mexico, and Brazil), and this relationship is reflected in the development of specific genres (for example, *cabaretera* in Mexico), the thematic and narrative function of songs in many films, and the formation of stardom.¹⁴ This crossover continued on television, illustrated by the fact that in the early 2000s, Televisa, the largest producer of Mexican telenovelas, formed a joint venture with EMI, one of the four largest international record labels. In turn, the process of “standardization of ways of feeling and expressing, of gestures and sounds, dance rhythms, and narrative cadences” produced by the melodramatic media (as discussed by Jesús Martín-Barbero and Marvin D’Lugo, among others) had broad transnational impact far beyond the inclusion of songs in film soundtracks or the films’ diegetic narrative structures, to extra-cinematic everyday realities.¹⁵ Both Mexican boleros such as “Bésame Mucho” and *romansy* in the Soviet 1970s formed part of the sonic background that shaped the experiences of cultural producers, audiences, and critics alike through what Anahid Kassabian has referred to as “ubiquitous listening.”¹⁶ Thus, although *Yesenia* was not a musical, its cultural reception extended to this broader field, constituting a crucial part of its intermedial environment.

THIS BOOK’S THREE LEITMOTIFS

Intermediality is integral to the three most prominent aspects of the story of *Yesenia* as recounted in this book. The first of these leitmotifs is focused on the distinctive media circuit linking Latin America to the Socialist Bloc. Falling largely outside the dominant European- and US-centered industry networks, this linkage provides a new perspective on the history of global media circulation, its “flows and counter-flows,” to use Daya Kishan Thussu’s famous formulation.¹⁷ This circuit was shaped in the period between the 1950s and the 1980s, until eventually it largely merged with (or was partially subsumed by) the dominant globalized music and TV market. During its existence, however, this circuit developed its own particular infrastructure, geography, common points of reference, its own distinctive temporality, and a different notion of what constitutes a global media capital.¹⁸ This book develops out of the premise that in its many iterations, global media production and consumption today reengages historical memories and continuing affective attachments to earlier intimacies—including those of global melodrama (whether Latin American or, increasingly, its other regional variants)—across nations of

the former Socialist Bloc, intimacies that were enabled by this distinctive circuit.¹⁹ Taking cues from Latin American cultural critics such as Martín-Barbero, D'Lugo, Ana M. López, and Matthew Karush, and placing their work into conversation with that of scholars of Soviet media Alexander Prokhorov, Elena Prokhorova, Lilya Kaganovsky, Eliot Borenstein, Christine Evans, and Kristin Roth-Ey, I approach this transnational circuit as defined through a melodramatic sensibility mutually constituted across media such as radio, recordings, TV, and cinema.

Despite its undisputed scale and cultural impact, one reason why the history of Latin American popular media consumption in the Socialist Bloc has been largely ignored is that it disrupts many of the established scholarly narratives around transnational circulation dynamics and affective communities constituted by them. Within much of the scholarship on transnational popular media, the historical viewerships of Latin American film musicals and melodramas (and, subsequently, of telenovelas) have been presumed to be primarily regional.²⁰ For the first decades of its existence, such media has been associated with lower-class audiences, and almost exclusively with Hispanophone communities in the Americas.²¹ The rise in worldwide popularity of Latin American telenovelas in the late 1990s, which positioned media conglomerates such as Globo and Televisa as global leaders and secured their market presence throughout much of Asia and the Middle East as well as in the Western Hemisphere, changed such assumptions. Most scholars, however, have understood this shift to be predicated on an overlapping series of ruptures resulting from economic globalization and technological changes of the period.²²

Similarly, the “Latin Pop Explosion” that began in the North American market of the late 1990s has been linked simultaneously to the growth of the domestic market share of Latinx and to the “World Music” turn within the industry as an extension of the same process of neoliberal globalization.²³ The continuing tie-ins between music industries and audiovisual media as constitutive of Latin media’s global popularity, however, have continued to be explored in scholarship only in the context of the Americas.²⁴ Their continued presence within the former socialist sphere was largely ignored. Given the ongoing isolationism of the cultural histories of the former Socialist Bloc and the geographic ghettoization of postsocialism as an Eastern European phenomenon, we still have not picked up on the continuities between the global media circuits of the Cold War era and the transnational cultural traffic afterward. Following the examples of Michael Denning’s *Noise Uprising: The Audiopolitics of a World Musical Revolution* and Andrew F. Jones’s *Circuit Listening: Chinese Popular Music in the Global 1960s*, this book seeks to reconstruct a specific historical transnational circuit—articulated in particular through its local reception in the Soviet Union—as one possible prehistory of contemporary global media circulation.²⁵

My interest, therefore, is not merely in investigating cultural reception, but in probing the character of the circuit itself. With all its distinctiveness, its Soviet–Latin American iteration, I argue, should not be thought of as either a

historical anomaly or a cultural curiosity. The phenomenon of transnational film and popular media circulations bypassing the Global North is historically anything but exceptional. The distribution of Mexican, Indian, and Egyptian popular cinema (as well as Mexican and Brazilian telenovelas) in the Soviet Bloc relied at least in part on their already established international success, albeit on a regional scale. However, because of the Soviet Union's position outside of Western media markets, the geopolitical and economic motivations of its media distribution networks, and the realities of its socialist intellectual property regime, its global media circuits followed a distinctive trajectory for much of the twentieth century. Tom Lamarre's discussion of regional television in an East Asian context provides another useful conceptual frame for such a materially grounded analysis: as he reminds us, merely by virtue of its existence, "distribution produces something in its own right . . . a complex set of social functions."²⁶ Understanding such functions is even more crucial in instances where the shared geography constituted by these networks does not "correspond with received territories and geographies but entails a sense of affective possession, emerging in conjunction with the mapping of the transmedial onto a geopolitical domain. Its 'where' is between media and nations."²⁷ Indeed, a peculiar sense of deterritorialization emerges throughout this book, and it is especially evident in the discussions of specific cultural forms—*Yesenia* providing a particularly telling example, with its pseudo-Romani protagonist and Franco-Mexican nineteenth-century settings offering a loose sense of cultural (mis)identification for the Soviet audiences, setting in motion a series of affective displacements.

The second, albeit interconnected, story this book tells explores this media circuit as a vehicle for intersecting sexual politics in the Soviet Union and Mexico in the 1970s. As has often been the case historically, the melodramatic regime enabled continuous renegotiations of gender norms through the new structures of feeling conveyed via film, TV, and music. I understand these particular renegotiations as part of the process leading up to the veritable explosion of sexual norms in the late Soviet period and their quick reification into the extremely reactionary gender regime of the post-Soviet era—a shift that intersects with a more globally recognizable neoliberal postfeminist ethos that became dominant everywhere by the 1990s, impacting in particular the more economically and politically vulnerable subjects.²⁸

Changing gender and sexual norms, in the Soviet Union as elsewhere, were inextricable from the increasing role of consumer culture—especially the fashion and personal care industries—which, in turn, both inflected and were inflected by entertainment media. This further amplified the import of shadow economies and black markets, which fueled much of late Soviet consumer culture.²⁹ The increasing prioritization of profits within the Soviet film apparatus that shaped the exhibition of foreign cinema in the 1970s was itself a reflection of the broader acceptance of a consumerist logic that was seeping into national life. At the same time, this

logic was tied as much to the emerging global capitalist consumer culture as it was to the latent informal (or semiformal) economies, which relied on social, interpersonal, and kinship bonds.

These Soviet developments were not unlike the 1970s Mexican state's attempts to negotiate between global internationalist imaginaries and (highly nepotistic) commercial structures as governing its own film exhibition policies. At the same time, informal economies—from street vending and popular markets to various forms of domestic DIY practices—similarly constituted major spaces of consumer culture in 1970s Mexico, selectively integrated with the state economic priorities of import-substitute industrialization. This book shows how changing gender norms co-constituted these broader social and economic processes, and how much, in turn, these changes were inseparable from media both at the level of representational models and in its material networks. In pursuing this gendered line of analysis, I build on the extensive work of cultural historians and anthropologists of the Soviet Union: Gail Lapidus, Lynne Attwood, Alexey Golubev, Natalya Chernyshova and Anna Rotkirch. Feminist scholars Marta Lamas, Eli Bartra, Gabriela Cano, Jocelyn Olcott, and Anne Rubenstein, and cultural historians and critics José Agustín, Eric Zolov, and Louise Walker, similarly guide my exploration of the Mexican context.

Ultimately, placing the Soviet-centered developments side by side with the radical changes in Mexican society reveals the broader transnational dynamics of the complex politics of the global 1970s. It demonstrates how the demands of the sexual revolution of the global 1960s were recuperated by mainstream cultural actors and reshaped—as well as being reshaped by—conservative models of femininity. While the rhetoric of sexual agency combined with the increasing sexualization of women posed a challenge to traditional feminine roles, this contradiction was successfully mediated through a consumerist logic. And yet, for the majority of women in both countries during this period, its realization remained largely aspirational—as the realities of informal economies effectively blurred the distinction between production and consumption, creating a much more complex interplay between individual and collective agency and identity. I demonstrate how the 1970s in both Mexico and the Soviet Union formed a crucial transitional moment of mediation between traditional models of gender essentialism, the rise of feminist consciousness, the continuing relevance of communal ideas, and the emerging neoliberal postfeminism that would culminate in the subsequent decade. Bearing in mind Latin America's own “peripheral” status vis-à-vis Eurocentric histories of twentieth-century feminism, the transnational and comparative aspects of this process offer a provocative counter-history of the women's culture and politics of that period, as constitutive of the popular media circuit this book reconstructs.

This geographic and cultural juxtaposition is at the center of the third and final story nested in the book's narrative. My overall argument here is that for much of the Cold War period, cultural modes originating in what we now tend

to refer to as the Global South, which relied heavily on affective identification in the form of melodrama, consistently proved to be more emotionally accessible to socialist audiences than their European or US counterparts. This affective translatability readily allowed for the creation of global cultural icons via their projections on big and small screens—from Raj Kapoor and Mithun Chakraborty, in the case of Indian cinema, to Lolita Torres and the protagonist of *Yesenia* (and, subsequently, those of the many telenovelas) in Latin America. Originating from the peripheries of the global world order and centering on characters from backgrounds marginalized by class, ethnicity, and race, yet determined to follow their passions in a way that transcended their organic communities, these media texts simultaneously legitimized the status of the outsider while ultimately integrating them into the mainstream (narratively, often via the melodramatic trope of mistaken identity). As such, these icons offered complex negotiations between the private and public spheres, mediating between conservative, state hegemonic, and popular vernacular ideological formations. By the 1970s and into the 1980s, these media texts functioned as informal sites of cultural intimacies, offering an unintended alternative to state-supported internationalism, cosmopolitan universalist humanism, or radical Third-Worldism, all of which had largely lost their cultural and political currency for the majority of the common people, whether in Mexico or the Soviet Union.

Without flattening the significant differences between Mexico and the Soviet Union, and acknowledging the uneven dynamics of their political and cultural relationship, I argue that what allowed for such points of intersection were the global dynamics of political and social developments in the 1970s. Further following Ghosh's insights, I understand these articulations of melodramatic global icons as arising with particular force during moments of social transformation and crisis. In the case of *Yesenia*, this period was marked by the aftermath of the global 1960s and the traumas of state violence in Prague and Mexico City of 1968. Aimed at eliminating internal dissent and motivated by maintaining their respective geopolitical positions, both the massacre perpetrated by the Mexican state on the student demonstrators at Tlatelolco and the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia led by the Soviet Union threw into deeper crisis their respective imaginaries of the revolution, eroding all vestiges of state legitimacy in both countries.

The powerful affective dimensions of such seemingly incongruous transnational communities were first foregrounded by Brian Larkin in his work on "Indian Films and Nigerian Lovers."³⁰ While I argue that these affinities were determined by the dual logic of uneven development and ambiguous relationships to "the West" as a cultural and geopolitical construct, their imprint cannot be ascertained within conventionally construed North-South or East-West binaries. Nor do they fold neatly into the liberal versus authoritarian divide, instead constructing distinctive—and distinctively uneven—expressions of agency. These affinities have much in common with the sentimental communities described by Lauren Berlant in the

2008 book *The Female Complaint*, with an important caveat: they were predicated on a series of displacements and deterritorializations resulting from an ambiguous foreignness of the very cultural forms that shaped them. As such, their function is best described by Ghosh as “a repertoire of popular cultural practices that rely on dispersed mass media flows from ‘elsewhere’ as their ‘clay,’ as the raw semiotic material for their expressive performances of the popular.”³¹

The “elsewhere” of these sentimental collectivities, despite melodrama’s appeals to the universal, is inscribed in imaginaries that are recognizably geopolitically specific yet highly ambiguous, where the very notion of clear national or regional identification gets dispersed. This logic accounts for why it was the artless *Yesenia*—a nineteenth-century Mexican “gypsy” whose displacement of cultural and national identity is very much at the core of the film’s drama—that touched audiences in the Soviet Union and China, and not the iconic heroines of the Mexican Golden Age melodrama performed by María Félix and Dolores del Río, whose national belonging is firmly sutured into their films’ narratives and aesthetics. At the same time, it had to be a Mexican—and not a Hollywood, French, or even Japanese—film that produced the very ambiguous deterritorialized foreignness to which socialist audiences so ardently responded. The geopolitical contours of these shared affects reflect the ambiguous Cold War status of Latin America vis-à-vis the Socialist Bloc, where both functioned in some ways as “a different West,” one that was at once less alienating than Europe or North America and yet reflected their shared, broadly “Western” cultural models and aspirations. Building on work by, among others, Carlos Monsiváis and Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado, I argue that this North(East)-South(West) interplay is articulated in Soviet and Mexican overlapping theorizations of the taste regimes that, wittingly or unwittingly, simultaneously affirm European cultural models and underscore the impossibility of their adaptation to local vernacular forms.³²

As I demonstrate the importance of fashion and consumer culture in mediating the models of femininity that emerge in the transnational reception of *Yesenia*, I argue that, similarly, the cultural intimacy and mutual recognition that emerged from it participated, at least in part, in both countries’ transitioning to what just a decade later would crystallize into globalized neoliberalism. Thus, in many ways both Mexican and Soviet affective communities in the 1970s unwittingly pre-negotiated the local conditions of the emergent neoliberal world order (symbolically embodied both by the collapse of the Soviet Union and by Mexico’s coercion into the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, which prepared its way into NAFTA) that would come into fuller effect over the course of the 1980s.³³ This dynamic would become fully legible in the subsequent reception of Latin American tele-novelas, but we can read this process retroactively, manifested already in the 1970s. Again, unsurprisingly, the stamping of neoliberalist hegemony on the countries outside the capitalist core was made particularly visible by the changing contours of gender representation and gendered modes of consumption.

And yet, while the iconicity of figures such as Yesenia is not entirely subsumed by the logics of the corporate industries that produce them (as would implicitly follow from a conventional Marxist approach), they are too deeply imbricated in the cultural industries to be easily translatable into an alternative political agency for its subaltern audiences. Shaped through a volatile transitional period when “an internal frontier appears between the institutional system and the ‘people,’” the political impulse in such expressions of the global-popular is, indeed, highly ambiguous.³⁴ These new and uncertain configurations of polity are also inscribed in the notion of fandom as distinct from the kind of audience formations imagined by the nation-state and by socialist media producers: these active spectators often express their agency in unruly ways that fall beyond the didactic logic of hegemonic modernizing cultural institutions.³⁵ The push-and-pull of cultural industries and their local vernacular mediations produces, at best, forms of political potentiality and, at worst, the ugliest versions of conservative populism.

Looking back at this transitional moment of the 1970s and its popular cultural manifestations through a transnational lens lets us glean its instability and mutability, revealing not the inevitability of neoliberalism but instead the multiple and frequently incompatible social forces at play. For all these reasons, and many more besides, the history of *Yesenia*’s circulation and reception, with all the pitfalls of mis-recognition that are at the core of the very notion of cultural intimacies as I understand it, presents itself as a rich field for cultural analysis.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

Given these broader historiographic goals, after this introduction, the prelude sketches the rise to Soviet stardom of the Argentinian singer-actress Lolita Torres. It places her celebrity in the Soviet Union in the late 1950s to 1960s within the larger context of the emergence of new notions of glamour and consumption that were inscribed into the socialist discourses of the Thaw period, musical performance and reproduction practices, and shifting definitions of folkloric versus popular culture. In highlighting the creation of libidinal transnational intimacies via stardom, interjected with complex negotiations of markers of foreignness within both Soviet and Perón-era Argentinian performance cultures, the prelude aims to draw out the book’s major thematic threads and key dynamics.

Chapter 1 shifts to detailing *Yesenia*’s production and exhibition, placing the film’s distribution in the Soviet Union as part of the intensification of Soviet-Mexican political and cultural diplomacy in the 1970s, which brought the two national film industries into closer contact, as well as the changes within the Soviet film apparatus that enabled the wide exhibition of Mexican popular cinema. I briefly describe *Yesenia*’s complex intermedial history, emblemized by its adaptations from highly successful serialized graphic romance novels (*historietas*)

to a telenovela, to a film, to yet another telenovela, within the context of the rise of the Mexican TV media giant Televisa.

Building on the centrality of intermedial women's culture, chapter 2 places *Yesenia* in the dual context of the significant transformations of gender politics of the 1970s: the growth of an institutionalized feminist movement in Mexico and the demise of the institutionalized ideals of women's liberation in the Soviet Union. By analyzing women's magazines and the reemergence of film melodrama in Mexico and the Soviet Union respectively, I argue for the impact of the discourses and practices associated with the sexual revolution on gender essentialism within mainstream mass cultures in both countries.

Chapter 3 turns to a discussion of aesthetic models that came to define, shape, and characterize the overlapping transnational space of women's cultures in both countries. I place two culturally specific iterations of kitsch—Mexican *lo cursi* and Russian/Soviet *poshlost'*—in dialogue with melodramatic modes and women's culture, and the vernacular music of boleros in Mexico and *romansy* in Russia. The chapter further traces these aesthetic and affective regimes in the cinematic sub-genre of “gypsy melodramas,” which form the context for *Yesenia*'s production and transnational reception: their genealogy in Mexican cinema, their 1970s iterations on Soviet screens, and in particular their intersecting modes of representation and their patterns of exoticization and racialization.

Chapter 4 investigates the same cluster of cultural and ethnic signifiers in 1970s costume drama and fashion in both countries (some of *Yesenia*'s most enduring traces are visible in the names of dresses, hairstyles, wigs, burlesque dancers, drag queens, clothing shops, and beauty salons). The chapter explores the intersections between the mass-produced imaginaries of fashion and glamour on the one hand and informal cultural production and consumption practices on the other. The conclusion of the chapter returns to the opening episode of the book, tracing such DIY and “pirated” practices in the context of the Soviet reception of “Bésame Mucho” and its inclusion in the soundtrack of a Soviet melodrama that became the country's most successful export to Mexico, *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* (*Moskva slezam ne verit*, Vladimir Men'shov, 1979), just a few years after *Yesenia*.

The book's coda briefly sketches out *Yesenia*'s reception within yet another global socialist context: China in the late 1970s and early 1980s, where it was screened as part of the first Week of Mexican Cinema in Shanghai in 1979, subsequently giving rise to several revivals of the film, sponsored by official media channels. As such, it opens up a considerably broader geography of a late socialist/postsocialist circuit of Latin America's melodramatic media, one that ultimately demands separate further investigation.

While much of the book's narrative is focused on the details of these case studies of circulation and reception, the remainder of this introduction offers critical reflections of a more speculative nature. While directly tied to the arguments of the subsequent chapters, thus referencing them where appropriate, it is intended

both as an overview of different aspects of the conceptual framework I propose and as a consideration of its implications beyond the specifically Soviet-Mexican context explored in the rest of the book. As such, it offers a snapshot of a broader context for understanding the distinctiveness of the global circuit activated by Soviet media circulation, focusing on cinema and music. This is followed by a more in-depth discussion of the historical dynamics of East-South transnational affinities and their complex relationship to the Euro-American culture, as well as the emergence of a different notion of the popular out of such contexts. Finally, the introduction concludes with some brief considerations of discourses on melodrama as both primary and secondary sources for exploring some of the key issues at stake in the book and their potential implications for the study of melodrama beyond the field's canonical emphasis on Hollywood.

ASYNCHRONICITY OF TRANSNATIONAL STARDOM AND FANDOM IN THE SOVIET UNION

One of the unique aspects that shaped the circulation of Latin American popular culture in the Soviet Union was the particularity of its media environment and the status of foreign film stars within it. While the conventional Cold War discourses in the West created the impression of the Socialist Bloc as autarkic, reinforced by the late socialist and early postsocialist critics' lamenting their experience of cultural isolation (primarily from Hollywood cinema and British and American counterculture), scholarship by, among others, Alexei Yurchak, Kristin Roth-Ey, Eleonory Gilburd, and Rossen Djalalov has offered us a considerably more nuanced vision of the cultural landscape of the Soviet relationship to all things foreign during the last decades of the country's existence.³⁶ The picture becomes even more complex when we place the Soviet mediascape's relationship to foreign cinema and international stars within a comparative context.

In the US, commercial exhibition in the mid- to late twentieth century consisted almost exclusively of domestic products, with foreign films being largely limited to "art cinema" circles while the industry famously invested in its global expansion.³⁷ Foreign stars tended to be integrated within Hollywood productions, contributing to the perception of diversity within American cinema, rather than perceived as representatives of other national film industries.³⁸ In Western Europe and Britain, Hollywood similarly occupied the largest share of foreign cinema on local screens—with the other strong film industries (such as those of France, Italy, and Britain) representing a certain percentage.³⁹ Despite the fact that Japan and India were the leading film producers in the world during that period, films from those industries were absent from US and Western European movie repertoires—with the exception of a few directors like Akira Kurosawa or Satyajit Ray, whose films formed part of the film festival circuit. Latin American screens (except for Cuban ones after 1959) were dominated by a combination of Hollywood, Mexican,

Argentinian, and, to some degree, Brazilian commercial cinema.⁴⁰ While French movies (as well as early Soviet and German films) were an important part of the noncommercial circuit, Italian genre films (“pink neorealism” and comedies) were particularly visible and beloved by Latin American audiences, thus forming a more diverse cinematic geography.⁴¹

In the Soviet Union, exhibition (like all other aspects of the film industry) was centrally controlled by the state and consisted roughly of a mix of half Soviet, half foreign films. According to numbers quoted by Marina Kosinova, in a typical year the exhibition schedule included 130 Soviet titles, seventy from other socialist countries, twenty-five to thirty from capitalist ones (a category that included Japan; only about six or seven were from the US), and thirty from “developing countries” (including India).⁴² But the actual percentage of foreign films on Soviet screens was higher and their reach was broader: because entertainment films from “capitalist” and “developing” countries were considerably more popular with the audiences and thus brought higher revenues to movie theaters (and, ultimately, the state) than domestic productions, the print run of their copies was higher—including print copies made in 16mm, making screenings possible in small venues around the country (from clubs in the countryside to mobile cinemas).⁴³ If an average Soviet film was seen by 390,000 viewers, an average for a foreign film (taking into account those from other socialist countries) was 424,000—while many regularly reached between one and three million viewers.⁴⁴ Most of the Indian and Egyptian films, as well as the less numerous US, French, and Italian genre movies, reached twenty-five to sixty-five million viewers, *Yesenia* holding the record with over ninety-two million tickets sold in the first year.⁴⁵ Once we add the informal practice of screening popular foreign films instead of the officially designated Soviet or Socialist Bloc films to generate further profits for individual theaters (which would not be reflected in these official statistics) as well as the practice of screening these films on television for many decades, we can imagine the scale and reach of foreign film exhibition in the Soviet Union.⁴⁶ Their affective and cultural impact was therefore enormous even before the advent of video, which drastically changed the late Soviet mediascape as it did in the rest of the world.⁴⁷ Thus, what may at first appear as isolated cases of the popularity of specific Latin American films, songs, or series, acquires a different dimension when we take into account the scale of their reach and impact.

The other, connected, dynamic in Soviet exhibition and reception of foreign cinema was its peculiar temporality, which goes counter to all the norms of film exhibition in the capitalist world. Because foreign films were bought for a flat sum, with no royalties but with exhibition rights for long periods (which could be further extended—although it was probably as common to simply violate these agreements), it turned out that most of the films the Soviet Union purchased were older and thus considerably cheaper and/or minor films with known stars, which were also marked down. And these films—many of which were already some ten years old at the moment of their first Soviet exhibition—would continue their exhibition

run for several decades. The practice of watching older films in theaters was also common for Soviet cinema—in fact, the revenues from “second runs” of Soviet films in theaters regularly exceeded those from the new releases.⁴⁸ Within the more elite, cinephile cinema culture—taking place through such venues as festivals and weeks of foreign cinema—retrospectives (whether of national cinemas or specific auteurs) were an especially common exhibition format.

These practices generated a distinctive temporality of, especially, international stardom: the idiosyncratic socialist symbolic economy did not fully recreate the capitalist logic of constant renewal, with its emphasis on the newest releases and contemporaneity and its constant production of new stars and tentpole films. Given the highly controlled nature of information flow (with virtually no independent access to foreign media) and relative lack of international travel opportunities for Soviet citizens, the disconnect (or anachronism) of Soviet reception was not apparent or, frankly, even relevant to most Soviet cultural consumers. Because, as we’ll see, an unusually large number of imported films in the Soviet Union were historical dramas and literary adaptations, the question of the contemporaneity of their representations—including such markers as dress and hairstyle, cars, and music—was even more opaque. Thus, the popularity of the international stars of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s—Jean Marais, Louis de Funès, Gina Lollobrigida, as well as Raj Kapoor and Lolita Torres—continued in the Soviet Union into the 1980s. This was furthered by the unusual synergy between film exhibition in cinemas and on television. Because both industries were state owned, and thus they were not in competition in the same way as their counterparts in most other countries, cinema officials extended broadcasting rights for newly released films to television “fairly quickly and cheaply, which meant that even more people got to watch these films on TV soon after they had run in cinemas.”⁴⁹ Moreover, the broadcasting rights tended to be granted for extended periods, which meant that most of these films continued to be shown on television for decades (apparently, either this was included in their original distribution purchasing rights or else such nuances were simply disregarded).⁵⁰

At the same time, against the phenomenon of commercial film production and exhibition cycles both reflecting and generating fashions and trends, in Soviet cultural reception broader generational identities (as well as, to some extent, specific subcultures) accounted for choices of movie and music icons, thus allowing for their extended cultural relevance. And Latin American stars—cinematic, television, and musical—played a crucial role in this process, acquiring increasing cultural importance in particular as a site of acquisition of “sentimental education” within a Soviet culture whose official position was oriented toward collective and social—not private or intimate—forms of existence.⁵¹ Their popularity came to define a period—sometimes marked as part of a generational identity, other times easily expanding into decades. Such overlapping processes created a particular scene of cultural reception, where the popularity of earlier stars still exercised a strong pull, despite their anachronism (especially vis-à-vis the sites and dates of their original production).

In other words, in disproportion to both their synchronic and diachronic domestic successes in Argentina and Mexico (respectively), Lolita Torres became one of the icons of the late 1950s through 1960s, and Yesenia of the mid-1970s through early 1980s. Each period was characterized by significant cultural and political shifts as the project of developed socialism traced an arc from hope to collapse.

But this peculiar—extended and overlapping—temporality is also what allows us to inscribe the Soviet reception within longer cycles of transnational circulation and the transformation of Latin American media, as was typical especially for the telenovela genre. The full cycle of remediation of most telenovelas through their various transmedial remakes likewise extends their relevance through several decades. Many telenovelas originated as radio plays or graphic novels, then were repeatedly adapted and remade into television shows and movies, many of which were transnational, such that their life spans could be well over half a century. This is the case with early juggernauts like *Simplemente María*: the original 1967 Argentinian telenovela was based on Celia Alcántara's romantic novel of the previous decade; it became internationally known via its 1969 Peruvian version; and it was remade by Mexico's Televisa in an even more internationally successful 1989 version, which became enormously popular all over the former Soviet Union in the 1990s. Similarly, *Corazón salvaje*, based on a 1957 novel by another woman romance writer, Mexico's Caridad Bravo Adams, has been made into two movies and four telenovelas to date, and its adaptation in 1968 was especially popular in China in the late 1970s to early 1980s. Such an extended temporality is fully exemplified by the transmedial history of *Yesenia*, which started as a *historieta* in 1965 (or in 1942, if you consider versions that came out under a different title), was made into a telenovela in 1970 and then into a movie in 1971, and was remade again as a telenovela in 1987—thus making its protagonist a cultural icon in Mexico for several generations. Reinserted into a new national reception context in the Soviet Union (and subsequently in China) allowed it to function as a *global* icon, “as an ‘aperture,’ an opening (in an optical system) into a *there*—the ever-receding ground of history,” in Ghosh's understanding of the term.⁵² History, as it emerges from this transnational analysis, is anything but a simple linear progression, and is itself subject to multiple uneven and overlapping temporalities, false starts, and incomplete processes—both reflecting and shaping my objects of study.

TEMPORALITIES AND GEOGRAPHIES OF THE SOCIALIST MUSIC CIRCUIT

A similar distorted temporality (as compared to the Western-capital cultural-media production cycles) and a distinctive geography are characteristic of the global music circuit engendered by Soviet socialist distribution and reception of foreign music. While its primary international export was classical, foreign mainstream popular music was considerably more present in the postwar Soviet culture

than what could be accounted for by the usual emphasis on the unavailability of American and British rock. Both its geography and its function, however, were very different from the English-language-dominated, US- and UK-centered global popular music market of that period. Although the Soviet recording company *Melodiya* was the second largest record manufacturer in the world by 1970 and released a fair number of international popular music records, as part of a state-controlled, noncompetitive socialist market its stars and hits were not generated through record sales.⁵³ Radio, movies, television, and (from the 1960s) popular press outlets such as *Krugozor* magazine (which included a flexi disc with songs featured in it) and music events (concert tours and international music festivals) were much more constitutive of taste making for popular music. As a result of such institutionally and media-centered construction, rather than the quickly changing hit-parade charts generated from music sales, international music stardom in the Soviet Union was also subject to longer cycles and uneven temporalities.

The geography of the Soviet circuit of international popular music, especially from the early 1970s on, was also quite similar to that of popular film imports. This book's prelude explores the reception of Latin American music in the immediate post-Stalinist period in the context of the success of Argentinian musicals and global folkloric revivals. By the early 1970s, however, the international popular music scene in the Soviet Union came to be increasingly more in sync with its Southern European circuits (France, Spain, Italy—even Greece), at least in part due to the organized international music events, promoted by European institutions and media, that were broadcast in the Soviet Union.⁵⁴ Thus, performers like Yves Montand, Mireille Mathieu, Dalida, and Joe Dassin, Demis Roussos, ABBA, Boney M, Ottawan, Baccara, Julio Iglesias, Raffaella Carrà, Toto Cutugno, Al Bano and Romina Power, Ricchi e Poveri, and Adriano Celentano were all extremely popular in the Soviet Union in the 1970s and 1980s, thanks to their television and movie appearances. Most of them toured the country with concerts as well. In addition to the Eurovision and Intervision song contests (the latter overlapping with the Sopot International Song Festival in Poland), the Sanremo International Music Festival in Italy played an important part in the creation and promotion of this particular music circuit, which extended to the Soviet Union—but also, importantly, to Latin America. As Laura Podalsky has shown, Italian *musicarelli*—musical films from the 1960s that were developed in response to Sanremo's growing influence, some of which were also shown in the Soviet Union—shaped both Spanish and Latin American (Argentinian and Mexican) perceptions of youth culture and their transnational film and music productions from the 1960s on.⁵⁵ In short, while the Soviet foreign popular music canon of the 1970s and 1980s looks very different from the North American or British one, it was actually part of a distinct circuit that extended, especially through Spain and Italy, to Latin America.

However, one crucial difference between the circulation of music and of cinema, at least until the 1980s, is in the modes of reproducibility and the relationship

to forms of ownership. Until the spread of video technology, films could only be seen in theaters or on movie screens set up elsewhere, but for much of the twentieth century, popular songs could be purchased as records. Even more importantly, those records could be reproduced and thus continuously reenter circulation. Songs were also subject to new performances and often new recordings, whether covers by local artists or, informally, by nonprofessionals (the latter assisted by continuing sales of sheet music). Given the radically different copyright regimes, these practices were considerably more common in the Soviet Union than elsewhere well into the 1970s, thus creating additional modes of music circulation. Moreover, bootlegged copies—both of songs that were released by the Soviet recording companies and, especially, of foreign ones that were officially scorned by the Soviet regime—were widespread throughout the socialist world as early as the 1940s. These were first (re)produced on discarded x-rays, later on reel-to-reel magnetic tape decks, and finally on cassette tapes.⁵⁶ This informal music circulation had its own temporality, responding not so much to actual scarcity (given that the actual volume of record manufacturing in the Soviet Union was quite massive and fairly varied) but rather to the ebbs and flows of the official ideological control of popular music. Most famously, the informal circulation focused on jazz and rock and roll—but the practice also extended to recirculating older forms of vernacular and romantic Russian music, in particular their emigré performers, which at various points have been deemed ideologically unacceptable by the Soviet establishment, as well as recordings of local, “unofficial,” guitar-playing singer-songwriters (*bardovskaia pesnia*).⁵⁷ The anachronistic, belated temporality of the circulation of those musical forms, as we will see in chapter 3, resonates in a particular way with the cultural function of Latin American romantic musical traditions, such as Mexican bolero (of which “Bésame Mucho” is a fine example) and its Soviet icons.

Given this complex media temporality, the nature of the cultural icons at the center of this book, emerging in periods of historical transformation, is largely transitional. They mediate, I argue, between national-popular and global-popular formations, as well as between socialism, however broadly conceived (as I include here Argentina’s 1940s–1950s Perónist worker-populism, in the case of Lolita Torres, and Mexico’s 1960s–1970s one-party institutionalized revolutionary *dictablanda* in the case of Yesenia), and, respectively, the liberalism and neoliberalism that have emerged in the subsequent decades. I see these icons as concrete manifestations of the emerging media and cultural infrastructures of global distribution and circulation. In this earlier period, predating the accelerated neoliberal globalization of the 1990s, they acted less as networks than as *relays*—in the sense that Kaveh Askari uses this term in his work on Iran, where it “evokes circulation but with an emphasis on sequence, interruption, and incremental agency over top-down or seamless transparency.”⁵⁸

What interests me, however, is the relationship between the shifting—and, to use a term that Peter Schmelz employs as paradigmatic for the late Soviet period,

increasingly *polystylist*—late Soviet culture and the emergence of certain forms of specific universalism and popular/populist consciousness during this period.⁵⁹ Slavoj Žižek and some other scholars see in these late socialist forms a perfect container, as it were, not only for postmodernism but specifically for postsocialist globalized consumer culture at large. Thus, Matthew Jesse Jackson, in his study of unofficial Soviet art, argued that late Soviet culture “crystallized aspects of postsocialist globalization” and could therefore “be understood as an anamorphic projection of a beckoning postdemocratic polity.”⁶⁰ Tempting as it may be to arrive at such provocative conclusions, my analysis shies away from such a deterministic view of history. While I trace in both Mexican and Soviet cases some early manifestations of later developments, the full subsumption of these cultural forms under the categories of, respectively, globalization and postdemocratic polity risks negating their (geo)political particularities by absorbing them into the very “globalized” Western categories they seek to oppose. As such, the anachronisms and cycles of deterritorialization and reterritorialization this book traces are much closer to the understanding of hybridity advanced by Néstor García Canclini and to Alexei Yurchak’s discussions of internal deterritorialization within late Soviet culture—both finding a symptomatic expression in the highly charged and problematic figure of “the gypsy” in *Yesenia* as a point of affinities between Mexican and late Soviet sentimental communities.⁶¹

TRANSNATIONAL AFFECTIVE COMMUNITIES AND CULTURAL INTIMACIES

This book’s argument rests on the speculative hypothesis that central to the reception history of *Yesenia* in the Soviet Union was the experience of mutual recognition between the Socialist Bloc and the so-called Third World at large, and between the Soviet Union and Mexico in particular, a recognition that extended beyond the contours of this particular case study. It is crucial, however, that such transnational affinities and cultural intimacies be understood in the plural. There was certainly no single, overarching way in which they were experienced, nor were they shared by everyone at the same time, nor did they ever lead to a sense of unity. Instead, they emerged for different groups of people at different times, depending on their particular historical circumstances, cultural and social formations, experiences, beliefs, and needs—criss-crossing the longer history of the official relationship between the Second and Third Worlds in the turbulent twentieth century more generally.

Furthermore, this plurality reflects the different scales and registers implied in such sets of relations. At the same time, one could perhaps speak of the affective resonances between the Second and Third Worlds at large. At a different level, there were also distinctive affinities between the Socialist Bloc (inclusive of both Eastern Europe and the former Russian Empire) and Latin America. And yet,

at a different granular level, we can detect parallels between the situations across Soviet and Mexican cultures and politics of the 1970s, which could be speculated to trigger a further sense of mutual recognition, whether acknowledged or not. In my discussions throughout the book, I tend to oscillate among these levels, dwelling most closely on the third, specific to Soviet-Mexican milieux of the 1970s, but it is here that I hope to tease out some of the broader historical and conceptual complexities of all three.

There were, of course, plenty of historical reasons for mutual recognition between the former subjects of the Russian Empire and of Latin America. As Grażina Bielousova asserts, the construction of Western proto-Orientalist imaginaries vis-à-vis Latin America and the Caribbean and vis-à-vis Eastern Europe and Russia became codified around the same time, and their structuring discourses were likewise strikingly similar. Despite their respective geographic positions (which are actually “West” in the case of Latin America and “North” in the case of Russia), European discourses on both are structured by the already established vocabulary of the Orient—the tropes of “Oriental despotism, Oriental splendour, cruelty, sensuality.”⁶²

This opposition between “Western” rationality and “Oriental” affective excesses came to be frequently reignited in the second half of the twentieth century in the context of the Cold War. Latin America was repeatedly constructed by the US as a “danger zone” particularly sensitive to communist—assumed to be Soviet—pressures, underscoring their shared irrationality, reengaging the simultaneous tropes of submissiveness and predilection to violence, so characteristic of Orientalist discourses. Such mutual interpellation was predicated, at least in part, on shared experience of demands for “civilized” subjectivity as conditions of entry into the developed world (or “the West”)—and the inevitable denial of such entry. Positioned outside of such rational and civilized subjectivity, both postcolonial and postsocialist subjects to this day are always in excess (speaking too loudly, standing too closely, using too much body language), never processing “good taste” (dressing too garishly, favoring outrageous design in everything from cars to houses), incapable of good organization (never on time) or polite debate in the public sphere (arguing, gesticulating, and yelling too much), of civic-mindedness (not respecting the law, not caring for the environment), codependency in personal friendships and familial relationships (dedicating too much time to socializing with friends or family), lacking in appropriate boundaries (borrowing money, asking for favors), and accepting of various forms of corruption. The infamous reliance on informal networks that characterizes both formerly Second and Third World countries itself alludes to something even more profound that is also shared: lack of trust in the law, the state, and the institutions.

These markers—themselves deeply melodramatic in their affective and transpersonal excess—function at once as interpellations of Orientalist epistemologies and, at the same time, as profound shared affinities that can perhaps best be understood

as what Michael Herzfeld termed *cultural intimacies*, albeit in a transnational and even transcontinental context: “a recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality,” offering “rueful self-recognition,” which runs contrary to the official representations.⁶³

Such transnational affects, as Rahul Rao has argued, are not necessarily always counterhegemonic—in fact, they “could serve *both* progressive and reactionary ends, often at the same time.”⁶⁴

At the same time that they are constructed as “the other” of the democratic, rational, and liberal (Cold War) West, the cultural identities of both Latin America and the Soviet Union/Eastern Europe are further complicated by an uneven relationship to their own colonialist legacies as manifest in internal differentiation of skin color or tone, caste, and regional, religious, and, of course, indigenous identities that resulted from their settler-colonial and imperial heritage.⁶⁵ As a result, such transnational affinities entailed their own iterations of racialized and Orientalized “otherness”—as we will see clearly in this book in the case of the shared projections of the figure of “the gypsy.”

To varying extents, these mixed Orientalist and colonial legacies found expressions in geopolitical hegemonies impacting much of the postcolonial world, in certain critical moments in the histories of anticolonial movements contributing to the construction of solidarities between the postcolonial subjects and those of the Socialist Bloc. The more explicitly political of them, however, concentrated on the shared (or desired) experience of a revolution. The Russian Revolution raised the possibility of a radical reversal of power whereby the previously “backward” nation could become a political and, at least in some respects, economic superpower (insofar as it was able to raise its population from poverty, invest in massive industrial modernization projects, and distribute aid to Africa, Asia, and Latin America to broaden its sphere of influence). Such political affinities were based on the genuine sense of proximity to the revolution as a possibility of radical transformation—and for that reason, in the case of artists and intellectuals, such affinities often manifested in enthusiasm for the early Soviet avant-garde as the perfect embodiment of art’s role in this process.

But for most socialist subjects in the turbulent 1960s—when for many Third-Worldists true revolution, following the Cuban and Vietnamese models, seemed just within reach, or even inevitable—revolution itself quickly became a reified object, endlessly commemorated and continuously emptied of any genuine transformative, let alone emancipatory, feeling. Moreover, the condition of “combined and uneven development” for both the socialist world and much of the postcolonial world was further complicated by the experience of “incomplete” revolutions—ones that failed to provide a profound sociocultural restructuring, uniformly resulting in the hegemony of the state—both “real” (through its practices) and symbolic (through its ideological weight). Mexico, which underwent a series of

revolutions in the course of its history, offers a particularly striking example here. But even Third-Worldism, which arose as an alternative not only to capitalism and imperialism but also to the nation-state model and Soviet-style state socialism, in many ways followed the same pattern. As Jeffrey Byrne demonstrates through the example of Algeria, by the 1970s, Third-Worldism had been “transformed from a transnational mode of cooperation that evaded and subverted the authority of the colonial state into an international collaboration that legitimized and zealously defended the authority of the postcolonial state.”⁶⁶

Beyond the more radical articulations of Third-Worldist solidarity, there was also a shared cosmopolitanism of socialist and leftist Latin American intelligentsia, which was mutually inclusive. This is particularly evident in the literary sphere, from histories of translation of Latin American writers in the Socialist Bloc and of Soviet and Eastern European ones in Latin America to individual relationships forged through the network of writers’ conferences and workshops during this period, each of which engendered a “global sense of commonality and solidarity that both surpassed and questioned the official narratives about East-South interactions.”⁶⁷ The communist cultural sphere, as Kyrill Kunakhovich has persuasively argued in the case of Poland and East Germany, functioned during communist times as its own distinctive version of a public sphere. Within it, an outsized role was played by artists, intellectuals, and other members of the intelligentsia, who continued to negotiate with the state, making implicit but often conflicting claims of speaking on behalf of “the people” in articulating their respective visions of cultural policies, practices, and aesthetics.⁶⁸ Something quite similar could be said about the Mexican cultural sphere, especially in the 1970s, a period during which the illusion of autonomy from the state became particularly apparent.⁶⁹

At the same time, however, the sense that this all-important cultural sphere actually excluded most of “the people” it was supposedly representing was becoming quite palpable in both countries—furthering the rifts between not only different classes but different cultural formations. Sentimental communities such as those enabled by the circulation of Latin American media both demarcated those differences and created an alternative affective sphere whose cathectic power depended on the continuing sense of exclusion from economic and symbolic privilege both nationally and globally as the shared experiential horizon of “the popular”—a term to which we will return shortly.

Ultimately, behind many of the affinities among the (post)socialist and postcolonial subjects are mutually recognizable historical traumas. From the militarization of social organization as an inevitable consequence of the anti-imperialist and national liberation struggles, to aggressive, state-run industrial modernization as an attempt to break out of the conditions of economic and geopolitical “backwardness” imposed by the imperialist and colonial legacies, to the weight of everyday experience of bureaucracies, these many aspects of socialist and postcolonial subjects’ relationship to the state imposed their violent logic on the everyday.

And, paradoxically, while the project of solidarity between the socialist peoples and those of the “Third” or “developing” world was itself part of the (pro)socialist state ideologies, the actual affinities between the people were rooted, at least in part, in the recognition of the complex relationship of simultaneous complicity and resistance to that very state power, thus in some ways mirroring such state ideologies and refracting them. The development of elaborate ways of bypassing, avoiding, and sometimes resisting the state, its practices, and its ideologies formed a pragmatics of these affinities, elaborated in a vast informal sphere of economic, political, and fundamentally cultural activity as a defining shared feature of the global (post)socialist world and the Global South. This informal sphere reflected communal sociality in its many forms, coinciding neither with the official (socialist) state organization (“the people” or “the party”) nor with liberal democratic and legal structures (the Habermasian “public sphere”), nor even with the kind of distinctive cultural sphere discussed by Kunakhovich. And furthermore, by the 1970s, even in the Soviet Union this informal sphere of shadow economies and cultural activities was already increasingly hard to disentangle from the flow of global capital.⁷⁰

Indeed, from the perspective of liberal democracy and law (let alone that of global capitalism), these informal spheres are understood as further proof of the very backwardness and unruliness of the postsocialist and postcolonial world. They constitute the realm of “the multitudes”—whose existence, depending on your political views, is seen either as a major threat to our current world order or as its only salvation. Exacerbated by the events of 1968 that brought the crisis of the state’s legitimacy to a head (the Prague Spring for the Soviet Union; the Tlatelolco massacre for Mexico) and followed by the numerous crises of the 1970s (the oil shock, hyperinflation, and borrowing by Third World countries to maintain state structures), the transition period to global neoliberalism was marked by pronounced segmentation and lack of social cohesion. In both self-understanding and imposed theorizations, this furthered the rift between “the people” (as an operative term within the socialist state) and what theorists have since variously termed “the subaltern” or “the multitudes.”⁷¹ The identity of the latter could not—or could no longer—be mapped out through either class structure or strong identification with the nation-state, the two major models that had provided cohesion under the earlier logic of socialist internationalism but that were now unassimilable. In contemporary political theory, these two polities—“the people” (united by their class and/or national identity) and “the multitudes” (no longer organizable through either)—have increasingly come to stand in direct opposition to each other as distinct alternatives for the Left’s vision of political mobilization.⁷² In this crucial transition period of the 1970s to 1980s in both Second and Third Worlds, however, the split between these two distinct imaginaries became apparent, leading to palpable anxiety among the intelligentsia and cultural elites aligned with the nation-state or the internationalist agenda alike.

The global-popular affects of melodrama of the 1970s speak more clearly to those disorganized multitudes—as such, they were generally at odds with conventional ideological positions dictated by the Communist Party or the Mexican state apparatus and increasingly imbricated in the emerging neoliberal and consumerist paradigms. Yet these new affinities nonetheless embedded the long-standing shared orientation toward communal good and what we may call “the commons,” as opposed to the individualistic values and ideologies linked to personal fulfillment, more associated with Western liberal modernization. The twin sources of this communal orientation were vestiges of older (premodern) worldviews and the modern revolutionary ethos. Communal values were a crucial part of socialist aspirations, whose formation involved, among other intellectual and political sources, the recuperation of traditional (precapitalist) forms of social and cultural organization within a modern and centrally controlled economic system. Within both Russian and Latin American nineteenth-century intellectual history, these notions were grounded in the specificity of regional and local forms of governance (indigenous forms of land ownership in the case of the Americas; the peasant community, *obshchiny*, in the Slavophile traditions)—in both cases filtered through Occidental liberal philosophies. What such transculturation offered was a distinct form of universalism—not an acceptance of the universalism of the European Enlightenment, but a mediation between its orientation toward egalitarian inclusivity and particularities of local self-understanding.⁷³ As such, as Sánchez Prado argues in his discussion of the position of Latin America vis-à-vis the notion of the Global South, it also produced a somewhat distinct form of entanglement with these European legacies.⁷⁴ In both cases, the geopolitical self-understanding of such positionality vis-à-vis the global allows for resonances in the respective figurations of the relationship between the individual and the community. Such shared understanding relies not on the universality of the individual subject, but rather on the transcendent role of *communitas* not merely as superseding individual subjective interests but as integral to and constitutive of them.⁷⁵ This remained a consistent part of socialist subjects’ self-understanding, even in the face of their disillusionment with the regime and their sense of the betrayal of these values by the political elites. This recognizably collectivist ethos was particularly persistent among the popular classes, even into the 1970s and 1980s.⁷⁶ Mutual recognition of these values is evident, for example, in the explanations given by Soviet audiences for their love of Indian popular cinema in the 1950s and 1960s (as documented by Sudha Rajagopalan), as much as in the more contemporary Cuban post-Soviet generation’s nostalgia for Eastern European and Soviet animation, which defined their childhoods in the 1970s and 1980s (as discussed by Aurora Jacome, among others).⁷⁷ A similar sense of mutual recognitions, I argue, also shaped the Soviet-Mexican popular entanglements, as exemplified by *Yesenia*.

Such foregrounding of the common good over individual self-interest presented an alternative to the “Western” worldview: this notion of the commons

could be shared precisely by all those who have been historically excluded from and exploited by the privileges and rewards of Western liberalism—the very liberalism that has been inseparable from the capitalism and colonialism in which it flourished. This notion of the commons found its manifestation in postrevolutionary anti-imperialist economic and cultural policies in both Mexico and the Soviet Union—such as nationalization of resources (in particular, the nationalization of the oil industry, which took place in Mexico in the 1930s under the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas, a development that would play an increasingly key role in Mexico's positioning in global economic flows, especially in the 1970s). The same emphasis on shared resources and collective ownership shaped mass educational projects in both Mexico and the Soviet Union, from the eradication of illiteracy to the accessibility of the canon of world literature to popular readership—developments that shaped telenovelas and other melodramatic forms, further allowing for the transnational familiarity of their iconic figures.⁷⁸

Beyond such organized, state-sponsored efforts, the figure of the commons reactivated earlier precapitalist forms of community that continued shaping informal social organization and its imaginaries, including those that increasingly departed from the hegemonic nationalist state projects. This could manifest in everyday practices, where notions of collective ownership and shared resources (the commons) intersected with communal values (*communitas*), while at the same time frequently overlapping with the traditional (bazaar) market forms.⁷⁹ The imaginary of the Roma community, shared by the Mexican and Soviet cultures and at the center of *Yesenia*, with its distinctive codes of redistribution of wealth within the community, projects just such a fantasy. And the melodramatic conflict between individual desires that necessitate breaking away from this traditional community (*Yesenia* falls in love with an “outsider,” which sets the film's narrative in motion) further underscores not only its ultimate subordination to modern liberal forms (via marriage and reconstitution of a bourgeois family) but also, paradoxically, the impossibility of containment of the values of *communitas* to one social group—or nation.

At the same time, this shared symbolic emphasis on the collective is also what made it easier for the hegemonic Western discourses to treat all the socialist world through the same Orientalist epistemes with which they have long approached Asia, Africa, and Latin America. This extended to essentialist assumptions that their inherently unruly collectivism made them unfit for civilized liberal democracy, their commons-oriented life choices threatening the spirit of competition inherent to capitalist modernity. In this way, the Cold War episteme inherited the colonialist world view—which continues to manifest itself to this day. Such projections and their continuous reinforcement by Western liberal discourses and representations have furthered the sense of affinities that shaped popular culture. In both, there was an ambiguity at work: a desire for global modernity (as represented, among others, by the tech and glamour of the Western culture industry)

and, simultaneously, a mourning and a celebration of being rejected from it—an ambiguity that became even more pronounced as the conditions for real socialism (or a real commons) visibly decayed.

These shared affective structures become visible, among other ways, through melodramatic figurations offering different scenarios of configurations of the individual and the community. It is not surprising, then, that while critical discussions of Hollywood melodrama have emphasized its politicization of the private space of the home (as evident in the title—which quotes, incidentally, an Elvis Presley song—of the canonical edited volume *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*), critical traditions outside of the Global North have most frequently discussed melodrama as operating on the interstices of the public and the private. Centering on the very notion of the popular as in some ways a crucial mediation among various social spheres (as well as changing political ideologies), melodrama thus understood also follows a somewhat distinct intellectual and cultural trajectory in its Soviet–Latin American transnational iteration. Whether directly or symptomatically, its discussions in these contexts have been inseparable from continuous attempts to demarcate the relationships between folklore, popular culture, and mass-produced culture, including its vernacular “low” manifestations such as B movies, telenovelas, and other media productions deemed to be in bad taste even by the local intelligentsia. In other words, the crisis of “the people” vs. “the multitudes” and the political agency and potential of these polities found its expression and mediation in the polemics about what constitutes “the popular”—with melodrama frequently posing a problem or, alternatively, a rich space for contestation.

GLOBAL-POPULAR AND MELODRAMA

Melodrama has traditionally been dismissed by cinephiles as an expression of poor aesthetic taste and as cheap entertainment for feminized audiences, and denounced by Marxist critics and Leftist activists as the ultimate enemy of revolutionary media. Scholarly and critical perspectives on it began to shift around the same time that male heteronormative elitist dominance began to erode and as cultural institutions began to change demographically, in tandem with feminism and other civil rights movements. By the 1980s, not only did melodrama become a subject worthy of serious scholarly attention, but many scholars in the Global North began to reclaim it as an inherently transgressive, liberatory popular form. In other words, critical discussions of melodrama have always keenly reflected the larger political stakes of its time. Rather than contributing to these polemics, I am more interested in how, from a comparative and transnational perspective, the critical and popular discourses on melodrama refract some of the same developments and problems that form the core of this book. Periodization thus becomes particularly important here, as do the regional and national points of origin for these debates.

The study of melodrama as a film genre has been central to much of the scholarship on Latin American cinema, especially that on Golden Age commercial filmmaking of the 1940s and 1950s, in which it has come to serve as an avatar of nationalist ideology. The established consensus, however, is that while critical to that era, melodrama waned significantly in the 1960s, as it came under ideological attack by the more politically minded New Cinema practitioners.⁸⁰ Until recently, melodrama and popular cinemas of the 1970s and 1980s more generally were presumed to be unworthy of scholarly attention due to their low artistic quality and minimal international impact.⁸¹ Despite some foundational essays on melodrama across film, television, and music spheres of the period (several of which were included in the foundational 1995 volume *To Be Continued* edited by Robert Allen), Lauren Berlant's work, and the theoretical arguments put forth by Agustín Zarzosa, surprisingly little scholarship within the US or North American academy has taken up transmedial approaches to melodrama as a mode. And it has been largely the critical writings on melodrama outside of the Global North (exemplified by Martín-Barbero and Monsiváis in Latin America, and Ravi Vasudevan and Madhava Prasad in India) that have offered a reconsideration of enduring romantic and sentimental modalities in cultural production and spectatorship at large.⁸²

Ana López's insistence on the importance of intermediality for broader reconstructions of Latin American media histories at large therefore proves to be even more pertinent to a transnational approach, in which each respective site offers a distinct cluster of intermedial entanglements.⁸³ While the nineteenth century's sentimental novel, serialized graphic romances, and radio plays were crucial to the development of film and TV melodramas in Mexico, literature (which enjoyed a privileged cultural status under socialism) formed a particularly important aspect of their reception field in the Soviet Bloc. Thus, in the Soviet Union during the 1960s and 1970s, the reception of all Latin American popular culture was shaped through the translation of major works of "magical realism" that emerged from the "Latin American Boom." The works of such authors as Miguel Ángel Asturias, Julio Cortázar, Carlos Fuentes, Jorge Amado, and especially Gabriel García Márquez were read by millions in the Soviet Union, thus becoming an almost immediate point of reference for all things Latin American.⁸⁴ Such literary associations awarded additional cultural and political legitimacy to the "lower" forms of entertainment—especially since melodrama as a genre had been consistently decried by the official Soviet culture. Links with literary sources, however tenuous, provided Latin American melodrama with new interpretative and affective frames, at least for critics, if not for the majority of viewers.⁸⁵ By the 1980s, this dynamic extended to television, allowing for more successful localization of tele-novelas, many of which were, indeed, adapted from literary sources (as alluded to by the term *telenovela*, in reference to the genre's origins in short radio plays and graphic novels, including those reworking classical literature). Understood by critics and audiences as a form of simultaneously ideological and sentimental

education, Brazilian and Mexican soap operas in late socialism served an additional geopolitical goal of providing an acceptable alternative to the increasing flow of Western/US cultural products—just as Indian and Turkish ones do in many postsocialist contexts today.⁸⁶

In fact, in the history of Soviet film criticism, discourses on melodrama began to (re)appear—triggered, at least in part, by the evident popularity of Indian, Egyptian, and Latin American cinemas in the early 1970s (even if the category of melodrama was imposed on these films by the Soviet critics and audiences themselves, frequently not coinciding with the films' original designations in their countries of origin).⁸⁷ From the late 1920s into the 1950s, unlike many other popular film genres, melodrama was considered irreconcilable with socialist cinema—reflecting the increasingly rigid cultural discourses that posited normative differentiations between folk and popular, socialist and capitalist, progressive and regressive, Soviet and Western. This lacuna was, however, largely discursive: as an aesthetic mode and an affective modality, sentimentalism and melodrama infused much of Soviet culture, including, perhaps most prominently, socialist realism.⁸⁸ And yet, in broader cultural and aesthetic terms, the notion of excess—which structures sentimental and melodramatic sensibility—stood in stark contrast to the emphasis on good taste that became crucial for Soviet discourse from the post-Stalinist period on. Good taste implied, above all, moderation in all things. As such, it was a deliberately devised mechanism for creating a socialist version of a rational consumer culture built on the earlier notion of “culturedness” (*kul'turnost'*) associated with the cultural revolution: a vision of the Soviet lifestyle as an alternative to a bourgeois or capitalist one.⁸⁹

Changes within the Soviet media apparatus and its dramatic embrace of entertainment genres in the course of the 1970s virtually forced the Soviet film critical establishment into a frenzied discussion of the question of audiences' preferences and the role of the popular within Soviet cinema, debates that only further intensified in the subsequent decades leading up to the collapse of the Soviet Union. These debates forced critics to acknowledge the increasingly privileged affective charge of the family space outside of the “heroic master narrative” of socialist realism, a position that resonated with the unique pathos of late socialism.⁹⁰ At the same time, not only did acceptance of melodrama as a serious scholarly topic trigger a critical reevaluation of the relationship between the public and the private spheres, but by acknowledging a distinct regime of popular aesthetic taste, evidently impervious to either socialist cultural norms or intelligentsia's response to (and against) them, critical exploration of melodrama inevitably introduced the thorny subject of “the popular.” The latter formation, according to the official Soviet discourse, was meant to be one with the (Communist) Party and the (socialist) state. Such discussions on the part of Soviet film critics and cultural workers were therefore, at least to a degree, a concession to finding a logic that would reconcile the increasingly commercial orientation of the state film organization with conventional Soviet ideological positions.

What also comes through in local critics' genuine puzzlement over how to make sense of the enduring power of vernacular popular culture (and specifically the role of gender within it) in the Soviet context is the determination to do so on terms that did not coincide with either Marxist or Western feminist positions on the subject, and yet were clearly shaped by the Cold War discourses. Two essays on *Yesenia* written by women critics Neia Zorkaia and Maia Turovskaia, to which we will return throughout this book's narrative, formed part of those efforts. Although both began writing on this topic in the 1970s, Zorkaia and Turovskaia continued their explorations of Soviet popular culture after the country's collapse. Both of them position *Yesenia*'s phenomenal success in the Soviet Union as a trigger for their scholarship on this topic. The public reception of Latin American melodrama confronted these late Soviet cultural critics with the collapse of official categories, together with the whole Soviet way of life. It also exposed the challenges of the intelligentsia's coming to terms with the experiences and desires of "the viewing publics"—or just ordinary people—that were inseparable from this collapse. Connecting and juxtaposing various cultural forms across decades and continents, the Soviet encounter with Latin American melodramatic media proves to have been aesthetic, political, and theoretical: generating new structures of feeling, but also new ways of thinking about the relationship between aesthetic forms, history, and the people.

Although framed by very different cultural and political contexts, critical writing on melodrama and popular culture acquires particular force in film scholarship outside of the Soviet Union in approximately the same time. And just like cultural studies in Britain and postcolonial and subaltern studies in Asia, Latin American critical thought of the last decades of the twentieth century has generated an important body of work that offers crucial conceptualizations of the popular through the writings of Canclini, Monsiváis, Claudio Lomnitz-Adler, and others. In contrast to earlier (Marxist-inflected) perceptions of cultural industry as a monolith, in different ways, they all argue for a reconsideration of the rigid divisions between the categories of high, mass, and folk culture on the one hand, and "top-down" and "bottom-up" approaches on the other. Insisting on the notion of the cultural sphere as formed by complex negotiations between the nation-state, institutional formations, capitalist market forces, and intimate everyday experiences, these Latin American critics offer a corresponding notion of "the popular": it is both a highly heterogeneous body of cultural production and an expression of the mediations of the conflicting forces shaping the social body and its cultural registers. Popular culture, and cinema and media in particular, in Monsiváis's and Martín-Barbero's writing are understood as a crucial site for the democratization and internationalization of Latin American publics, offering, as Sánchez Prado has recently argued in relation to Golden Age cinema, "an expansion of cultural repertoires available to Mexican spectators in relation to the process of modernization."⁹¹

Here we are confronted with a significant difference in film scholarship's approaches to melodrama. Scholars focused on Hollywood and British cinema have succeeded in foregrounding aspects of feminist and gender studies, whereas both Asian and Latin American scholarship have been centered, above all, on the intertwined relationship between the national and the popular, while late Soviet and post-Soviet critical discourses are predictably concerned with the impact of communist ideology. Questions of gender and sexuality necessarily emerge as inseparable from these latter frameworks—rather than determined by an explicitly feminist theoretical apparatus. This distinction is significant and bears additional reflection. In my discussion of Mexican and Soviet melodrama, I therefore find it productive to resort to conceptual categories developed outside of those national contexts—but without taking Hollywood as an indisputable reference point. Such methodology builds on what inter-Asian cultural critic Kuan-Hsing Chen refers to as *inter-referencing*: multiplying the geographic frames of conceptual reference points to produce a transnational epistemology based on distinct sets of cultural affinities.⁹² As the trajectories of gender politics in much of the world followed paths distinct from those of European or North American feminism (and this was perhaps most pronounced in the Soviet case), inter-referencing provides a broader range of conceptual coordinates to help us understand the varied configurations of melodrama beyond Hollywood. Thus, in my study, using South Asian and Latin American conceptual categories of the shifting aesthetic registers of the popular—and, in particular, melodrama's configurations of the private and the public—has proved more relevant for understanding both *Yesenia's* Mexican production and its Soviet reception.

One example of this approach is how we understand the construction of social spaces in a film like *Yesenia*. Vasudevan's work on melodrama in India offers one of the most conceptually developed models for such analysis, and it is worth quoting him here at length. He argues that at stake in Indian melodramatic modality is "the continued recognizability of many of the features of an apparently archaic narrative, performative, and expressive design in the cinema of the modern and even contemporary post-colonial world" and its "articulation of personalized contexts of home, family, and other fields of primary attachment, with public registers." The public field in Indian cinema, Vasudevan famously claims, "is constituted both by formal and informal structures of power, justice, social identity, and social mobility. As the integument of the social and political realm, the family form does not simply personalize social and political issues. Rather, it renders the personal and political as nondistinguishable registers of fictional organization. However, the family may itself be displaced or drawn into other registers of attachment [that] . . . reside in the register of the popular, and even in the personification of nationhood as a new register of melodramatic belonging."⁹³

Within this formation, the family and domestic sphere is not equal to the liberal private realm, nor does the latter occupy the hegemonic position in the way it does for Hollywood melodrama. As both Vasudevan and Mitsuhiro

Yoshimoto demonstrate, this different configuration is part of what propelled the twentieth-century associations of melodrama with “backwardness,” understood as generating an intersection between modern and premodern forms and firmly positioned against the progress and modernity associated with realism.⁹⁴ This association was especially pronounced within the discourses of the postcolonial Left, where melodrama figures simultaneously as a “backward” form locally and a reactionary form globally—as associated with Hollywood and Western colonial and neocolonial power and the dominant film industry. Melodrama originating outside these locations acquired particularly derogatory connotations within both art and political film discourses, which did not elude the Latin American—and, even more specifically, Mexican—filmmakers themselves. Elena Lahr-Vivaz, in her discussion of Mexican melodrama, quotes Emilio Fernández’s reaction to the French critics describing his films as melodramatic: “For you the lives of Mexicans are melodramatic; for us they’re a drama. What would you have me do to have it considered a drama? Shall I cut off my mother’s head? Or my father’s balls? When you say we make melodramas, you are ridiculing us. When you say my movies are melodramatic, it’s as if you were saying that they are shit.”⁹⁵

The very style of Fernández’s comments embodies the melodramatic excess he simultaneously rejects and celebrates. After all, as Lahr-Vivaz rightfully notes, this distinction did not seem to bother his films’ audiences—as such rigid markers of taste categories and cultural registers were pertinent only outside (geographically and culturally) the sphere of the popular.⁹⁶

Behind this consistent association between so-called “non-Western” melodrama and underdevelopment is precisely the distinctiveness of its configurations of the private and public spheres. What is absent here is not only the autonomous, liberal, private sphere of the couple, but also the conventionally understood “civil society” as the location of the popular. Recognizing this, as Ghosh observes, scholars like Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge propose an alternative concept of a *public culture* that could be used in its place: “a flexible rubric, allowing the inclusion of popular practices produced by those with little or no access to the modern associational forms of civil society; public culture was that vibrant zone of contestation where mass-produced commodities could be reassembled to articulate a local modernity.”⁹⁷ Melodrama can therefore be understood as both projecting and activating such a process. This “articulation of a local modernity” is also what Martín-Barbero, in more triumphalist terms, argues for melodrama in Latin America (understood in its broadest transmedial configuration): “In Latin America, whether it be the form of tango or bolero, Mexican cinema, or soap opera, the melodrama speaks of a primordial sociality, whose metaphor continues to be the thick, censored plot of the tightly woven fabric of family relationships. In spite of its devaluation by the economy and politics, this sociality lives on culturally, and from its locus, the people, by ‘melo-dramatizing’ everything, take their own form of revenge on the abstraction imposed by cultural dispossession and the commercialization of life.”⁹⁸

The “primordial sociality” taking its revenge is, indeed, very close to the understanding of the emergent forms within the subaltern that is articulated in Ghosh and Sarkar’s engagement with the global-popular as addressing “the inchoate desires and instrumental aspirations that are afforded in the global-popular: a ‘quality’ life, a planetary reach, a global influence.”⁹⁹ Underscoring the political ambivalence and heterogeneity/multidirectionality of such desires, however, Ghosh proposes a different understanding of the political process embedded in such popular expressions: “If we forsake the lure of the organic community, we can posit the potentialities of the popular in a different way: as gradual alterations in lifestyles, tastes, and everyday habit in heterogeneous locales that move toward social transformation—but not in unison. The vanguard motivates, but the directions of change remain highly differentiated.”¹⁰⁰

As this book demonstrates, such differentiated alterations and transformations—both in their potentialities and their subsequent historical realizations—can be glimpsed in the history of Mexican melodrama’s reception in the Soviet Union, exemplified by *Yesenia*’s transnational circulation, positing this history as an antecedent of the more contemporary manifestations of the global-popular as conceptualized by Ghosh and Sarkar.

But the story of *Yesenia*—with its negotiations of the shifting figure of the stranger disturbing and interrupting the primal sociality—points to a politics that cannot so comfortably escape into the universals of liberation, however indeterminate. The *now* of my writing comes out of a vantage point that has been constituted by the collapse of the socialist world and the neoliberal regime that has come to dominate the Americas and the former Socialist Bloc alike, as well its accompanying femicide, sex trafficking, and various other manifestations of increased exploitation and commodification of sex and sexuality in both Mexico and the former Soviet Union. On the horizon are new forms of nationalist populism that have a decidedly sinister look—and that very term, *populism*, is increasingly used exclusively in relation to authoritarian and/or right-wing politics. At the same time, we are looking back at *Yesenia*’s intermediality from within a very different media ecosystem, one that has undergone a radical transformation of global entertainment media circulation. From the new rise of Latin popular music, now for the first time integrated into the mainstream global music industry, to new, highly participatory forms of fandom and media piracy, the global media circuit looks nothing like it did in the 1970s, when *Yesenia* first conquered Soviet audiences. And yet, the complex modalities of transcultural popular affinities it speaks to cannot be reduced to the question of new technologies. Nor can it be subsumed by the supposedly all-encompassing power of global capitalism. Fickle and unstable, fraught with political ambivalences and ambiguities, sometimes beautiful, at other times ugly, the force of the global-popular cannot be dismissed or underestimated, just as it cannot be condescended to or fully disciplined. Thus, the power of *Yesenia*—which so puzzled the Soviet critics—remains an open question.