

Yesenia in Mexico and the Soviet Union

It would take twenty years from the release of *The Age of Love* for another Latin American movie to achieve comparable cultural impact in the Soviet Union. By that time, the country was in the midst of what subsequently came to be known as the period of Stagnation.¹ Nikita Khrushchev was deposed in 1964, and his successor Leonid Brezhnev instituted a more rigid order to stabilize the cadre. The expanded official ideologies of the Thaw narrowed considerably, while the policy of developed socialism, in tandem with détente, produced lifestyle benefits for many members of the Thaw generation. Their children were better educated and wealthier than any generation in Russian history. And yet it also became evident that the solemn promise made by the Communist Party in 1961, that within twenty years the Soviet Union's production and consumption would outpace those of the developed capitalist countries, was a pipe dream—as the consumerist revolution and youth culture of the Swinging Sixties transformed the West, making all comparisons of lifestyle between the two simply untenable.² Soviet consumerism of a controlled kind eroded the vestiges of the spirit of war-communism while failing to replace it with any overriding ideological goal. “Socialism with a human face,” the slogan of the Prague Spring, which in many ways embodied the aspiration of the 1960s generation across the Socialist Bloc, was crushed in 1968—and the consequences of that fateful year continued to reverberate among the Soviet intelligentsia.

At the same time, in the second half of the 1970s, international cultural and scientific exchanges between the Soviet Union and the rest of the world were at their peak.³ Cinemagoing was at its all-time high, and television viewing was increasingly becoming the norm as well: if there were only ten thousand TV sets in the whole of the Soviet Union in 1950, by 1976 Soviet factories were producing seven

million sets annually.⁴ The children of Lolita Torres's fans, at least those living in big cities, were increasingly more curious about the world of British and American rock and roll, giving rise to several countercultural currents. Within just a few years, the Euro-Caribbean disco sensation Boney M would break through the Iron Curtain, giving multiple concerts in Moscow in 1978 and, alongside ABBA, entering the pantheon of most popular musical performers in the Soviet Union (with the record company Melodiia promptly releasing both bands' albums, albeit in entirely idiosyncratic versions). French, Italian, and even Hollywood movies were becoming considerably more common on Soviet big screens, and Soviet cinema and television, too, had shifted production toward entertainment genres, including musicals and melodramas.

And yet, it was a Mexican melodrama set during the Second Franco-Mexican War—*Yesenia* (Alfredo B. Crevenna, 1971)—that, in 1975, went on to become the highest-grossing film in the history of the Soviet Union. Based on ticket sales, an astounding 91.4 million viewers saw the film in the first year of its release, and it was shown in movie theaters for years to come, eventually migrating to TV screens, and still later was sold on videotapes and then on DVDs, through both official and informal markets.⁵

In 2019, a Russian-dubbed version of the film was uploaded to YouTube, generating enthusiastic user comments, many of them reminiscing about how they watched the film repeatedly and shed tears over it, usually mentioning also their mothers and grandmothers.⁶ Another YouTube video, uploaded in 2015, featuring the theme song from *Yesenia*, similarly drew nostalgic user comments in Spanish, Russian, and Chinese, praising the emotional power of both the music and the film's romance.⁷ Several mention naming their daughters *Yesenia*—or having that name themselves. A brief glimpse into these recollections establishes some discursive continuities with the earlier reception of Lolita Torres: the emphasis on the affective impact of the music, the beauty of the performer (although, significantly, very few Soviet viewers remember the name of the actress who played *Yesenia*, Jacqueline Andere—simply referring to her by her protagonist's name), the memorable costumes, and the sense of gendered multigenerational community created by the film, underscored by the passing of the name to newborn girls.

But the differences were significant as well. Torres's success in the Soviet Union as it emerged from World War II and the deep wounds of Stalinism was, as we have seen, at least partly the result of a cinema-starved domestic market in the heady atmosphere of the Thaw's internationalism. And unlike many other foreign films of that era screened in the Soviet Union, which typically enjoyed success in their home countries as well as abroad, *Yesenia*—even though it was based on a popular telenovela and even more popular comics—was only a moderate success with Mexican film audiences. Its main cultural impact was most visible in the local fashion and personal care industry's mimicking of the protagonist's iconic hair and dress styles.⁸ The film's international circulation was limited to the Soviet

Union and, later, China, and it remained largely unnoticed by scholars and critics outside of those two countries. Indeed, *Yesenia*'s reception and quick fandom were not entirely supported by the Soviet film and cultural apparatuses, which seemed at times perplexed by, outraged by, or willfully ignorant of its enormous success.

And if Torres's Argentinian musicals arrived in the Soviet Union just a few years after its own film industry's prime, *Yesenia* was a product of a considerably longer period of decline in Mexican cinema, decades past its Golden Age of the 1940s. Many critics and scholars have considered the Mexican cinema of the 1970s and 1980s—recently evocatively referred to as “the Lost Cinema of Mexico”—the lowest point in the national industry's history.⁹ This “loss” refers not to the low number of movies made—in fact, Mexican film production was at its height in the 1970s—but to the critical consensus over the decline of their artistic quality. After decades of wide circulation of the Golden Age classics both commercially (if largely within Latin America) and at international film festivals, by the 1970s, Mexican cinema's international prestige was fully exhausted. Most historians and critics seem to be completely unaware, however, of the one part of the world where Mexican cinema of that period found a wide and enthusiastic viewership: the Socialist Bloc. It was seen by audiences during “weeks of Mexican cinema” in Moscow and Beijing and in international programs at the Moscow, Karlovy Vary, and Tashkent film festivals, achieving broad commercial exhibition and considerable success all across the socialist sphere.¹⁰

While the promotion of Soviet-Mexican cinematic contacts throughout the decade (as we'll see shortly) was part of concerted state efforts, the enormous popularity of *Yesenia* nonetheless caught Soviet film institutions by surprise. Its box office numbers were in sharp contrast to the number of reviews in the press or, in fact, promotion of any kind. Unlike Torres's films and songs, *Yesenia* became a hit without the crucial element of the construction of stardom through publications and other news coverage to create additional intimacy with the viewing public. It is evident that its success was not entirely anticipated by the Soviet film distributors either—even though, reflecting the changes that had taken place in Goskino (the central state apparatus in charge of cinema in the Soviet Union), newly reformed in 1972, the film was distributed in an unprecedentedly high print run of almost two thousand copies. This, it turned out, proved entirely insufficient, leading to record use of those printed copies—49,500 uses per copy in 1975 alone.¹¹ Nor was this success shared with the Mexican media and state. Far from deliberately created or orchestrated as a form of cultural diplomacy, *Yesenia*'s enduring popularity was a “bottom-up” process within an otherwise highly formal and state-controlled cinematic culture—a phenomenon that has puzzled critics for generations.

Maia Turovskaia was one of the few Russian scholars who addressed the film's popularity head-on.¹² Writing retrospectively, in the 1990s, Turovskaia admits that neither she nor her fellow film critics had seen the film or even heard about it at the time when the box office numbers were announced, making *Yesenia*



FIGURE 4. Poster for *Yesenia*. Personal collection.

the highest-grossing film in Soviet exhibition history. The previous box office leaders—the Soviet comedy *The Diamond Arm* (*Brilliantovaiia ruka*, Leonid Gaidai, 1969), the Hollywood Western *The Magnificent Seven* (John Sturges, 1960), and the Indian *The Vagabond* (*Awara*, Raj Kapoor, 1951)—fell behind it by some fifteen million viewers.¹³ But unlike Turovskaia's colleagues who merely ignored this remarkable fact, she decided to watch *Yesenia* to confront the mystery of its success.¹⁴ Describing this experience in detail in her later writings, Turovskaia offers a brief and acerbic summary of the film's plot: "An officer from a hacienda falls in love with a gypsy and marries her. Also in love with him is a rich heiress who, alas, is dying of tuberculosis. After various adventures it turns out that the gypsy is her illegitimate sister, given away by the mother, who had sinned. Therefore, no misalliance. *Happy end* [*sic*] for the healthy."¹⁵

After watching the film in a theater, the critic, appalled by what she sees as the film's abysmally primitive artistic qualities, asks a woman sitting next to her, who was crying throughout the movie, what moved her so much. The woman responds categorically that the film is "about her." Turovskaia persists, pointing to the ludicrous disconnect between the film's diegesis and this Soviet woman's reality: "Which part is about you: the mother's sin, the gypsy camp, the hacienda, the officer, the tuberculosis, which?"—to which the woman resolutely responds, "All of it!"¹⁶

The scene played out here—the confusion mixed with disdain on the part of the critic, a true member of the intelligentsia, and the intense emotional identification and reaction of the audience, one of "the masses" (Turovskaia mentions that the woman had a bag of groceries with her, as if to highlight her status as a commoner)—mirrors the reception of the film, and that of many other "churros"¹⁷ like it, in Mexico. And it would be repeated regularly in the late Soviet era following *Yesenia*—in the reception of the Indian megahit *Disco Dancer* (1982, released in the Soviet Union in 1984) and several other Indian and Egyptian films, and even more intensely with the Brazilian TV series *The Slave Isaura* (*A Escrava Isaura*, Globo, 1976, screened in the Soviet Union in 1988; hereon *Isaura*). The mass reaction to this kind of melodrama reached fever pitch with the Mexican telenovela *Los ricos también lloran* (1979–80, broadcast in Russia in 1991).¹⁸ *Yesenia* fits comfortably within this larger sentimentalist media corpus—all produced by major film/TV industries of the Global South, explicitly intended for popular consumption by "naïve" or "earnest" audiences (that is to say, lower-class viewers, presumed to be largely uneducated, at least when it comes to film aesthetic criteria), all heavily engaging the melodramatic mode.¹⁹

Yesenia's triumph in the Soviet Union seems to form an exception to the assumption within global film history that, by the 1970s and 1980s, film melodrama became emptied of its impact, increasingly an object of, at best, camp following. Furthermore, the popularity of *Yesenia* and of other genre films from the Global South appears to contradict the well-established Russo-Soviet cultural orientation toward the West, as viewed by both the Soviet cinema policymakers at the time and cultural historians since.²⁰ And yet, it appears that the antics of a Mexican "gypsy" appealed more to the Soviet audiences than the sophisticated cool of Audrey Hepburn (who starred in *How to Steal a Million*, 1966, which was screened the same year but was largely unnoticed by most moviegoers).²¹ The earnestness of late Soviet *Yesenia* fans is striking, too: while authenticity and sincerity were the catchwords of the Soviet Thaw culture of the late 1950s and early 1960s, the period of the 1970s and 1980s, often referred to as Stagnation, is usually associated with the culture of ironic distanciation.²² Such an affective regime seems at odds with the intensity of emotional identification that was witnessed by Turovskaia and expressed in fan letters sent to film magazines of the time, and repeated in present-day YouTube user comments.²³

This question that so troubled the Soviet critic—why *Yesenia* found such powerful resonance among late Soviet audiences—would be raised by the film establishment over and over again throughout the late 1970s and 1980s. It is one that animates this inquiry as well. What did Soviet audiences cry over when they watched *Yesenia*—what were they responding to, and why? And, beyond the experience of the Soviet viewers, how can we understand the distribution flow between the Soviet Union and Mexico (and Latin American film and television industries more broadly, soon extending to Brazil and elsewhere)? Its shared affective space reveals, I argue, common underlying cultural mechanisms of responses to the global post-1968 crisis in Mexico and the Soviet Union. At the same time, I see it as activating a profound, if politically highly ambivalent, set of cultural intimacies set in motion through these networks.

Of course, *Yesenia*'s popularity was not merely a question of preferences on the part of the audience. First of all, it was determined by the choice of film imports by Soviet state organizations, which had already realized that the increased presence of melodramas from Asia (India and Egypt) could sell more tickets without undermining any fundamental ideological principles. *Yesenia* was bought for \$20,000 with no percentages or royalties, and its box office success demonstrated a clear commercial gain from this film import policy. Hollywood films, even the old ones, were considerably more expensive and their distribution agreements were reciprocal, requiring exporting an equal number of Soviet films, which most Western distributors were not commercially motivated to accept. Moreover, many films from “developing countries” (such as India and Egypt—albeit not Mexico) were frequently imported into the Soviet Union through barter exchanges, which were favorable to both sides.²⁴ Ideologically, it was also considerably easier for the Soviet agencies to justify such frivolous (if extremely profitable) cinematic choices by alluding to their anti-imperialist elements, which were easy to find in most postcolonial narratives, including Mexico's abundant revolutionary iconography.

In other words, to some extent the popularity of Latin American, Indian, and Egyptian melodramas over their Hollywood or European counterparts in the Soviet Union was simply due to the latter's predominance on Soviet screens.²⁵ And yet, when it came to genres, which heavily rely on emotional identification, films from the Global South consistently proved to be more accessible to Soviet audiences than their Western counterparts, their affective translatability more powerful, their “structure of feeling” more successful in mediating the conflicts and changes people were experiencing—some of which were apparent at the time, others of which we may see more clearly now.

In what follows, this chapter begins my analysis of the film by first sketching out the broader context for its production and its subsequent distribution in the Soviet Union in the midst of the intensification of Soviet-Mexican political and cultural relations in the 1970s. In order to understand *Yesenia*'s production history as reflecting broader Mexican cultural and political dynamics, I further draw on

its intermedial genealogy within women's literary and graphic culture and the rise of the telenovela.

MEXICAN BACKGROUND

Virtually every account of Mexico in the 1970s describes it as being in a state of crisis, undergoing a series of dramatic transformations in response to the aftermath of the political turmoil of the global 1960s and the start of economic decline, after decades of growth and stability. The decade was marked by loss of state legitimacy exacerbated by the repercussions of the Tlatelolco student massacre of 1968 and the subsequent dirty war fought by the state against Mexican leftists, the failure of the leading party (PRI) to produce the policy of social and economic cohesion promised by revolutionary nationalism, and the increasing cultural and political segmentation that emerged in tandem with that failure. The rise of counterculture and women's movements gained increasing importance—both offering an alternative to the mainstream culture and being reluctantly incorporated into it.²⁶

The figures of failure and crisis permeating historical discourses on (and of) the 1970s likewise pertain to Mexican cinema.²⁷ If the Golden Age of the 1940s and 1950s offered a powerful projection of a unified and triumphalist nationalist mythology, 1970s film culture in Mexico visualized the country's increasing political fragmentation and "the rupture of the social contract."²⁸ For one thing, the period saw the significant emergence of the cinema of "independents"—such as Jorge Fons, José Estrada, and Felipe Cazals—which emphasized the sense of social alienation and ultimately demonstrated the "impossibility of the construction of a collective subject of Mexican politics."²⁹ At the other end of the spectrum, the predominance of the "low" cinematic genres decried by critics and the intelligentsia resonated with the local audiences, symptomatically addressing and at times subverting the normative system of representation, in particular when it came to racial and gender norms.

The presidency of Luis Echeverría Álvarez (1970–76), who placed his brother Rodolfo in charge of the state film institutions, was characterized by a significant increase in state support of the industry: out of the 437 films produced during that period, 116 were financed with state resources.³⁰ This meant that after decades of impenetrability of the film industry, dominated by the same figures, the younger, more creative and politically minded filmmakers were given opportunities, with a relative lack of censorship. This support was part of the larger political project: Echeverría was eager to project an image of someone who, unlike his predecessor, was capable of connecting equally with the young, educated, leftist elites (de facto diverting attention from his responsibility for the Tlatelolco massacre), the working class, and the peasantry. His support for the young political filmmakers was part of demonstrating his "ability to speak the language of the intelligentsia's Marxist critique of global capitalism and structural inequalities," as his populist appeal relied on embracing Third-Worldist rhetoric and reorienting his international policy toward greater multipolarity within the Cold War order.³¹

Eager to establish or reinforce Mexico's relations with countries across Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Soviet Bloc, Echeverría was the first Mexican president to make official visits to Cuba, China, and the Soviet Union. This brought about a dramatic increase in Mexico's political, economic, and cultural ties with the Soviet Union over the course of his presidency, with a new favorable trade agreement and a mixed trade commission set up in 1973, as part of the president's visit.³² The Soviet-Mexican Cultural Association, set up in 1966, also drastically increased its activities in the next decade, and there were more overall contacts between the two countries between 1973 and 1978 than in the whole postwar period, including those between the state-supported film institutions.³³

The cinematic exchanges continued even when Echeverría's successor, José López Portillo, in 1976 placed his sister Margarita in control of the newly unified Dirección General de Radio, Televisión y Cinematografía, marking a significant reversal of Echeverría's policies more generally, and of film policies in particular (notably without breaking with the fine tradition of nepotism). Singularly hated by the film community for her ill-informed bureaucratic and authoritarian style of management, lack of interest in art cinema, and resulting defunding of the state film apparatus, Margarita López Portillo aggressively pursued commercial contacts with other national industries, especially those with potential for coproductions. The Soviet Union's film industry was one of the few that eagerly responded, thus furthering cinematic commerce between the two nations.³⁴ Despite President López Portillo's fervent anti-communism—aggravated by the infamous attempted kidnapping of Margarita by radical guerrilla group Liga Comunista 23 de Septiembre (or September 23rd Communist League) in 1976, whose repercussions included severe governmental repressions leading to the total annihilation of the Liga—the mutual commercial interests between the Mexican and Soviet film industries trumped all ideological considerations.³⁵ In 1978, Margarita even participated in the Moscow International Film Festival and took part in celebrating the jubilee of both the Russian and Mexican revolutions and the release of Sergei Eisenstein's (newly reedited) *¡Qué viva México!* as iconic of both. She used this as an opportunity to negotiate for a new Soviet-Mexican film coproduction (it would end up including Italy as well), which resulted in a large-budget, two-part epic flop based on John Reed's Mexican revolution reportage, released as *Las Campanas Rojas* (*The Red Bells*, Sergei Bondarchuk, 1981–83).

SOVIET-MEXICAN EXCHANGES AND CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

In short, with the US-Soviet détente and the simultaneous reorientation of Echeverría's geopolitics, and due to mutual commercial interests within their respective film industries, the 1970s were a period of unprecedented expansion of cinematic exchanges between the two countries. As in so many other aspects of both countries' cultural establishments, they tended to rely on informal

networks and existing personal and familial relationships that overlapped with the institutional structures.

On the Soviet side, the Soviet-Mexican Cultural Association was headed by Lev Kulidzhanov, a celebrated filmmaker and one of the leading figures in the Union of Soviet Filmmakers. His role in the association both underscored and enhanced the importance of cinema as one of the privileged venues for Soviet-Mexican exchanges. The Filmmakers' Union (unlike the umbrella organization for Soviet cinema, Goskino) was a progressive group, genuinely dedicated to the development of Soviet cinema and to its internationalization, as well as to improving conditions for its members' creative work—and Kulidzhanov, despite his numerous official Party-affiliated positions, was well liked within the cinematic intelligentsia.³⁶ A regular lecturer at the Moscow Film Institute (VGIK), he cultivated relationships in particular with the older generation of Mexican muralist artists with ties to the Soviet Bloc, such as David Alfaro Siqueiros and Guillermo Chávez Vega.

Another important mediator between the Mexican and Soviet cinematic spheres was the director Sergio Olhovich, who studied cinema at the VGIK between 1961 and 1969. After graduating and moving back to Mexico in 1969, he became increasingly involved in film production politics, tirelessly advocating an easier entry into the industry and support for the new generation of filmmakers. Olhovich also founded Cinematográfica Marco Polo, a production company that promoted the work of the new politically minded directors, and in 1975, along with Paul Leduc, Felipe Cazals, Miguel Littin, and several others, he founded the group National Front of Cinematographers, whose manifesto was closely aligned with the political and aesthetic spirit of the New Latin American Cinema. In the course of the decade, Olhovich remained in close contact with the Soviet film institutions, promoting his vision of politically conscious Mexican cinema and supporting Rodolfo Echeverría's initiatives.³⁷

And indeed, in both 1972 and 1976, the “weeks of Mexican cinema” in the Soviet Union featured almost exclusively New Mexican Cinema's films of social critique, including Olhovich's own, which were consistently praised by Soviet critics.³⁸ Many of the same directors were simultaneously featured in the Moscow International Film Festival and the Tashkent Festival of Cinemas of Asia and Africa—contributing to the official inclusion (in 1976) of Latin America in that festival's purview. Olhovich's 1974 film *El encuentro de un hombre solo* was enthusiastically received at Tashkent, and the following year his next film, *La casa del Sur* (1975), was entered in the Moscow Film Festival, where Lev Kulidzhanov handed him one of the awards. Virtually unknown anywhere else, Olhovich's films were frequently reviewed in the Soviet press, hailed as evidence of the increasing social and political engagement of Mexican cinema and the success of public-sector filmmaking.

A very different, but equally active, cultural ambassador of Mexico to the Socialist Bloc was Sonia Amelio, who found fame as an internationally celebrated dancer (of both classical and folkloric traditions), pianist, and actress. Her father,

Salvador Amelio García, was the director of the state film distribution company Películas Nacionales, which, among other things, worked with the Soviet film export agency bringing Soviet films to Mexican screens.³⁹ Amelio García was also one of the founders of the pro-communist Partido Popular in the 1940s, and it was through his friends in the Soviet film export agency that arrangements were made for Sonia to tour the Soviet Union in the 1960s and put her in close contact with the Soviet artistic elite.⁴⁰ In 1967 she participated in the Moscow Film Festival, where she presented her cinematic debut in Emilio Fernández's *Un dorado de Pancho Villa* (1967).

Parallel to her ballet and music career, from 1972 to 1974 Amelio also acted in the telenovela *Los Hermanos Coraje*, costarring Jorge Lavat, the lead male protagonist of *Yesenia*.⁴¹ But in 1972 she took time off from her shooting schedule to accompany Rodolfo Echeverría as part of an official visit for the opening of the “weeks of Mexican cinema” in Moscow, Leningrad, and Tbilisi. She also attended the Tashkent festival that year, where she was keen to solidify plans for a Soviet-Mexican coproduction, in which she intended to star. The project was to be directed by the celebrated Soviet filmmaker Sergei Gerasimov, filmed in both countries, and produced in cooperation with Películas Nacionales.⁴² While this large-scale project never came to fruition, Amelio made cameo appearances in Soviet films produced at the time and continued to participate in Soviet-Mexican exchanges for the duration of the decade. She thus perfectly embodied all the prevalent aspects of cultural diplomacy, combining high-level state and commercial connections as well as classical, folkloric, and popular genres focused on music, dance, film, and eventually television.

These Soviet-Mexican cultural mediators, however, presented very different cultural and political positions. Sonia Amelio's folklorically inflected vision of Mexican culture was at direct odds with that of Olhovich. As part of his participation in the subsequent 1974 edition of the Tashkent festival, he pleaded with the Soviet organizers to only support “serious” Mexican cinema made by the independents, instead of buying and exhibiting the products of the commercial studios, “banal movies with guitars, songs, dances, and horse riding.”⁴³ And yet, at the same festival, the most visible Mexican guests, appearing in numerous photos as part of the festival coverage and fondly remembered by the Soviet participants, were Amelio's friends: Susana Dosamantes, who was best known for acting in telenovelas and film adaptations of another famous historieta, *Kalimán*; and Alicia Encinas, the star of several telenovelas, whose career was advanced by the newly founded Televisa producer Valentín Pimstein.⁴⁴ Both Dosamantes and Encinas were there to promote their films for Soviet commercial distribution. The following year, Mexico was represented at Tashkent by actress and singer Isela Vega, another sex symbol of the period, best known for posing in *Playboy* and being an activist for nudity (celebrated now as a symbol of libertarianism and transgression of the Mexican film scene of the time). While their performance histories were



FIGURE 5. Embodying *lo Mexicano*: Susana Dosamantes and Alicia Encinas at Tashkent, 1974. Personal collection.

largely unknown to the Soviet festival organizers, the actresses' much-documented participation at the festival was always memorable and certainly contributed to associations of Mexican cinema not only with horse riding but with striking—and strikingly liberated, especially by Soviet standards—female leads.

However, in choosing Mexican films for wide exhibition, Soviet distributors faced particular challenges. Not only was politically driven cinema considerably less popular with audiences, but when it came to depictions of nudity and sexuality, much of Mexican cinema in the 1970s—whether the socially conscious or the popular—was much too risqué for the highly rigid Soviet norms. Virtually the only genres that could be counted on for popularity without presenting problems to the Soviet censors were children's films and historical musicals and melodramas. And, of course, these were especially likely to include “guitars, songs, dances, and horse riding” (and, as importantly, attractive but fully dressed female actresses as protagonists). To justify the inclusion of such genre films at festivals, Soviet reviewers' faint praise emphasized their connection to the Mexican cinema of the Golden Age and their “unique connection to genuine folklore: . . . deeply nationalist, exciting and touching . . . attracting viewers not by their logical analysis but their capacity to evoke emotions.”⁴⁵ As a result, already in the 1970s, virtually all the Mexican films purchased for commercial distribution in the Soviet Union were exactly the kind of popular films that Olhovich campaigned against.⁴⁶

It is easy to see how *Yesenia* fit the bill for what the Soviet distributors were looking for in a Mexican movie: in addition to its evident “capacity to evoke emotions,” the film was undoubtedly “deeply nationalist” as well—with its setting during the Maximilian period of Mexico’s nineteenth century celebrating Benito Juárez’s antimonarchist liberal ideology. In fact, the setting of films in this earlier, proto-revolutionary moment in Mexican history appeared to offer a perfect compromise endowed with ironclad nationalist revolutionary credentials. Thus, the winner of a Special Prize at the Moscow Film Festival in 1973, Felipe Cazals’s historical drama *Those Years* (*Aquellos años*, 1972)—while diametrically opposed to *Yesenia* in its stark cinematic and narrative style, as well as its political poignancy—takes place during the same historical moment. This is also the case with another high-grossing Mexican import, *The Mushroom Man* (*El hombre de los hongos*, Roberto Gavaldón, 1976), which earned 273 million Soviet viewers in the first year of its exhibition.⁴⁷

These three films—*Those Years*, *The Mushroom Man*, and *Yesenia*—set in the same iconic period of Mexican history give a comprehensive glimpse of the diverse cinematic formations at play in 1970s Mexico. Cazals was the best-known auteur of independent political cinema, and his film was a denunciation of the reified iconography of the Mexican Revolution. Gavaldón, one of the last remaining filmmakers of the Golden Age era, was experimenting with countercultural influences, and his film’s antiracist, anticolonialist message is filtered through an unmistakably psychedelic aesthetics. And Alfredo B. Crevenna, despite having started making films in the 1950s and directing a number of popular melodramas, by the 1970s was associated with low commercial genres (having directed two other films—*La satanica* and *Santo y el Aguila real*—the same year he made *Yesenia*).⁴⁸ Yet all three are ostensibly historical films rooted in one of the foundational moments for Mexican nationalist discourse—demonstrating the same kind of continuous engagement with the historical revolutionary iconography that resonated with both Soviet audiences’ expectations of the exoticism of Mexican culture and their intimate familiarity with their own Soviet “historical-revolutionary” film genre.

Evidently, the commercial interests that bound together the Soviet and Mexican sides carried more weight than the aesthetic ideology or Marxist economic critiques voiced by Olhovich. As Echeverría’s presidency came to an end in 1976 and Margarita López Portillo assumed the reins of the Mexican film apparatus, positions like Olhovich’s became further marginalized, and commercial cinema came back to center stage, making *Yesenia* the paradigmatic winner not only of the Soviet market, but of the Mexican media industry.⁴⁹ Only when the Chinese delegation visiting Mexico in 1976 approached Jorge Lavat requesting copies of the film to be screened in China did the Mexican film establishment find out about *Yesenia*’s popularity abroad—but without coming to terms with its true scale.⁵⁰ While the immense success of *Yesenia* in the Soviet Union and its considerable revenues were never made public in Mexico, that success led to the film’s subsequent distribution

in China, and to the subsequent arrival of telenovelas on socialist screens, securing the international positions of the same commercial industries that filmmakers like Olhovich dedicated their lives to fighting.

SOVIET BACKGROUND

To understand this seeming contradiction between the political demands of a socialist state and its choice of film imports, we need to turn to the changes within the Soviet cinematic institutions. Just as Echeverría's policies were an attempt to placate the political crisis of 1968 in Mexico, the intensification of official political rhetoric and artistic censorship around the 1968 Soviet/Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia created a sense of deep crisis within the Soviet film industry and culture at large. In 1972, when Filipp Ermash became the new head of Goskino, the state organization in charge of cinema, his policy was to look for a compromise between the Party and the filmmakers, who were particularly concerned with their films being rejected due to censorship, before or after they were made. Ermash's solution was to favor "lighter" fare in both film production and exports: such films raised fewer objections "from above," giving more opportunities to filmmakers, and thus minimizing conflicts.⁵¹

This ideological compromise perfectly suited Sovexportfilm, as by then the commercial advantages of exhibiting foreign entertainment-driven cinema—especially if it could be purchased inexpensively—had become obvious. Since "serious" films, whether Soviet or foreign, came under closer political scrutiny, in the course of the 1970s the exhibition of foreign films came to be dominated by Italian and French comedies supported by their respective communist parties, a handful of older US and British genre films (prohibitive costs prevented importing the more recent ones), and an even greater mix of Indian, Egyptian, and Mexican movies, in addition to a considerable number of Soviet comedies, musicals, and, increasingly, melodramas.⁵² As ticket sales for domestic production consistently fell behind what was planned by the state (which always set unrealistic goals), this further encouraged turning to the commercially popular imports. This even led to the informal practice, among local theater administrators, of switching the screenings, showing foreign films instead of the less popular Soviet or Eastern European ones that were scheduled, as the only sure way for local theaters to increase revenues.⁵³ With foreign commercial cinema in high demand, mid-1970s Mexico, whose film exports were at their all-time low, was a natural business partner.

The exhibition of foreign cinema was thus divided into the screening of more "serious" cinema as part of festivals, retrospectives, and "weeks of foreign cinema," with wide commercial film exhibition increasingly relying on genre films, furthering the audience segmentation between the urban intelligentsia and the rest.⁵⁴ This emerging fragmentation into "high" and "low" cinematic forms signaled the end of the relative cultural cohesion of the Stalinist and Thaw

periods, when cinema served as a space for working through shared national preoccupations, projecting a space of common belonging. This shift signaled one of the facets of the crisis of the official culture as an extension of nation-state ideology and the increasing appeal of impinging forms of commercial mass culture. The history of *Yesenia*'s production will further articulate the Mexican specificities of this dynamic.

YESENIA

Although Turovskaiá's summary of the plot, which opens this chapter, captures the gist of *Yesenia*, it is worth outlining it in slightly greater detail here.

Yesenia is a beautiful, spirited Roma who lives in a caravan with her mother and grandmother. She falls in love with an officer named Oswaldo, who has just sworn allegiance to Benito Juárez. Oswaldo asks the patriarch of her community for permission to marry Yesenia. At that point, the grandmother reveals to the patriarch that Yesenia was adopted from a noble family, whose daughter eloped and gave birth to a child, who wasn't accepted by her family. As the only proof of her parentage, she was given a Virgin of Guadalupe locket. Yesenia and Oswaldo get married under Romani law—but the society doesn't accept them. When Oswaldo is recalled to army action and is captured by the enemy, Yesenia is left alone and is led to believe that Oswaldo abandoned her. Brokenhearted, she returns to her caravan. Oswaldo comes back and finds out that Yesenia left him—in despair, he proposes marriage to the granddaughter of his godfather, Luisa. Yesenia and Oswaldo meet again, and at the same time Yesenia discovers her true family—and that Luisa is her half-sister. Yesenia is accepted into her ancestral home and renounces Oswaldo, sacrificing her love for the sake of her newly found sister. But Luisa, who has an incurable heart condition, finds out about Oswaldo and Yesenia's love and leaves for Europe—and the two lovers get married before the altar of the Virgin of Guadalupe, to the outrage of bigots, while outside the church, Yesenia's Romani family throws a celebration.

Filmed in just over a month and released five months later, in November 1971, *Yesenia* had its pre-premiere in Cine Rex. It was part of the celebration of that movie theater's much-lauded restoration, intended as a demonstration of the new administration's commitment to the modernization of the film apparatus, including its exhibition sector.⁵⁵ The film's official opening was in Olimpia, the oldest movie theater in Mexico City, associated with the splendor of the early days of cinema, where it played for four weeks to decent box office success.⁵⁶ This success was, without a doubt, due to the fact that *Yesenia* was already well known in Mexico, as the heroine of immensely popular romance graphic novels and the eponymous telenovela, which was screened on Mexican TV just the previous year. In fact, the speed of the movie's production was no doubt geared toward capitalizing on this connection. The film's cast was initially meant to be the same

as that of the telenovela, but at the last moment Fanny Cano, who played Yesenia on TV, became unavailable due to undergoing a “surgical intervention” in the US. She had to be replaced by relative newcomer Jacqueline Andere, which generated much gossip as to the true reasons for this switch.⁵⁷ Yolanda Vargas Dulché, the author of the *Yesenia* franchise, including the script for both the telenovela and the film, blamed the comparative lack of success of the latter on this replacement: the audiences, she claimed, “fall in love with a character and do not admit any changes.”⁵⁸

At the same time, as noted by Emilio García Riera, the speed with which the film was made was also characteristic of the industry’s general attempt to increase production at minimal costs regardless of the results.⁵⁹ Such an accelerated schedule was itself a reflection of the emerging dominance of industrial practices associated with the production of telenovelas. As such, it signaled a broader shift within the Mexican commercial cinema of the 1960s and 1970s—and the Mexican cultural industry at large—in its orientation toward private television, as embodied in the establishment of Televisa in 1973.⁶⁰

Yesenia embodied this shift on every level. The original 1970 TV version was produced by Valentín Pimstein, whose career in Mexico began in the 1950s with the second-ever telenovela made in Mexico, *Gutierritos* (1958). Pimstein would become the leading figure in the fiction branch of Televisa throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. It was he who set the standard for industrial telenovela production in Mexico, responsible for Televisa’s status as one of the two leading producers (alongside the Brazilian Globo) of serialized television shows in the world during those decades. Crevenna had been part of that history as well, as he had been involved in the very first adaptations of telenovelas to cinema: *Gutierritos* (1959); *Teresa* (1961), based on the 1959 telenovela, also produced by Pimstein; and *Senda prohibida* (1961), the film version of the very first telenovela ever produced in Mexico.⁶¹

Pimstein was a close friend of Emilio Azcárraga Milmo, a member of one of Mexico’s most powerful media clans, the owner of Churubusco Studios (where *Yesenia* was filmed), and, eventually, founder and owner of Televisa. Azcárraga, better known as “El Tigre,” in the 1970s would become one of Mexico’s most influential businessmen, directly responsible for the massive integration of Mexican cultural industries—cinema, music, news, magazine and book publishing, talent agencies, and so on—under the Televisa umbrella, making it the most powerful media conglomerate and a major expression of cultural and political hegemony in Mexico.⁶² Pimstein came to Mexico from Chile with ambitions of becoming a cinema producer and was initially resistant to the lure of the television market. As recounted by Claudia Fernandez and Andrew Paxman in Azcárraga’s biography, El Tigre finally convinced Pimstein to work with him by not only lending him money for paying off the gambling debts but also putting a down payment on his house. This evidently convinced Pimstein to produce the



FIGURE 6. The garish colors of *Yesenia*.

first telenovela for Azcárraga's TV company TSM, *Murallas blancas* (1960), successfully finding sponsorship by Colgate-Palmolive, and to stay by Azcárraga's side for the duration of his career.⁶³

Yesenia's relationship to the increasing dominance of the telenovela aesthetics did not escape the attention of Mexican film critics.⁶⁴ Indeed, the summary of the film given by García Riera in his *Historia documental del cine mexicano* (which remains virtually its only review in Mexico) perfectly reflects attitudes apparently shared on both sides of the Atlantic: "Filmed as part of an overproduction plan, with its ugly colors, uneven mise-en-scene, apathetic actors and an even more apathetic and clumsy director . . . *Yesenia*, a long soap opera (*culebrón*) with infinite dialogues clarifying conflicting relationships, is worthy of reproaches that are more boring than indignant."⁶⁵

Curiously, the color scheme of the film—indeed very gaudy, especially by the standards of 1970s independent cinema—was likely one of the reasons for its attractiveness to Soviet audiences. It was in sharp contrast to the "unforgettable greenish palette" of most domestic films of the same period, which resulted from the quality of color film stock produced by the Soviet factory Svema, which made even the most vibrant mise-en-scène appear drab.⁶⁶ As we will see later in this

book, the film's colorful costumes, in particular, contribute to its success with both Soviet and Chinese audiences.

Both the telenovela's and the film's appeal in Mexico, on the other hand, rested on audiences' familiarity with the character of Yesenia from the women's graphic romances (historietas) written by the most prolific and celebrated author of this genre, Yolanda Vargas Dulché. In its graphic novel form, *Yesenia* was part of one of the most popular series in the country, *Lágrimas, risas y amor*, which in the 1970s was still selling over six million copies monthly.⁶⁷ And Vargas Dulché was involved in writing the script (or libretto) for both the telenovela and the film. Her relationship with Pimstein and telenovelas went back to 1966, when her other popular historieta, *María Isabel*, was first adapted for Azcárraga's company TSM, lauded for "introducing the new social custom of integrating señoras and their female servants" as part of the same TV viewership.⁶⁸ Pimstein was well known for cultivating relationships with successful writers to integrate literature into television scripts. This was equally true for the popular genres as it was for classics, and intended to provide additional cultural cachet for productions while enabling a tighter synergy among the different parts of cultural industries—and historietas were a particularly commercially successful sphere.⁶⁹

Reflecting on the announcement in 1971 that *Yesenia*, which had just finished its run as a telenovela, was being made into a film, one critic sarcastically reflected on the prevalence of Vargas Dulché's and other women writers' romantic creations in the mediasphere: "There should be a law preventing the public from such abuses, otherwise some historian of the twenty-third century without a doubt will be led to enlist in its discussion of the greatest problems of our epoch 'Simplemente María' and 'Yesenia.'" ⁷⁰ The critic's prediction, however, came true considerably earlier than in the twenty-third century. *Yesenia* would have yet another incarnation as a Televisa telenovela in 1982. And *Simplemente María*—here referring to a highly popular Peruvian 1969 telenovela version, popular in Mexico at the time, based on the romantic novel by an Argentinian woman writer Celia Alcántara—would be remade by Televisa in 1989 (and again in 2015). Alongside *Los ricos también lloran*, the 1989 Mexican version of *Simplemente María* would prove to be such a resounding success with post-Soviet audiences in the 1990s that Belarusian biologists would name a new pear variety after it, and Victoria Ruffo's telenovela heroine would be transformed into one of the main (male) characters of the notorious 1996 postmodernist novel *Chapaev i Pustota* (*Chapaev and the Void*) by Victor Pelevin.

Given that the author of the sarcastic comments, Tomás Perrín, was in charge of advertising and marketing publicity, his mocking of "low women's genres"—historically so closely connected to the very trade he belonged to—appears at best hypocritical. And yet, to understand the persistent impact of women's romantic writings and the historietas, telenovelas, and films associated with them on cultural life in Mexico and elsewhere—an impact evidenced by

Yesenia's enormous success in the Soviet Union—we need to undertake a brief historical detour into their origins in the earlier part of the twentieth century, the ideological functions they served, and the cultural niche they occupied for many subsequent decades.

HISTORIETAS

The origins of historietas—comics generally, and serialized, weekly, pocketbook-size graphic romances in particular—are rooted in the period of literacy campaigns and “socialist” (public) education of 1930s Mexico. Those efforts were accompanied by an explosion of illustrated magazines, various kinds of comic books, and other hybrid written and visual forms, all of which contributed to enhancing literacy and the formation of a shared, modern, mass national-popular culture.⁷¹ Revolutionary modernity, state progress, and the creation of reading publics were thus linked, and, as Anne Rubenstein explores, for women, reading historietas in the postrevolutionary decades was both a public form of participation in this revolutionary culture and an alternative to its more institutionalized didactic narratives. This was especially important in that the inclusion of women as both major targets and disseminators of public education in all its forms was one of the campaigns’ big goals. But it was met with a unified conservative resistance, a push-back that took different forms, “from mild satire to burning of rural schoolhouses and the murder of teachers.”⁷² As such, historietas formed a major sphere of mediation between the state ideology and vernacular cultural norms with their more traditional conception of gender norms. They were an important interface between audiences and the public sphere, with readers, especially female readers, frequently writing letters to the publishers to share their reactions and opinions.⁷³ And they were also an early and remarkably tenacious product of a distinctly women’s cultural sphere—partaking in *estéticas cursis*, or “corny aesthetics”—a notion to which we will return at greater length in chapter 3.⁷⁴ Associated with feminine and lowbrow to middlebrow taste formations, this aesthetic extended to various genres of “women’s culture”—from novels to women’s magazines, telenovelas, and historietas. These were also the areas of cultural production where women could be authors within an entirely male-dominated literary field, as demonstrated by the careers of both Fernanda Villeli, the author of *Senda prohibida* (the historietas that was made into the first Mexican telenovela in 1958, as well as a film, directed by Crevenna ten years before *Yesenia*, in 1961), and Vargas Dulché, the author of *Yesenia*.

Vargas Dulché came from a lineage of women writers: her mother was a journalist and her aunt, Catalina D’Erzell, was a famous author of radio novels (one of the generic prototypes of telenovelas). Vargas Dulché was highly educated and spoke French and English. She began her career working for Emilio Azcárraga Vidaurreta, the father of Emilio Azcárraga Milmo, on the radio station he owned, XEW-AM, first singing popular romantic songs (boleros) by iconic performers

like Agustín Lara, Pedro Vargas, and Toña la Negra and then forming a duo with her sister and even perhaps performing with Lara himself.

Eventually, she started supplementing her income from singing by writing radio plays, movie scripts, and historietas—all sharing the same romantic melodramatic sensibility, recognizable as much in the boleros she sang as in the stories she wrote and illustrated. As her writing achieved increasing popularity, Vargas Dulché became not only fully financially independent, but together with her husband (and coauthor) she founded what would become one of the four major industrial groups producing comic books: Editorial Argumentos (later Grupo Editorial Vid), which captured 23 percent of the comic book market. Despite working closely with Televisa in the course of the 1970s and 1980s, Vargas Dulché exercised a great deal of creative control over the many transformations of her historietas into telenovelas and even managed to keep her publishing house independent (unlike the other two major publishers, Publicaciones Herrerías and Editorial Novaro, which were absorbed by the Televisa Novedades group).⁷⁵

It is hard to overestimate the importance of historietas within the Mexican media environment of the early 1970s. According to some estimates, they were the second most popular mass medium after the radio, with television coming in a distant third.⁷⁶ Their production process led to an easy integration into television: Mexican historietas, before they are illustrated, resemble movie scripts, including full dialogue and detailed instructions for their visualization—making their adaptation to either film or television a rather seamless process.⁷⁷ Even as television became increasingly dominant over the course of the 1970s, production of historietas (and the derivative form called *photoroman*) tripled, reaching seventy million a month by the end of the decade.⁷⁸ And, despite the assumption that romantic historietas like the Vargas Dulché series *Lágrimas, risas y amor* were directed only at women, surveys conducted in the late 1970s suggest that although lower- and middle-class women readers were indeed in the majority, that series was read by literally everyone.⁷⁹

In their negotiations of culturally dominant constructions of femininity, crucial for the *cursi* aesthetic and the historieta narrative mode has been the archetype of *la chica moderna*. As explored by Rubenstein and Joanne Hirschfeld, this culturally specific iteration of the “modern girl” was a figuration of the compromise between hegemonic, culturally conservative gender norms and the pressures of modernity that demanded a great deal of individual agency. *La chica moderna* was thus independent, especially in the choice of her romantic objects and in her willingness to stand up against certain social and communal norms of feminine behavior when following her passions. At the same time, she displayed traditional standards of sexual attractiveness and absolute compliance with heteronormative, monogamous romantic notions of love and the importance of family/motherhood.⁸⁰ And while this figure is particularly well known from Mexican and other Latin American cinemas of the Golden Age, the stakes of redefining

the image of the modern woman “for the masses” were equally high in the 1970s, with the advent of the feminist movement in Mexico.

When asked in 1978 whether feminism left a mark in the telenovela genre that she helped define, Vargas Dulché unequivocally claimed that her heroines from the very beginning, well before the feminist movement of the 1970s, were liberated women. “My female characters who want to ‘make it’ do so!” she claimed, citing both Yesenia and María Isabel as examples.⁸¹ “I have always tried to teach a lesson,” she added, with a characteristic reference to literacy: “And I take honor in saying that *historietas* have taught the people to read better.”⁸² These claims of didactic intent were similarly furthered by her husband and coauthor, Guillermo de la Parra, who asserted that in their *historietas* (many of which traded in exoticized images of other cultures and included now-infamous racial representations bordering on caricature), they always attempted both to entertain and “to provide information on history, traditions and customs of other countries.”⁸³

However disingenuous such claims may seem, the impact of *historieta*-based telenovelas on literacy has repeatedly been affirmed in both personal accounts and the press—their popularity purportedly led to many women learning to read so that they could follow the stories in the original publications, should they ever miss an episode or want to revisit the intricacies of the plot.⁸⁴ Such attempts to endow *historietas* and telenovelas with a didactic mission and additional cultural capital were, indeed, not uncommon throughout the 1970s, when the government even issued an *historieta* advocating family planning as a way to improve the quality of life, appropriately titled *Una mejor vida* (A Better Life).⁸⁵ And connections to high literary culture were not uncommon either—thus, Televisa’s first telenovela, *Cartas sin destino* (1973), also starring Yesenia’s Jacqueline Andere, was loosely based on Edmond Rostand’s classic late-nineteenth-century romance *Cyrano de Bergerac*.

The next chapter will take a closer look at the various cultural institutions in Mexico and the Soviet Union that played the role of providing this kind of gendered sentimental education—and at the women who were usually framed as the recipients of such lessons—to understand the function of Yesenia as a global icon in this dual context.