

Prelude

The Soviet Stardom of Lolita Torres

The Socialist Bloc's passionate reception of Latin American musical and cinematic melodramas goes back to the Soviet Thaw of the 1950s. During that period of cultural and political opening toward both the West and the post-colonial world, the old Stalinist interdiction of foreign movie imports was dismantled, and Soviet film exhibition became significantly reoriented toward international cinema. In part, this was due to a sheer deficit, as Soviet film production dropped to just six feature fiction films a year in the early 1950s.¹ At the same time, however, this orientation reflected a radical change in Soviet foreign and cultural policies, which happened to be in alignment with the popular tastes of audiences.²

In the effort to rebuild the Soviet film apparatus, which, like other divisions of industry, had been severely injured by the war, ticket sales to popular foreign films proved to be a reliable source of revenue. Soviet audiences had already exhibited their enthusiasm for Hollywood cinema in the late 1940s when, in addition to films purchased during the war from the Allies, some of the so-called “trophy films” taken from Germany were also screened commercially.³ However, as the war alliance fell apart, giving way to the Cold War regime, Hollywood films in the 1950s became not only ideologically problematic but much too expensive to import (although some would be purchased and screened in the late 1960s, and again in the 1980s). Thus, alongside the very popular—but also extremely costly—European films, Indian, Chinese (at least until 1965), Mexican, and Argentinian popular movies came flooding in. Not only did they add up to a fairly large percentage of overall film exhibition and an even larger share of gross revenue, but many became enduring favorites with Soviet audiences.⁴

Latin American cinema was first presented to the socialist mass audience by several of Emilio Fernández's Mexican Golden Age classics, which were screened not only in the Soviet Union but all over the Soviet Bloc in the 1950s and early 1960s. But the peasant-indigenist nationalist vision of these films proved to be considerably less appealing to Soviet moviegoers than the more urban, cosmopolitan stylings of Argentinian musicals directed by Julio Saraceni and Lucas Demare.⁵ The star of these films, Lolita Torres, became such a celebrity in the Soviet Union in the 1950s that she spawned many imitators among local singers and actresses, and the name Lolita was given to many girls born in the population boom of the decade. Torres enjoyed comparatively modest success in her native Argentina in the late 1940s and early 1950s, never coming close to the popularity of such stars as Libertad Lamarque, Zully Moreno, or Nini Marshall—but for generations of Soviet audiences she became the embodiment of Latin American glamour. In many ways, Torres's success offers a template for the subsequent Soviet reception of Latin American popular media, especially in relation to the construction of a certain kind of femininity through music, performance, and fashion.

LOLITA TORRES IN ARGENTINA

By the mid-1950s, Argentinian popular cinema had moved past its Golden Age of the 1930s and 1940s, yet its international reach actually expanded, due in part to the burgeoning global network of film festivals. This period coincided with the nationalist-capitalist, worker-supported populist presidency of General Juan Perón (1946–55), which paid considerable attention to cinema, not least through the involvement of First Lady Eva Perón, a former movie star herself. Although the Soviet Union's relationship to Perón's anticommunist government was quite ambiguous (and Perón even instituted a short-lived ban on Soviet films in 1950–51), the two shared a geopolitical antagonism toward liberal democracies and a commitment to rapid industrialization,⁶ which created additional motivation for economic and cultural exchanges. As a result, Buenos Aires had been one of the first places in Latin America to have official ties with the Soviet film industry—enabled, however, not through direct government exchanges but through Artkino Pictures, a company founded by Isaak Argentino Vanikoff, a socialist-leaning son of Russian immigrants who had imported and distributed Soviet films there since World War II. In the 1950s, the Argentine film industry was on the hunt for new film markets that were not monopolized by rivals from Hollywood or Western Europe. The 1954 Mar del Plata International Film Festival was organized with that objective in mind, welcoming participants from the Socialist Bloc.⁷ The Soviet participants were put under the charge of Vanikoff, who served as an intermediary for potential commercial exchanges between them and the Argentinian film industry.⁸

According to Torres's recollections, the Soviet delegation to Argentina for the first Mar del Plata festival in 1954 was also tasked with the mission of finding films

for popular consumption in the Soviet Union with “social content,” but no violence and no sex. Those with a lot of music were preferred.⁹ Thus the Soviets selected the critically successful *Dark Rivers* (*Las aguas bajan turbias*, Hugo del Carril, 1952), a film that reflected Perón’s populist message, filling the slot for a film with an explicit social critique. Their other choice was a musical comedy, *The Age of Love* (*La edad del amor*, Julio Saraceni, 1954), featuring Torres, which was respectably free of sex and violence, thus adhering to Soviet standards. While director Hugo del Carril would go on to become a regular of the Soviet festivals, his works exemplifying the kind of socially engaged cinema the socialist film circuits promoted well into the 1970s, it was Saraceni’s *The Age of Love* that went on to considerable box office success.¹⁰ After the three-year dictatorship following Perón’s ouster (during which del Carril spent two months in jail for his collaboration with Perón’s government), in 1958 the Soviet organization in charge of import and export of cinema (Sovexportfilm) established itself in Argentina.¹¹ It promptly grabbed up another musical starring Torres, *Un novio para Laura* (Saraceni, 1955). This movie followed the success of *The Age of Love* and solidified Torres’s celebrity with Soviet viewers. From the late 1950s onward, these films were continuously screened in the Soviet Union—both in theaters and, eventually, on television. Even twenty years later, during Torres’s tours in the 1970s and early 1980s, she had star power enough to easily fill ten-thousand-seat theaters for her musical performances all over the Soviet Union.¹²

TORRES’S ON-SCREEN PERSONA: THE INGENUE AS THE MODERN GIRL

Torres’s on-screen image was a variation on “the ingenue” (*la ingenua*) and the “modern girl” (*la chica moderna*), marked as much by her childish naïveté as by her daring. Her films characteristically followed story elements from the Italian “white telephones” romances and Argentinian and Hollywood screwball comedies, with a heavy dose of Spanish folkloric *españoladas*—all film genres unfamiliar to Soviet audiences.¹³ She was usually cast as a spunky ingenue with a comic touch—young, vivacious, dynamic, active, eager to take charge of her own life. Her body was nimble (Soviet commentators were particularly obsessed by her impossibly narrow waist), her movements and gestures quick and agile, communicating youth and impatience—but with decorum and a certain constraint. This combination was similarly conveyed by her voice, with its considerable range and depth and its warm timbre. Both her body and her voice were put fully into play in the musical performances that formed an important part of these films. Always the “good girl,” Torres’s characters never kissed her romantic partners on screen—but left that to the audience’s imagination, which corresponded to the representational norms of Soviet postwar film. In this and other aspects of her movie persona—sincere, passionate, idealistic, with just the right amount of fascinating glamour

and exoticism—Torres combined official Soviet norms of sexual morality with the fresher spirit and the cult of youth of the Thaw.

Youth and internationalism became, in many ways, code words for the Soviet culture of that period, and Moscow's Sixth World Festival of Youth and Students in 1957 can be seen, in retrospect, as "the culmination of the conceptual shift towards cultural universalism and coexistence."¹⁴ The focus on youth was likewise reflected in the ages of filmmakers and actors who entered the cinematic institutions and industries after the war. In 1955–56, in an unprecedented shift, more than fifty Soviet films were directorial debuts. These included films that would come to be seen as iconic of the Thaw, such as *The Carnival Night* (*Karnaval'naia noch'*, Eldar Riazanov, 1956), *The Forty-First* (*Sorok pervyi*, Grigori Chukhrai, 1956), *Spring on Zarechnaia Street* (*Vesna na Zarechnoi ulitse*, Feliks Mironer and Marlen Khutsiev, 1956), and others. Casting reflected this shift as well, further emphasizing the youth of characters portrayed in the Soviet films emblematic of this period, from *Cranes Are Flying* (*Letiat zhuravli*, Mikhail Kalatozov, 1957) to *Walking the Streets of Moscow* (*Ia shagaiu po Moskve*, Georgii Daneliia, 1964). The young actors' physical appearance was characterized not the least by, in Oksana Bulgakova's words, "their alternative body language . . . further accentuated by the contrast between their thin, flexible, fragile bodies and the corpulent, athletic bodies of the older generation."¹⁵ The political significance of youth was further manifested in the cinematic trope of seeing the world through the eyes of a child, in order to convey an ideologically uncontaminated freshness of perception in implicit opposition to the ossification of Stalinist socialist realism—as seen in *Ivan's Childhood* (*Ivanovo detstvo*, Andrei Tarkovsky, 1962) or *Welcome, or No Trespassing* (*Dobro pozhalovat', ili postoronnim vkhod vosprishchen*, Elem Klimov, 1964).¹⁶

With the emphasis on youth, however, came the first vestiges of a distinctive youth culture, and that culture expressed itself, among other things, through clothes and other consumer objects. As with the other nations that had been devastated in World War II, postwar Soviet reconstruction entailed a much-needed increase in the quality of life. War austerity was left behind and Soviet economic policy began to embrace certain forms of consumerism. Even the notion of luxury was reevaluated—it was declared that the proletariat, which ruled society, now had an ideological right to those luxuries it could afford. And yet, importantly, this had to take place within the parameters that differentiated socialist consumer culture from its capitalist, bourgeois forms.¹⁷ Women played a crucial role in this process: as wives and mothers they were also, by default, both homemakers and educators, as well as builders of socialism. They were thus called upon to be the guarantors of good socialist consumer taste—for it was, above all, the cultivation of taste and moderation that coded consumer culture as Soviet.¹⁸ Consistent with Soviet pro-nativist policies instituted under Stalin, as well as the implicit gender conservatism of the petit bourgeois origins of the notion of *kul'turnost'*—the master discourse governing the prescriptive behavior of Soviet citizens—this "good Soviet taste" included well-defined evaluative norms of women's appearances.

In the 1950s, as elsewhere in the postwar period, these norms in the Soviet Union turned toward decidedly more feminine fashions—emphasizing skirts over pants, for example, but also tailored skirt-suits and dresses.¹⁹ In the absence of other media outlets explicitly devoted to these issues, for which a separate media genre developed only in the course of the 1960s, cinema—and foreign film and music performers in particular—provided powerful models for the complex self-fashioning of the early Thaw's Soviet Woman.²⁰ Lolita Torres's stardom was part of that project.

The combination of childlike vivaciousness with conservative sexual heteronormativity as constitutive of her image was crucial. For, in spite of the changes in gender norms in relation to legal rights and professional employment that took place under socialism, the Soviet ideology maintained patriarchal notions of the importance of preserving “women's honor” (albeit, unlike in Latin America, divorced from any religious connotations).²¹ Not only did sexual morality have to conform to traditional norms that made the stability of family and procreation a non-negotiable priority for every Soviet woman, sexual promiscuity by the 1950s had persistent political connotations—associated with the decadent West and, in the context of World War II in particular, with the betrayal of the Motherland, evident in such iconic female on-screen villains as Pusya, the mistress of the Nazi officer, in Mark Donskoi's *Rainbow* (*Raduga*, 1943). In this context, the sexual restraint scripted into Torres's roles—manifested in the rejection of an on-screen kiss—was, indeed, fully consistent with the Soviet public morality of the 1950s.

And yet, especially after the war, these official gender ideologies were also highly contradictory: privileging public over private, and civic over subjective realms, while also insisting on the sanctity of motherhood and filial obligations (grounded in a very traditional bourgeois notion of the private sphere) as well as on the cult of romantic love, which was manifested, for example, in persistent courting rituals and corresponding expectations of gender roles performed through them.²² To negotiate these seemingly conflicting ideologies, within the Soviet representational regime—in melodramas or even popular music—romantic love, while unchallenged, was consistently presented as constitutive of public/collective demands—not as an independent goal of personal fulfillment. Romantic couples' dedication to each other was inseparable from their shared duty to the Motherland, larger contributions to the building of the socialist society, and the fulfillment of family obligations. This allowed plenty of room for family romance, and by the 1950s, war (specifically, home-front) melodrama—even though not labeled as such by critics, who continued to use the term *melodrama* to connote a bourgeois aesthetic not suitable for socialism—was in fact a dominant cultural genre.²³ The same was true of Stalinist musicals and musical comedies made in the 1930s, whose popularity with Soviet audiences extended into the 1950s and 1960s—in them, romance was central even as it was narratively subordinated to other, collectively or socially minded, concerns. Even in lyrical popular music during the 1930s and 1940s, subjective sentiment was framed as a necessary counterpart to the “civic” ethos.²⁴

During the brief period of the Thaw, however, the contours of public and private, like many other aspects of culture, were being renegotiated—entering the phase that Mikhail Epshtein famously called “socialist sentimentalism.”²⁵ Against the hegemony of state-mandated patriotic sentiment, Indian and Latin American musical melodramas during that period represented alternative models for the representation of gender and romance, undetermined by either experiences of World War II or explicit political prerogatives of building socialism.²⁶ Certain Soviet films of the late 1950s and early 1960s, too, began to openly foreground both ambivalences and conflicts between social expectations and “private feelings.” This triggered a series of debates on the compatibility of the latter with the socialist ethos, especially within cinema.²⁷ Films that were at the center of these polemics—such as *Cranes Are Flying*; *Gals* (*Devchata*, Iurii Chuliukhin, 1961); and, most notoriously, *But What If It's Love?* (*A esli eto liubov'?*, Iulii Raizman, 1962)—still framed love and romance explicitly in relation to the country's political, industrial, and cultural transformations. And yet, they also clearly opened a space for the exploration of subjective desires, in particular those of their female protagonists, showing them as being irreducible to ideological goals. What Soviet audiences of that generation saw in iconic female protagonists such as Veronika in *Cranes* (Tatiana Samoilova—impulsive and sensual but always sincere and devoted to her romantic ideals) or, in a more populist vein, Tosia in *Gals* (Nadezhda Rumiantseva, imitating Giulietta Masina—childish and unrefined but vivacious and passionate), was at least in part a refraction of Lolita Torres's persona that they fell in love with in July 1955, when *The Age of Love* was screened in Moscow.²⁸

THE AGE OF LOVE IN CONTEXT

To fully explore the intersections between Argentinian and Soviet cinematic forms and their receptions, it is worth giving a brief summary of the film. Its story starts in 1928, when the celebrated stage performer of Spanish music and dance Soledad Reales “La Chispera” (played by Torres) is about to marry Dr. Alberto Méndez Tejada, a young man of considerable fortune. But unbeknownst to him, the engagement is broken off by his father, who considers marriage to a stage performer a social disgrace. Alberto is led to believe that Soledad betrayed him. Twenty-five years later, his son, a failed lawyer and aspiring popular music composer, meets the daughter of the deceased Soledad, Ana María Rosales (Torres, again). Ana María is promoted from being a chorus girl to replacing an arrogant and temperamental stage diva in the production of a musical, for which Alberto Jr. is writing the music—much to the delight of the other chorus girls and the whole stage crew, who see her as their champion, as well as a talented star. Unaware of the family history, Alberto and Ana María fall in love—and this time, it's the grandfather who convinces his outraged son to allow the two to marry by revealing his role in what happened twenty-five years prior and

his regrets about it. Not only are the two lovers reunited, but Alberto Jr. joins Ana María on stage, announcing to his family his decision to quit law and permanently dedicate his life to musical theater.

Combining the conventions of both melodrama and musical genres, the plot of *The Age of Love* privileges romance over social norms and family obligations—but, by using the device of intertwining romance and the heroine's successful ambitions as a stage performer, it also affirms women's entry into the public sphere, avoiding the usual melodramatic retreat into total domesticity, thus conjoining the audience's taste for popular genres with progressive social values. In its two-part structure, with the present-day part and the new couple demonstrating progress in the country, the film perfectly illustrates Clara Kriger's argument that Argentinian films of the Perón era could focus on depicting social injustices, as long as they were in the past.²⁹

In this, Argentinian films of the era particularly comfortably matched the Soviet representational norms of the Thaw, when implicit critique of the earlier (i.e., Stalinist) period—from within the socialist position—informed most of the arts. The Soviet audiences also shared with their Argentinian counterparts a long-standing love of musicals (or musical romantic comedies). In the Soviet case, it was rooted in the success of the 1930s domestic films directed by Alexandrov and Pyřev as well as Hollywood movies that were among the cache of "trophy" films and dated mainly from the 1930s and 1940s. Among the favorites of Soviet audiences were Franciska Gaal, who was particularly famous for her 1930s versions of the tango, which she first performed in the Austrian-Hungarian comedy *Peter* (*Peter, das Mädchen von der Tankstelle*, Henry Koster, 1934), and Deanna Durbin, who starred in many of Henry Koster's Hollywood musical comedies. Both Durbin and Koster's films were equally popular in Argentina in the 1940s, thus laying the foundation for a shared cinematic culture, reflected in *The Age of Love*.³⁰

As European exiles in Hollywood in the 1930s and 1940s—including directors like Koster and musicians like Russian-born Nicholas Brodsky—infused the Hollywood musical with the traditions of Viennese operetta, Argentinian musicals further "Europeanized" the form by infusing their versions of it with Spanish and French musical vaudeville performance traditions, albeit in their Argentinian iteration—all while retaining the Hollywood musical's classic narrative format. This combination was particularly resonant in the Soviet Union, for while the lowbrow European musical stage genres—operetta, vaudeville, revue—were long gone from the US cultural repertoire by the 1950s, they still formed a vital part of Soviet entertainment culture. These latent generic elements within Argentinian musicals (whose own cultural genesis was likewise hybridized and retained closer ties to such older performance forms) were therefore more easily legible to and fully appreciated by their Soviet audiences.³¹

Also among the foreign musical melodramas that became popular with Soviet Thaw audiences were Indian films brought to the Soviet Union in 1954 as part

of the first Indian film festival in Moscow. In fact, Raj Kapoor's *The Vagabond* (*Awara*, 1951) became the highest-grossing film of that decade, seen by 63.7 million viewers in 1954.³² Categorized by the Soviet film establishment as "Indian melodramas," and dependent on their popularity not least for their unforgettable song-and-dance numbers, Indian films modeled yet another alternative for negotiating the public, the private, and the contours of masculinity and femininity. To discuss the reception history of *The Age of Love* necessarily entails some reflection on the continuities and differences between it and *Vagabond* and between their respective stars, Lolita Torres and Raj Kapoor, for these two films together occupied an important space within the Soviet movie culture of the late 1950s and early 1960s, advancing a certain new style of foreign film celebrity.

RAJ KAPOOR vs. LOLITA TORRES

Both films' success in the Soviet Union depended, in many ways, on their representation of their protagonists as outsiders, forming a crucial aspect of their respective star images. Torres's heroine is marginalized by her status as a performer (disreputable in the eyes of high society), while Kapoor's *Vagabond* is a petty criminal, rejected at birth by his father, a wealthy judge. While affirming humanistic values and drawing attention to social inequalities and the plight of the poor, the Chaplinesque figure of Kapoor's *Vagabond* stands in highly ambiguous and unstable relation to class structure and politics, and in an even more problematic position with regard to the ideology of socialist productivity, which was as strongly valued in the Soviet 1950s as it was in the earlier era. His opposition to social and political injustice takes a form more akin to the kind of popular revolt analyzed by Hobsbawm in his classic study of bandits—his outlawry is founded not on a class consciousness that interprets the organization of the economic system, but rather on a revolt against all forms of coercive power, especially physical coercion, claimed by the state or by government-like establishments. This notion was quite far removed from the kind of Marxist class consciousness and celebration of the proletariat promoted by the Soviet state.

The Soviet film critical establishment, usually highly attentive to precisely these kinds of ideological complexities in both Soviet and Western cinema (leading to its subsequent rejection of much of European leftist cinema of the 1960s), was certainly willing to overlook them in Indian and other "non-Western" films.³³ And one could speculate that it is precisely this image of an "undisciplined" positive hero who shared all the basic values of socialist society and yet longed to operate outside of its prescribed structures that appealed to the Soviet society coming out of the militaristic urgency and rigidity of life under Stalinism and during World War II. Its appeal is therefore not rooted in mere escapism, but in its alluding to a different utopian image, effectively communicating an alternative

structure of liberation in marked difference from its culturally hegemonic socialist context. And while Kapoor's lovably boyish character, embodying Nehru's "sunny post-independence optimism"³⁴ in the 1950s, certainly sounded the same notes in the Soviet Union's de-Stalinization period, the film itself is surprisingly dark. In *Awara*, Kapoor's cheerful independence is in contrast to—and has to be negotiated with—the law, both in its traditional and its "modern" (state juridical) forms, visually depicted with almost grotesque brutality.

If, as Manishita Dass has argued, in the cinematic universe of *Awara* the city streets—especially in the setting of the song-and-dance numbers—subtend a *cinetopia*, originating in the leftist utopian imaginary of the Indian Proletarian Theatre Association,³⁵ in *The Age of Love* it's the literal, diegetic stage that, as in the tradition of the Hollywood musical, plays a similar functional role. It is a space of liberation—not only in the sense of Richard Dyer's famous discussion of the utopian function of non-narrative symbolic aspects of musicals in his "Entertainment and Utopia," but also as a space for broader social and labor reorganization, which enters into the plot of the film as stage politics.³⁶ Torres's Ana María Rosales represents a new kind of a leading lady: in contrast to her rival, the arrogant diva, she remains "one of the people," joining the chorus girls in their revolt against the tyrannical manager—clearly referencing Eva Perón's trajectory.³⁷ And it is on stage that the final reconciliation between her and Alberto occurs, as he joyfully takes his place next to her—not as an admirer or patron but as a stage partner. This new unity serves as an implicit affirmation of the egalitarian status of all artists, mirroring the contemporary notion promoted by the Union of the Argentinian Cinematography Industry of all participants in the cinematic process as "film workers."³⁸ It also affirms the ideals of social progress and the advancement of women brought about by modernity and a vision of a more egalitarian society, where class antagonisms have been minimized if not suspended—a perfect Perónist "state of harmony between capital and labor."³⁹

If the first part of *The Age of Love* is a Castilian-infused rendition of *The Lady of the Camellias* and, thus, a nod toward the sentimentality of late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe (which had enormous impact in creating melodramatic cultures in both Argentina and Russia), the second part breaks new melodramatic ground as a triumphant celebration of cosmopolitan modernity, modeled on Hollywood but with a populist Perónist slant. Yet, without the final kiss to take the diegetic couple into the private sphere of the liberal nuclear family and intimacy, the diegetic world of this romance stays within the social realm, here embodied in theater (and, implicitly, cinema itself). In this, it allows for further harmony with Soviet representational rules—as well as those of Indian popular cinema with its traditional prohibition of on-screen kissing.⁴⁰

Despite certain similarities between formal ideologies and representational strategies, the gender difference between the Soviet reception of Indian and of Argentinian stars here is noteworthy. In the case of Indian cinema, foreshadowing

similar status of other male Indian movie stars in subsequent decades, from Amitabh Bachchan to Mithun Chakraborty, it was Raj Kapoor who became a global icon in the Soviet Union (as well as in China and many other places). Against his on-screen (and off-screen) love interest Nargis, voluptuous and statuesque—all slow grace and expressive, soulful eyes—Kapoor’s Chaplinesque vagabond role is all movement, with quick gestures and facial expressions, very much at odds with the monumentality of Stalinist, socialist realist male heroes, and therefore much more in line, in many ways, with the Thaw’s changes to the physiognomy of Soviet cinema as described by Bulgakova.⁴¹ But Kapoor came to embody more than his on-screen persona: he was a star-director-producer cum political figure in his own right, playing an active role in Soviet-Indian cultural diplomacy for decades.

Torres’s stardom within Soviet culture was of a different kind, resting exclusively on her physical appearance, her musical repertoire, and her fashion sense. Hers was a politics of the celebrity lifestyle, combining the liberated plasticity of postwar bodies and the ultimate image of postwar feminine glamour: the French couture dress. Even as her roles were located historically in the neverland of show business, and abundantly supplied with both period and folkloric musical stage costumes, Torres consistently embodied Dior’s “New Look” with its ample A-line skirts and narrow waistline emphasizing the new hyper-femininity of European high fashion. This was, indeed, highly deliberate: early in her career, she asked to make a change in her wardrobe on and off screen. She moved away from the more old-fashioned dresses, selected by her aunt, in which she appears in her earlier films, to more up-to-date fashion in Saraceni’s films. This change was decisive in creating her image as “elegant and modern”—and this association with high fashion also shaped her Soviet reception.⁴²

DIOR LUXURY IN THE SOVIET 1950s

Just as foregrounding the romance plot revalorized subjective experiences against social and collective demands, couture luxury implicitly contrasted with Soviet fashion’s emphasis on practicality and functionality, which was rooted in the 1920s avant-garde conventions of industrial arts. The new postwar acceptance of such notions of luxury was, as Larisa Zakharova argues, part of “an attempt to maintain social consensus in a society where the material conditions of ordinary people were defined by shortage,” during a time when the new privileged social stratum of Soviet bureaucratic nomenclature began to enjoy its expanded lifestyle opportunities.⁴³ As one expression of this change, starting from the late 1950s, the Dior New Look began to dominate women’s fashion in the Soviet Union, its hyper-femininity fully in line with Stalinist-era nativist policies and monumentalist aesthetics—and yet with a fresher, younger, more



FIGURE 1. Lolita Torres in *Un novio para Laura*, 1954. DVD screen grab.

romantic touch.⁴⁴ And the Argentinian cinematic celebration of such romance and luxury held undeniable appeal to Soviet audiences' fantasies, perfectly mediating such conflicting cultural models.

Torres very quickly became a fashion icon—she is mentioned with striking regularity in memoirs and interviews as a point of reference for glamour



FIGURE 2. Liudmila Gurchenko in *Karnaval'naia noch'*, 1956. DVD screen grab.

among Soviet men and women of the generation of the 1950s and 1960s.⁴⁵ Soviet magazines furthered this: in a departure from the usual emphasis on progressive political stances or the working-class background of its profiled foreign stars, the women's magazine *Rabotnitsa* (The Worker Woman), in its coverage of Torres aboard a Soviet ship in Buenos Aires to meet her fans, the sailors, gives a detailed description of her attire and all her fashion accessories.⁴⁶ Unsurprisingly, she became a frequent object of emulation for women throughout the country—and because Dior attire was certainly unavailable in Soviet stores, the memoirs of the era are full of accounts of women sewing their own clothes and styling their hair to look like their favorite Argentine star, especially since *Rabotnitsa* conveniently offered patterns and cutting-and-sewing guides.⁴⁷ As Kaganovsky rightfully notes, “this also contributed to the retrenchment of gender norms in the 1950s and the 60s, when women were once again saddled with domestic chores, which were now declared not burdensome, but ‘pleasant.’”⁴⁸

Attention to style—both visual and musical—was similarly taken up by Torres's many official Soviet mediators. Gelena Velikanova and Aleksandra Kovalenko, popular singers in the Thaw period, performed her songs with Russian lyrics; Maia Kristalinskaia sang them in a mix of Spanish and Russian. Edita P'ekha visually styled herself after Torres (as is particularly evident from her 1960s album covers). But the most famous Soviet embodiment of Torres is Liudmila Gurchenko in her iconic performance in the highly popular musical comedy *The Carnival Night*, which not only signaled the return of this genre within Soviet film production, but fascinated audiences with Gurchenko's own Dior New Look clothing in the final song of the film. The story of the young actress auditioning for *The Carnival Night* with a performance of Torres's songs from *The Age of Life*, dressed the part (only,

as Gurchenko claimed, with an even narrower waistline and fuller skirts!), became part of the actresses' and the film's public mythology.⁴⁹

TORRES'S SOVIET MUSICAL RENDITIONS

It wasn't, however, just Torres's look that ensured her popularity in the Soviet Union—it was also her musical performances that won over audiences' hearts. The dissemination of her songs was fully supported and promoted by the Soviet state: record-producing factory Aprelevsky zavod released two of her singles in 1956 almost in tandem with Torres's first appearance on the big screen in Moscow, while by 1959 there were at least three other records, issued in Moscow, Leningrad, and Riga. In 1959, Music Publishing House (Muzgiz) issued a book of musical notations to her songs with Russian translations of their lyrics.⁵⁰ Issued repeatedly and with relatively large print runs, these editions allowed Soviet fans to perform Torres's music themselves, thus literally "domesticating" a foreign import, bringing it inside people's homes and making it their own. While, in the postwar era of transistor radios and vinyl albums, the Western music-publishing industry "had to reinvent itself as a licensing or copyright industry, collecting royalties from radio, film, and recording,"⁵¹ the state-owned Soviet copyright regime operated differently. Not only did it encourage DIY "musicking" through continuing music publishing, but it also treated music covers as fair use. And, in fact, Soviet renditions of Torres's songs entered the mediasphere even earlier: the year of the release of *The Age of Love*, a Russian version of "Coimbra Divina"—retitled "The Student Song"—was released by three record companies (in Moscow, Leningrad, and Riga). It was performed by Aleksandra Kovalenko, the lead singer of the State Popular Music Orchestra of the Russian Federation, directed by the famous Soviet jazzman Leonid Utesov; it was this version that frequently went out on the radio, and Kovalenko was followed quickly by Velikanova and Kristalinskaia—both major stars of 1950s Soviet popular music (*estrada*).⁵²

The popularity of Torres's songs both eased and advanced the acceptability—and desirability for audiences (if not necessarily for the Soviet cultural establishment)—of other "accented" performances: Soviet versions of foreign songs (with or without acknowledging their original source) or, literally, singers who performed in Russian with an accent.⁵³ Both were common practices since at least the 1920s, furthered in the 1930s by the official advancement of musical traditions hailing from non-Russian Soviet republics and from ethnic minorities. Many popular musicians included Moldovan, Georgian, Yiddish, and Romani songs or musical motifs in their portfolios. This was also often used as a reflection on political events, such as when music from the Spanish Civil War entered the Soviet cultural sphere. During the 1940s, in the atmosphere of Stalinist xenophobic suspicion and wartime patriotism, most musicians switched their official repertoire to Soviet lyrical patriotic songs, but by the early 1950s the popular foreign favorites came back. Thus, when

Kovalenko recorded Torres's song, her music selection—in addition to many Soviet movie songs from the period (including, eventually, the songs from *The Carnival Night*, performed in the film by Gurchenko)—featured several jazz standards and Spanish, Mexican, Cuban, and Uruguayan folksongs. These recordings were widely played on the radio between 1953 and 1958 (when she left Utesov's orchestra).

However, such an enthusiastic embrace of foreign popular music was not without consequences: thus, in 1955, just a few months before Torres became such a sensation in the Soviet Union, another popular singer, Ruzhena Sikora (Russian-born, of Czech and Polish origins), who was one of the first to perform foreign songs in other languages, was harshly attacked on the pages of the major Soviet newspaper *Sovetskaia kul'tura*. The article denounced her performances of the Mexican bolero-cum-international standard "Bésame Mucho" (under the Russian title "Song of the Heart"), a Spanish antifascist song called "¡Ay Carmela!" and a song from the film *Rome, 11 o'Clock* (*Roma, ore 11*, 1952) by communist Italian neo-realist filmmaker Giuseppe De Santis, a well-known friend of the Soviet Union.⁵⁴ The author claimed that all three songs originated in "fascist jazz and American pornographic gangster movies" and that their "primitive harmonies have nothing to do with genuine music of Italian, Spanish, or Mexican people," accusing Sikora of pandering to the tastes of *stiliagi*—the Soviet countercultural followers of Western fashions.⁵⁵ This rhetoric promoted the differentiation between commercial versus folk music, further mapping these divisions along geopolitical lines (American vs. Italian, Spanish, or Mexican). Continuing much earlier Soviet polemics, jazz was therefore associated with Western (US) capitalist mass culture as opposed to the "authentic" folkloric musical cultures.⁵⁶

And, in their endless vigilance, the Soviet critics were not entirely wrong—the song from *Rome, 11 o'Clock* had, indeed, come to Italy via Charles Vidor's 1946 Hollywood film *Gilda*. And by the 1950s, much of the "Latin sound" was mediated internationally through the "mondo exotica" film music circuit, originating in the Hollywood of the 1940s, whose Latinomania is best exemplified by Xavier Cugat and Carmen Miranda. It was subsequently appropriated by the Italian postwar *dolce vita* culture (evoked, first critically, then more ironically, by Italian neorealists—finding its culmination in Fellini's 1959 film *La Dolce Vita*).⁵⁷ The worldwide circulation of "Bésame Mucho" was, indeed, triggered by Jimmy Dorsey and His Orchestra's hit recording in 1944, which reached number one on the US music charts and was also featured in an all-star vaudeville show produced to boost US troops' morale, *Follow the Boys* (Eddie Sutherland, 1944).

Given these associations, Latin popular music—just like Soviet *estrada*—needed the ideological cloaking of folklore to restore its status as "people's" music and therefore acceptable to the official communist culture. And, like Soviet *estrada*, it could be appreciated for its lyric and romantic aspects (seen as intrinsically linked to its folk origins), as long as they were clearly separated from sexuality and, preferably, framed in generally progressive "civic" rhetoric.⁵⁸ Thus, Soviet

renditions of these songs—usually with toned-down Russian translations of lyrics or, when performed in another language, unfamiliar to most listeners—aided in domesticating these foreign cultural products, assimilating them to ideological and cultural Soviet norms, while never submerging entirely the “foreignness” that made them appealing both to musicians and to the listening audience. If, from the contemporary perspective, this historical phenomenon may appear to be both a flagrant violation of intellectual property rights and a wholesale cultural appropriation, such an evaluation has to take into account the distinctiveness of socialist theories and practices of intellectual property, as well as of the power relations at play (where assigning a “dominant” or “minority” cultural role to either side is not entirely obvious). It is further complicated by the political role this process played in the Soviet Union of the time.

CULTURAL POLITICS OF MUSICAL TRANSLATION

The official shift to a more vigorous and committed internationalism in the late 1950s, led by Khrushchev, created space for the broader acceptability of markers of non-Russianness in Soviet popular culture. This extended to the complex multiethnic and multinational composition of the Soviet Union itself—and, especially in the immediate postwar period, to its new Soviet (Baltic republics) and Socialist Bloc acquisitions. Thus, Velikanova, another popular performer of the Soviet version of “Coimbra Divina,” was Polish-Lithuanian; and P’ekha was a French-born Polish Jew who made her debut in Moscow at the 1957 World Festival of Youth and Students, where her group (aptly named *Druzhba*, or “Friendship,” referring to “the Friendship of the People,” the Soviet lingo for internationalism) performed songs in several languages, including Spanish. For the duration of her long singing career, P’ekha had a strong Polish accent, which itself became an object of imitation by numerous singers—while barely tolerated by the authorities, resulting in frequent mentions in the press of her working hard on perfecting her Russian.⁵⁹ On the other hand, Gurchenko, who was Ukrainian, was told in no uncertain terms that she could continue at the Moscow Film Institute (VGIK) only if she “fixed” the way she spoke, because her accent marked her as “uncultured.”⁶⁰ She was also denounced by Victor Shukshin (future writer, filmmaker, and actor—and the head of the VGIK’s Communist Youth unit), for being an imitator of foreigner stars—namely, Torres—at one of the official meetings. Gurchenko, well known for her temper, just stormed out of the room, and the denunciation remained a pure exercise in political demagoguery—after all, most of the country was imitating Torres.⁶¹

Similar ambivalence extended to the facial features of the stars: Soviet admirers of Torres, for example, repeatedly described her exotic, “wild slanting eyes.”⁶² Thus, Torres’s Latin American ethnic identity was perceived as white and European and yet also, somehow in excess, visibly manifesting a subtle racial transculturation (in this case, presumably, suggesting traces of indigenous heritage).

This resonated with the complex negotiations of the racialization of beauty standards for Soviet (female) stars, which emerged during the Thaw. Thus, in contrast to the female movie stars of the 1930s—Liubov' Orlova and Marina Ladynina, both of whom were blond and stereotypically Slavic-looking—in the postwar era, Tatiana Samoilova, the star of *Cranes Are Flying*, was widely seen as somehow not quite Russian, with an “Asian slant” of her eyes; similar descriptions followed the sisters Marianna and Anastasiia Vertinskaia (the latter making her debut in *The Amphibian Man*, a sci-fi underwater romance with Latin American themes, to which we'll soon turn), even as they were simultaneously presented in the press as the undisputed beauties of 1960s Soviet cinema, frequently compared to Vivien Leigh and Audrey Hepburn.

These markers of national and racial belonging/non-belonging—such as an accent or perceived physiognomic features—played an ambivalent role in the circulation of global cultural icons, setting in motion a dialectic between exotic foreignness on the one hand and a feeling of familiarity or affinity on the other. The fandom this engendered engaged various informal modes of circulation, from homemade posters and magazine cut-outs to sing-alongs and DIY fashions and hairstyles in imitation of the stars. Such modes inevitably bypass capitalist conceptions of intellectual property, pointing instead to a certain shared understanding of the cultural commons, whose internationalist universalism had particular purchase in the exuberant atmosphere of the post-Stalinist Soviet Union.⁶³ The political effects of such appropriations and transculturation via informal means of circulation are necessarily contradictory and often ambivalent, enabling the expression of popular desires that do not fold neatly into progressive ideologies or dominant cultural and political hegemonies.

The complexity of this process was similarly reflected in Torres's music. Her overall musical identity was decidedly more “Spanish” than Argentinian. While in the late 1940s, when she began her stage career, the Perón regime was supporting the revival and popularization of Argentinian folklore, Torres chose instead to specialize in Spain's regional folkloric and popular repertoire. In fact, she was noted for accurate reproduction of various regional Spanish accents.⁶⁴ Many of her subsequent film performances—including *The Age of Love*—reflect this polyvocal identity. Thus, despite the intentional contrast between the musical repertoires of the characters of the mother and daughter (the former as traditional Spanish, the latter as modern Argentinian) in that film, its most popular songs belong to the “Spanish” part (and “Coimbra Divina,” which became the biggest hit in the Soviet Union, extended that geography further into Portugal).

Based on its musical style, *The Age of Love* is influenced by the genre of *españoladas*.⁶⁵ These quasi-folkloristic films were developed in the 1920s and became a staple of Franco's Spain, especially in the 1940s. Reflecting the alliance between Perón and Franco, many of them were successfully imported to Argentina, where they had considerable commercial success.⁶⁶ Yet there were ideological differences

between the *españoladas* and Torres's Argentinian star vehicles like *The Age of Love*: the former typically celebrated the rural idyll as the expression of the national(ist) spirit, with women as absolute guarantors of tradition, whereas Saraceni's films presented a very different, markedly Perónist progressive view of women's social and class roles. While borrowing some of the markers of *costumbrismo*—from traditional dress to music—*The Age of Love*'s genre as a self-reflexive stage musical instead highlights the performativity (as opposed to any presumed authenticity) of the Spanish identity of its characters.⁶⁷

In the Soviet context, *españoladas* and their associations with Franco—which would have raised inevitable political conflict, given the centrality of the Spanish Civil War to the mythology of Soviet internationalism—were largely unknown. As a result, Torres's on-screen persona's generic associations with Spain and Spanish culture, somewhat paradoxically, were filtered through the cult of the Spanish Republic that was familiar to Soviet audiences, whose knowledge of Argentinian culture at the time was limited, at best, to European and Russian renditions of tango. For them, Torres's pan-Latin repertoire therefore served as a vector for (Luso-)Hispanic popular musical culture, simultaneously introducing audiences to the basic genres of Latin American music: not only the ever-popular (but associated with the prewar and even the prerevolutionary period) tango but also the rumba, samba, and bolero. Torres's version of "Bésame Mucho"—which, notwithstanding its associations with US jazz standards, was a bolero originally written in 1940 by the Mexican composer and pianist Consuelo Velázquez, who started her career in a 1938 Argentinian musical, *Noches de Carnaval*, directed by none other than Saraceni—was also one of its most popular renditions in the Soviet Union. The association between Torres and this popular song further added to its enduring status as the musical embodiment of Latin American sensuality, as well as to the confusion regarding the song's origins—as we'll see in the concluding chapter.

Latin American musical and dance culture in all its many forms provided, in the Soviet Union as elsewhere, a viable alternative to white European, middle-class aspirational cultural forms and practices, as tango and other global vernaculars of the 1920s functioned vis-à-vis, say, the Viennese waltz or the Parisian operetta.⁶⁸ Increasingly, it also offered an alternative to the "standard bearers of musical modernity as defined by North American taste"—which, by the 1950s, meant American (and, by the late 1960s, increasingly British) rock and roll, totemically represented by Elvis Presley and the Beatles.⁶⁹ In the Cold War context this was increasingly important, and the Soviet cultural establishment was indeed eager to delineate and amplify these distinctions despite—or because of—the difficulties of keeping them entirely apart, given the hybridizing realities of both global music circulation and local consumption habits; the dynamic we can see already in the presence of earlier European popular formats in Torres's own cinematic repertoire—and their resonances in Soviet stage and, later, TV culture. But while virtually all of Latin American popular music from the 1920s through the Stalinist

era arrived via its double US-European mediation, this trajectory changed in the late 1950s, in sync with the growing nationalism and international reach of Latin American cultural industries. Combined with the shift in Soviet cultural policies, these developments placed Soviet audiences in more immediate contact with Latin performers, whether on stage or on the big screen.⁷⁰ Lolita Torres became the first—and, perhaps, the best-remembered—Latin American performer disseminating this alternative musical culture, in which the hazards of domestic and international politics produced unexpected results.

LATIN BALLROOM DANCE AND MUSIC CRAZE IN THE SOVIET UNION

At the same time, its reception is also indissolubly associated with the rehabilitation and evolution of ballroom dance in 1950s and 1960s Soviet culture. Couple dancing was a fundamental, albeit informal, aspect of Soviet (youth) culture of the 1940s, with “Western” dances such as the fox-trot, waltz, and tango dominating the floor. After decades of official denunciation of such practices as anti-Soviet, in the 1950s, Soviet cultural authorities reluctantly institutionalized ballroom dance by setting up clubs and classes, publishing textbooks, preparing instructors, and, eventually, forming professional associations. As with fashion and popular music, the challenge was to strip dance of Western bourgeois associations—vulgarity, excessive sexuality, and the disconnect from national folkloric roots. Initially, the newly created official repertoire of ballroom dances consisted of earlier, prerevolutionary dances and fusions with Slavic folkloric forms, but after 1956 the inclusion of the more contemporary (and informally much more popular) “Western” dances became the norm.⁷¹ As ballroom dance became institutionalized internationally in the 1950s with the formation of such organizations as the International Council of Ballroom Dancing (1950) and the International Council of Amateur Dancers (1956), it was marked specifically as the channel through which Afro-Latin dances—rumba, samba, jive, paso doble, cha-cha-cha—could be accepted into the official program. In the Soviet Union (as elsewhere in Europe and the US), these dances were perceived as especially risqué and were most popular among young people, but by appropriating them to state-supported ballroom dance, the official culture hoped to neutralize their subversive impact.⁷² But even so moderated, the official and supervised dance halls in the 1950s and 1960s were intrinsically linked to the organization of intimacy and sexuality: based on sociological surveys of the time, it was at such dances that the majority of first encounters leading to marriages took place.⁷³ Even though, in the course of the 1960s, the twist became probably the most popular informal dance, ballroom dance, which began to evolve into a more professional form—thus requiring more extensive training, elaborate costumes, makeup, hair, and so on—continued the associations of Afro-Latin dances in the Soviet Union with a more refined and glamorous

sensuality, in contrast to more subversive (and informal) “Western” dancing, in spite of the latter’s appropriation of African American dance and music styles. As such, the Afro-Caribbean rhythms were stripped of their well-established, racialized Western associations with dangerous deviancy and anarchic sexuality (which, in the Soviet context, were articulated most vehemently in the critiques of jazz of previous decades).

Lolita Torres’s persona fit with this cluster of associations: her on-screen dance performances were minimal but highly staged and set to the very combination of musical rhythms that would form the core of Latin American ballroom dance programs (in the Soviet Union and elsewhere), equally “sanitized” via earlier European stage traditions and specifically sentimentalist legacies—overlapping and yet distinct from, for example, the “mambo craze” of the global 1950s–1960s. Jesús Martín-Barbero’s insights into the dynamics of the standardization of the *sentimental culture* of Latin America (within which he includes both music and audiovisual forms such as film and telenovela) are particularly apropos here, albeit in a different transnational context. He claims that “the long process of massive, popular identification that was put into motion in the 1940s and 1950s by the Mexican and Argentinean cinema, and by the tango, the ranchera, and the bolero,” produced “the mass standardization of ways of feeling and expressing, of gestures and sounds, dance rhythms, and narrative cadences made possible by the cultural industries of radio and cinema.”⁷⁴ The popularity of Torres’s music and movies, crystallized within this new Soviet sensibility and structure of feeling, associated itself with the dense cluster of cultural identifications with Latin American melodramatic culture.

She wasn’t the only one, of course. Especially during the youth festival in 1957, the range of Latin performers in the Soviet Union expanded considerably. As a result, as Tobias Rupprecht documents, even visitors from Latin America were surprised by the Latin music craze in the Soviet Union:

The Peruvian philosopher Francisco Miró Quesada, touring the Soviet Union in the summer of 1959, was surprised to see that ‘everyone preferred Latin American music . . . to European music’ and that ‘many girls were able to sing tunes in Spanish’. The visiting Colombian politician Alberto Dangond remembered that his young guide Ljudmila was very ‘aficionada a los ritmos latinoamericanos’. The Brazilian communist Eneida de Moraes was pleasantly surprised that the band in her Moscow hotel played Brazilian music. And her compatriot journalist Nestor de Holanda was overwhelmed to hear rumba and samba in a restaurant in the Black Sea resort town of Sochi.⁷⁵

Most of these performances were very much on par with the kind of music propelled by the 1950s Latin craze in the US—despite the considerable geographic distance and absence of diasporic communities—and their enormous popularity in the Soviet Union demonstrates the irony of the US impression that “the Soviets openly expressed their disdain for Latin American music,” which evidently

fueled the Cold War logic behind the inclusion of Latin performers on US television.⁷⁶ Indeed, the US-sponsored *Trio Los Panchos* was one of the first Latino music groups to tour the Soviet Union.⁷⁷ Rupprecht lists *Los Mexicanos*, a Mexican folkloric band that had played concerts in Leningrad and Moscow in the mid-1950s; the *Trio Los Caballeros* from Paraguay, who played multiple shows in the late 1950s and early 1960s; the Argentine group *Los Trovadores del Norte*; and Brazilian singers Silvio Caldas and Victor Simón.⁷⁸ Another group that had similar success in the Soviet Union was *Los Paraguayos*, who performed a similar mix of assorted folkloric songs and Latin American romantic songs (boleros in particular).⁷⁹

Rupprecht's acerbic description of the enthusiasm surrounding such performances highlights primarily their indiscriminate mixing of national and regional markers to create a generic spectacle of pan-Latin American folklore, attuned to their audiences' undiscerning taste. Indeed, Soviet cultural critics were also quick to decry these performances as excessively emotional, inauthentic, and lacking in technique. As a way to educate the audiences, music scholars—led by Pavel Pichugin, one of the editors of the journal *Soviet Music* (*Sovetskaia muzyka*)—began publishing academic work popularizing the “correct” folkloric traditions of Latin America. Between the 1960s and 1980s, Pichugin published four major books and numerous articles dedicated to Argentinian, Mexican, and Cuban music, becoming the leading Soviet scholar and propagandist of Latin American musical folklore—without, however, making any significant impact on the enduring love of the Soviet people for the mass-produced bastardized versions.⁸⁰

At the same time, the somewhat indiscriminate mix of folkloric music and international trends that Rupprecht describes in the Soviet context were, in fact, fully continuous with the contemporary pan-Latin American dynamics of both state-supported and commercial articulations of folkloric national heritage and its use in the global music market of the time. On the one hand, Perón's promotion of Argentinian folkloric music in the 1940s; Amalia Hernández's Folkloric Ballet of Mexico, which was founded in the early 1950s; and the Cuban National Folkloric Ballet, founded in the early 1960s, were all part of a complex and contradictory process of “the nationalization of vernacular musics,” spearheaded by left-leaning and/or populist governments as well as by grassroots movements (in Latin America and elsewhere in the postcolonial world) seeking to ground themselves in a space independent of US domination, and manifested, among other ways, in the importing of consumer culture.⁸¹ On the other hand, the “invention” (to use Pablo Palomino's term) of Latin American popular music's global commercial circulation was deliberately engaged in various forms of both homogenization and hybridization of distinct local sounds.⁸² The leftist nationalist political projects in fact intersected with the marketing strategies of selling tango, son, bolero, salsa, and other forms as authentically national and yet as belonging to the hemispheric Latin American imaginary.

What is important in the Soviet context is that these national-popular and commercial articulations formed a distinct transnational Latin American musical (as well as cinematic and cultural) circuit, whose Soviet nodes were strongly shaped by Torres's popularity. Like the Chinese-language musicals in Hong Kong and Taiwan in the 1960s analyzed by Andrew F. Jones, these Soviet versions of the Latin craze furthered the process of the global circulation of popular musical cultures by engaging with a range of Latin American and Afro-Caribbean genres.⁸³ While they were increasingly globally standardized, in their socialist circulation they formed a distinctive circuit with its own geography and symbolic points of reference (the Spanish Civil War, Perón's Argentina, the Mexican and Cuban revolutions), at once internationally recognizable as bearing not only aural and visual signatures of its era (such as the mambo sound of the global 1960s), but also unmistakable traces of the local vernacular.

THE AMPHIBIAN MAN

Cinema and television were crucial parts of these circuits. Thus, a combination of Torres's stardom, the enthusiasm for the Cuban Revolution in the early 1960s, and the longer, more familiar markers of Mexicanness (going as far back as the 1920s), account for the setting and music in the Soviet blockbuster *The Amphibian Man* (*Chelovek-amfibiia*, Gennadii Kazanskii and Vladimir Chebotarev, 1962), a sci-fi musical romance about a sea monster taking place in an unidentified Latin American country, which became the highest-grossing film of the entire Thaw period, surpassing the previously uncontested *Avara's* box office success when it came out in 1962. The film's original director, Chebotarev, was going for "an average Latin American style,"⁸⁴ which was achieved by mixing Mexican sombreros, colonial architecture reminiscent of Havana, and Cuban revolutionary-style hair and beards (in addition to elements of the nineteenth-century adventure-novel "pirate" imaginary).

The film announces this cluster of associations sonically through the predominance of bongos—audible already in the opening sequence—on its soundtrack, the generic signifier of "the rhythmic pulse assumed to be the fundamental syntax of the genre."⁸⁵ Less than halfway through the film, the ideological conflict at its core is set up musically by two diegetic songs within one fifteen-minute sequence, both written by the celebrated composer Andrei Petrov (who scored both diegetic and nondiegetic music for the film), both referencing Latin traditions. One is a jazzy number performed in a nightclub and, in an original version of the film, accompanied by a striptease (subsequently edited out by censors),⁸⁶ with, in the words of its composer, "convulsing pulsation of the ecstatic rhythms of 'mambo mambo, samba samba'"—mirrored in the repetitive Russian lyrics: "Nam by, nam by, nam by, nam by . . ."—which became known as "The Song of the Sea Devil."⁸⁷ The other, a lyrical and mournful "Fisherman's Song" ("If the fisherman doesn't return, he must have found peace on the bottom of the sea . . ."), was clearly intended to be

reminiscent of a bolero, with sparse guitar accompaniment sung by a poor street musician in a heartfelt, sentimental manner.

These two songs bookmark the two different sounds of the era in the Soviet Union—the first an offspring of the debauched global 1960s, an American/jazz-style mambo, the second an extension of the long-standing folk/vernacular idiom. The former, “The Song of the Sea Devil,” became a much-loved hit, continually performed informally at parties and dances, but strongly criticized officially; while “The Fisherman’s Song” was continuously singled out by critics as the film’s big success, its notations repeatedly reprinted by the musical publishing house and versions performed by stage and television stars.⁸⁸ In retrospect, the latter turned out to be the very first in a string of extremely popular romantic ballads, or *romansy*, by Petrov—written both for movie soundtracks and for *estrada* performers such as P’ekha in the course of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, connecting the bolero tradition to Russian “gypsy” sentimentalist music (a link that will become particularly relevant in our analysis of the reception of the Mexican *Yesenia* in the 1970s later in the book).

But while both songs are meant to be representative of the same “average Latin American style” the director attempted for the film as a whole, the link to Lolita Torres becomes most visible in the performance of *The Amphibian Man*’s female lead, Anastasiia Vertinskaia. Not only does she incorporate Torres-like mannerisms, her dancing a vague but unmistakable imitation of flamenco moves (as depicted on the poster for the film), but her very character is yet another echo of the Torres type, marked by the same combination of childlike naïveté (and Vertinskaia was, in fact, seventeen at the time of the film’s production), spirited willfulness, and decorous femininity.

Torres’s stardom, then, participated in (re)legitimizing the melodramatic impulses in the music and cinema beloved by the Thaw generation, as much as it set the standards for Soviet femininity in the postwar era. But it was also the perception of Torres’s spatial accessibility and therefore proximity that created a particular experience of affective intimacy so constitutive of her stardom, in contrast to other Western stars. This different affective regime, I argue, set the foundation for the later (1970s–1980s) embrace of Latin American melodramatic heroines, perceived by Soviet audiences as somehow “one of us” even as they retained the signifiers of exoticism. Such cultural and affective translation was crucial for ideological reasons, being a way to officially justify Torres’s stardom despite her largely apolitical, nonsocialist credentials. But they also gave audiences reason to sustain a decades-long dedication to the star and a sense of her importance to their personal lives. This intimacy was dependent upon the media circuit itself as it emerged in the postwar Soviet Union. Radio, film, and eventually television played key roles in this process, aided by the structure of programming: by 1960, more than half of radio airtime, and almost 20 percent of television airtime, in the Soviet Union was given over to music.⁸⁹ The film exhibition network exploded during the same



FIGURE 3. Poster for *The Amphibian Man*. Personal collection.

decade, by the mid-1960s reaching the highest level of moviegoing per capita in the world.⁹⁰ However, the phantasmal media presence of Torres was reinforced by her well-publicized personal visits to the Soviet Union, beginning with her appearance at the Third Moscow International Film Festival in 1963.

CREATING INTIMACY THROUGH FANDOM

The sense of geographic distance between Soviet audiences and their foreign idols was rendered unbridgeable geopolitically, given the infrequency of international travel more generally, and across the Iron Curtain in particular. Foreign stars belonged to that other imaginary world, “abroad” (*zagraniitsa*), rendering the sense of remove from them even greater.⁹¹ Stars visited Moscow during the International Film Festival, but their interactions were limited to the Soviet officials. They were not allowed contact with the local audiences—the only exception being at the Tashkent Film Festival, albeit, again, only for non-Western stars like Kapoor. Among the idols of Soviet music lovers in the 1950s and 1960s, only Yves Montand visited the country with concerts.⁹² Unlike Montand, however, Torres had no prior connection to the Soviet Union, antifascism, the working class, peace activism, or the shared cultural hegemony of France—thus making the process of cultural translation of the star into “one of us” potentially more challenging.⁹³ More pragmatically, the costs of travel and the underdeveloped travel

infrastructure between Argentina and the Soviet Union meant that compared to visits from France or Italy, the logistics of Torres coming to Moscow were infinitely more complicated.

In the years immediately following the first screenings of her films in the Soviet Union, it was athletes and sailors stationed in Buenos Aires who seemed to function as the connection between the star and the Soviet people: they came looking for Lolita Torres to present her with presents and ask for signed autographs. The resulting visit and an impromptu a cappella performance by Torres in 1957 on board a Soviet ship were much publicized, both in the Soviet Union and in Argentina. While Soviet newspapers were delighted to give accounts of the star's elegance, including details of her dress and her impeccable manners, at home the kindness she showed to such undignified audiences gave rise to speculation. *Mundo Radial*, one of the leading popular magazines of the 1940s and 1950s dedicated to radio, film, and theater that enthusiastically propagated Perón's ideological program (and was subsequently shut down soon after Perón fell), in its coverage of Torres performing for the Soviet sailors reported that "Lolita Torres surprised everyone with her kindness towards the crew of the Soviet ship" and, referring to the political instability and ideological conflicts in Argentina in the post-Perónist period, wondered: "The ways things are right now, one has to choose sides. Will Lolita go with the communists?"⁹⁴

As with the original establishment of the distribution network between Argentina and the Soviet Union, the film festival network came in handy once again, and after a series of failed attempts (due to Torres's personal circumstances), in 1963 Torres finally joined the Argentinian delegation to the Moscow Film Festival. Upon arrival she was greeted by hundreds of journalists, photographers, and screaming fans. Her film screenings and performances filled multi-thousand-seat theaters. Torres's recollections make it clear that she had never experienced such fame. As she waved to her fans from the balcony of the Kremlin theater, she told her husband, "Look, I look just like Perón greeting people on Plaza de Mayo."⁹⁵ But if the scale and format of such events were anything but intimate—indeed, they were reminiscent of political showmanship and the "cult of personality" (equally resonant in Argentina and the Soviet Union)—the physical presence and proximity to their foreign idol was a rare event for Soviet fans.

The personalization and domestication of Torres's image was particularly marked in her TV appearances: she took part in a recently launched variety show, *The Little Blue Flame* (Goluboi Ogonek). The show was staged as a "café" with its own stage for performances and little round tables for guests, who included a mix of celebrities (movie stars, singers, circus performers, poets, writers, and cosmonauts) and distinguished workers. The format promoted the experience of intimacy: stars were presented as "regular people" sitting around the table, enjoying chatting with guests, and audiences were interpellated into the imaginary space, whether as hosts or guests.⁹⁶ It was extremely rare to have a foreigner on the program (just as it would

have been unthinkable to have one in one's living room, or at a café for that matter), and Torres's appearance on the show was remembered as a meaningful bonding experience with her larger audience, underscoring how much she was unlike those other bourgeois stars, who, however popular with Soviet audiences, would have been impossible to imagine within such a familiar (symbolic) space.

If Torres herself had not quite imagined the level of popularity she had in the Soviet Union before her first visit, the Argentinian press seemed to be quite aware of it. Popular magazines quickly took it up as an opportunity to reflect on the Soviet reception of *The Age of Love* as evidence of the superiority of local commercial filmmaking over its competitors, to differentiate its national (and, more broadly, Latin American) cinema from that of Hollywood and Europe, and to reaffirm the superiority of its melodramatic codes as the best and most accurate reflection of reality. Thus, *Mundo Radial* claimed that Torres's Soviet popularity was evidence that Soviets both recognized and rejected "the violence and delinquency" at the core of Hollywood cinema, and European cinema's "distortion and disfiguration of reality under the disguise of modernist realism" in their representation of "the eternal sentimental conflict between the sexes as if man and woman were irreconcilable, wild beasts in a tremendously hostile jungle" (an argument we will see repeated in 1970s Mexico in subsequent chapters).⁹⁷ *Radiolandia*, meanwhile, claimed Torres's success as one of the main events signaling "the Soviet Thaw" after the death of Stalin—a return to love stories "after many years of having to conform to the issues of collective farming, work problems and the construction of socialism."⁹⁸ Thus, both articles aligned the Soviet taste for the melodramatic imaginary with the Latin American (and specifically Argentinian) mode of commercial filmmaking as participating in a shared alternative to both socialist or European realism and Hollywood, positing its normative understanding of gender relations as crucial to this new shared aesthetic and geopolitical model.

As surprising and exciting as her appearance on *The Little Blue Flame* was, Torres's media self-presentation fit in perfectly with Soviet cultural expectations—even in Argentina she was known for being a "real lady" (*una dama*) who "made good manners a way of life."⁹⁹ Her persona was strongly identified with her character in *The Age of Love*, a perfect alternative to an image of the spoiled diva: she was always polite, well spoken, composed, and well behaved (in fact, much of her early artistic career was fully controlled by her father, who concentrated on maintaining an image of decency and morality for her, within the limits entailed by box office success).¹⁰⁰ Even the choice for her fado in *The Age of Love*, which was so beloved in the Soviet Union—"Coimbra Divina"—wasn't arbitrary: the Coimbra fado is unlike its Lisbon equivalent. While the latter is associated with the working-class quarters and popular cafés, the Coimbra fado was more refined and cultured, linked to university students (it is because of this connection that in Russian the song's title is "The Student Song"—which conveniently also disguised the

associations between Coimbra and the Portuguese fascist dictator Antonio Salazar, who taught there).¹⁰¹ As such, Torres's demeanor was in perfect harmony with the Soviet norms of *kul'turnost'* (culturedness), imposing essentially bourgeois/middle-class behavioral standards and emphasizing propriety and good education (the note struck by *The Little Blue Flame*). Torres was, indeed, always gracious with her hosts, even if she had reason, in private, for her outrage in discovering that without her knowledge or consent, she was to be paid for her performances in Russian rubles, which could not be converted to "hard currency"—forcing her to spend all of it in the Moscow stores. Her financial distress was all the worse for her having been assured, by various Argentinian friends who had visited Moscow, of her popularity there and that she would surely be paid "any amount of US dollars, deposited directly to a Swiss account."¹⁰² Always a lady, Torres never complained or betrayed her disappointment to her Soviet hosts. Nor did it discourage her from undertaking future tours—and, in the course of the 1970s and 1980s, she gave a series of concerts throughout the Soviet Union, always to full auditoriums, ensuring her ongoing popularity decades after the original screenings of her films. While her biographer gives the total number of her tours as seven, present-day Russian-language internet blogs and fan sites continue to reference up to twelve visits—evidencing the popular (Russian) perception of the Argentinian star's close and continuous relationship with the Soviet Union, an impression of presence that signaled a particular kind of emotional intimacy.

This intersection of intimacy and a universal—more precisely, cosmic—transnational affinity finds an emblematic form in the anecdotes about Torres's "number one fan," the first man in space, Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin. The twenty-one-year-old Gagarin was apparently in the audience for the first screening of *The Age of Love* in Moscow in 1955, becoming one of her great fans. In 1962, via the Soviet Embassy in Buenos Aires, the actress received a letter from the cosmonaut, who had orbited the Earth just a year prior. The letter confessed his adoration and asked for a signed autograph, which Torres was happy to provide. In return, she received Gagarin's autographed photo and another letter, which told the singer that he had always listened to her music during the hard years of training, so that when he went into space her songs "exploded in his heart, and he couldn't but hum them"—making them "the first music to arrive into space, the one I carried in my mind and my heart—that is, your voice!"¹⁰³ The story is entirely plausible, as Gagarin was in fact well known for his love of popular music and his interest in singers (rumors of his "close friendship" with Edita Pékha, who was, indeed, one of those many Soviet stars fashioning themselves after the style of Lolita Torres, were said to have ruined her marriage).¹⁰⁴ But its rehearsal in both Russia and Argentina (which continues to this day on the internet) signals a desire for Torres's affair with the Soviet public to be not merely a transnational phenomenon, signaling affinities between Argentina and the Soviet Union,

but something more transcendent: a love story projected on the planetary and even the cosmic level: the story of Latin American melodramatic sentimentality—romantic and pure—embodied in music and cinema, conquering the world via its Soviet fans.¹⁰⁵

In the subsequent decades, as we'll see in the next chapter, it would be specifically the ethos of melodramatic suffering—already embedded in Torres's films and performances but given an optimistic Thaw/Perónist gloss—that would come to dominate the reception of Latin American culture in the Soviet Union, tapping into older traditions of Russian vernacular expression. This was no longer an expression of the national-popular, but rather a sign of complete disenchantment with the project of the state culture, as much as it was inseparable from it. We'll see how the changing models for femininity and sexuality were tied to this reception, as were fashion and other forms of ordinary cultural consumption and appropriation, with their embedded reliance on alternative notions of intellectual property and informal circulation, and their movement toward melodramatic media as a conduit for neoliberal modes of gender and sexuality. The first contours of these developments are already visible in the story of Torres's fame in the Soviet Union in the 1950s, whose transnational affective community tells us as much about Khrushchev's socialism as about Perónist populism. Matthew Karush's conclusion that Perónist social transformation and the binary moralism of its discourses were rooted in the melodramatic tendencies of its preceding mass culture, movies, and music is particularly pertinent here. He observes how

Perónism appropriated mass cultural discourses that expressed both the popular resentment over social inequality and the popular desire for the trappings of wealth. This discursive framework imposed limits on the utopias Perónism might imagine. Thus, Perónism often endorsed bourgeois standards of propriety and conventional models of beauty. It also reproduced the contradiction between working-class pride and envy, a contradiction that resurfaced whenever economic conditions prevented the state from delivering on its economic promises to workers. In a sense, these limits were the consequence of Perón having built his movement out of melodrama rather than Marxism.¹⁰⁶

In the following chapters, we will trace the further development of a different version of such "melodramatic" populism as it found its manifestation in the reception of the Mexican "gypsy" melodrama *Yesenia* in the 1970s. The rest of the book therefore jumps some twenty years forward in time, focusing on the distinctly Soviet-Mexican circuit of sentimental media, its aesthetic regimes, and its political contexts. By that time, however—while the ideology behind the Mexican presidency of Luis Echeverría Álvarez that enabled Soviet-Mexican exchanges was, indeed, in many ways strikingly similar to Perón's—state- and nation-centered forms of cultural populism were no longer viable in either

country. And yet, despite the crucial historical and geopolitical differences, the contours of this new transnational sentimental community are already visible in the cultural and social dynamics of Lolita Torres's Soviet stardom of the 1950s. As the following chapters demonstrate, many of the major themes and problems emerging from this earlier Soviet-Argentinian encounter reemerged with a vengeance within the changed, considerably less buoyant environment of the 1970s.