
Mexican and Soviet Womanhood, circa 1970

Having considered the context of *Yesenia's* production in Mexico and its exhibition in the Soviet Union in chapter 1, the goal of this chapter is to locate the film against the background of political, social, and cultural changes for women in both countries. This chapter argues that in the context of the 1970s, the ideas of women's liberation mediated by mainstream and conservative cultural spheres—such as women's journals—played a key role in shaping *Yesenia's* image as a transnational icon. It explores the impact of sexual revolution in both Mexico and the Soviet Union as it intersected with the reemergence of the melodramatic regime and sentimental culture at large, albeit in a remediated form, reinforcing the essentialist notions of gender and female sexuality. Sentimental media, Lauren Berlant famously argued, creates a “culture of ‘true feeling’ . . . that sanctifies suffering as a relay to universality in a way that includes women in the universal while attaching the universal more fully to a generally lived experience.”¹ To see how *Yesenia's* transnational reception formed part of such a process, it is worth attending both to the realities of the lived experiences of women in Mexico and the Soviet Union and to how the notions of universalism or cosmopolitanism inflected gender discourses in both cases.

At first glance, women's lives in 1970s Mexico and the Soviet Union couldn't be more different. Statistical data provides an instructive glimpse here. Based on the 1970 census, the average Mexican woman had 7.3 kids, and at least half of women dedicated approximately twenty-five years of their lives to taking care of children. The divorce and separation rates were just above 2 percent, and abortion was illegal.² Twenty-one percent of women were illiterate, and 17.6 percent were part of the labor force. Fifteen percent of the students in secondary education

were women.³ The Catholic Church exercised a great deal of cultural and social control, especially in women's lives.

In the Soviet Union, by contrast, full participation in the labor force was mandated by the state, and almost 90 percent of able-bodied adult women were either employed or engaged in full-time study by the mid-1970s, which constituted 51 percent of the overall labor force.⁴ Literacy rates were at 99.7 percent and the female-to-male ratio in higher education was at almost exact parity.⁵ Women constituted three-fifths of the white-collar labor force.⁶ The average length of a woman's employment in her lifetime was 33.5 years.⁷ Abortion was legalized in the 1920s, and briefly prohibited during Stalin's regime. The divorce rate, at least in the European part of the country, was nearly 50 percent, and most divorces were initiated by women.⁸ Not incidentally, women outnumbered men in the general population, as they had since the end of World War II. In 1950, there were 76 men for every 100 women, while by 1979 there were 122 men for every 144 women.⁹

Birth rates and population control were seen as matters of official priority in the 1970s in both countries, as part of the regime, which Michelle Murphy refers to as the "economization of life"—where, in the interest of the developmentalist paradigms of economic growth, the state's objective was to "designate and manage surplus aggregate life."¹⁰ This was a crucial decade for decreases in birth rates and numbers of children for both Mexican and Soviet women. Yet this development was approached from opposite perspectives. In Mexico, it was the direct result of public policy concerned with overpopulation, the introduction of birth control, and legal changes introduced in 1974 that reformed article 4 of the Mexican Constitution. This new law provided equal rights to men and women, which included the rights of women to protect their family and decide on the number of children.¹¹ In the Soviet Union, on the other hand, increasingly low birth rates (in its European republics) were framed as a major "demographic crisis" that necessitated pronatalist measures, and increasingly more conservative gender policies and attitudes, which were largely embraced by the women themselves. Abortion was used as virtually the only form of birth control.¹²

The practices and attitudes toward women's participation in public life were similarly contrasting. In Mexico, the 1970s witnessed the institutionalization of women's movements and their impact on state policies, explicitly aimed at challenging the hegemonic gender norms. For the Soviet Union, it was an era of increased public awareness of persistent sexual discrimination despite legal (and, with some caveats, economic) equality between men and women, and further disillusionment with Soviet ideals of women's social and political agency. These developments, however, impacted social life in both countries in ways that were far from homogeneous, finding different manifestations within different classes and social groups and through different cultural forms.

At the same time, this period was marked by some shared cultural and social dynamics, of which the technocratic metrics reflecting the status of women

within the broader political economy can give no indication. The rising public awareness of the “women’s question” in both countries forced closer attention to subjective and personal experiences. This legitimized questions that were otherwise relegated to the private sphere and, thus, ignored or undermined within male-dominated official discourses. At the same time, this attention to women’s private lives had the effect of reactivating gender essentialism, framed as a celebration of “authentic” and highly romanticized and sexualized femininity. Set out to challenge their respective hegemonic patriarchies, these representational models entered popular culture in a way that frequently led to reaffirmation of many crucial aspects of that same patriarchal order. Infused with the increasing appeal of international consumer culture, these changes set the stage for a distinctly neoliberal self-commodification. *Yesenia* as a cultural text positioned at the intersection of these shared dynamics fully embodies their multiple internal contradictions and conflicting cultural forces.

THE 1970s IN MEXICO: GENDER POLITICS

The 1970s in Mexico was undeniably a period of expansion for women’s movements.

Women’s liberation became a dominant motif of public practices and discourses, equally manifested in such seemingly diverse domains as religion (such as the radical program of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Cuernavaca, inspired by Marxism and liberation theology) and counterculture (with its open celebration of nudity, free love, and the lifting of gendered cultural taboos such as cursing). While their expressions were understood and practiced differently across the political and cultural spectrum, by the 1970s the demands for change in women’s status and identity in Mexican culture and society nonetheless reached the mainstream. This was increasingly visible in the media: in 1971, Lolita Ayala became the first woman coanchor of television news (she moved to Televisa when it was founded two years later), a decision based on market research confirming the importance of women viewers and, consequently, women reporters.¹³ Between 1970 and 1976, at least six major women’s activist groups were formed, including *Mujeres en Acción Solidaria* in 1971, *Movimiento Nacional de Mujeres* in 1973, *Movimiento de Liberación de la Mujer* in 1974, and the latter’s splinter group *Colectivo la Revuelta y el Movimiento Feminista Mexicano*. For the first time in Mexico’s history, these groups were able to take an active part in shaping the country’s public and political life.¹⁴ By the end of the 1980s, not least through the efforts of small yet vocal activist groups—further enabled by the United Nations World Conference on Women, celebrating the International Women’s Year, which took place in Mexico City in 1975—the disconnect between the social and political status of women in Mexico and those in the Soviet Union would not look nearly as stark.

As Eli Bartra notes, in the 1970s, the notion of “the women’s condition”—understood as the realization that women’s inferior social position was not a

matter of individual circumstances but a collective and shared situation—came into focus and reached across the spectrums of class, politics, and culture.¹⁵ At the same time, the 1975 UN World Conference, as Jocelyn Olcott explores at length, also highlighted conflicting notions of what constituted women’s liberation, as argued by the various parties involved in the event.¹⁶ State-socialist and Third-Worldist activists largely rejected questions of desire and sexuality as “bourgeois” and at odds with the overarching political goals of economic and political equality on a global scale. Many European and, especially, North American participants took the opposite position, refusing to engage with broader political and economic problems, which they considered beyond the scope of women’s activism and pertaining to the male sphere of influence. Only the more radical women’s groups, who admittedly constituted a minority within the conference, including those from Mexico, reframed the supposed “private” issues of queer identities, sex work, and family organization as inseparable from the global struggle against various forms of exploitation and violence. These diverse understandings of the goals of various women’s movements at the time—and their reflection in the conference itself—led to vocal, highly publicized disagreements and outright conflicts.¹⁷

On the “bourgeois feminist” side of the conference, Betty Friedan represented the position that was equated with the US. On the other side of the divide was Domitila Barrios de Chúnigara, a Bolivian tin miner’s wife, known for her participation in one of the key films in New Latin American Cinema, *The Courage of the People* (*El coraje del pueblo*, Jorge Sanjinés, 1971), in which she famously reenacted her role during the 1967 army massacre of the miners. As an organizer of the Housewives’ Committee—a women’s organization that actively supported miners’ unions and dealt with issues that directly affected women within that community—Domitila was an activist for economic justice. Skeptical of alliances with Western feminists and disdainful of their discourse on sexual rights (including those of sexual minorities), she saw them as undermining the economic and political rights for which she was struggling. She rejected the idea that questions of gender were articulated through sexuality, linking women’s issues directly to social and economic geopolitical inequality.¹⁸ In that perspective, she was joined by the women representatives of the Socialist Bloc, who together opposed what they perceived as a depoliticized version of women’s liberation as sexual liberation, put forth by feminists like Friedan, emphasizing instead the need for socialist transformation, modernization, and progress. Their version of equality of the sexes, though articulated in highly technocratic terms, was based on highly conventional notions of sexual difference, as we’ll see shortly.¹⁹

Mexican women activists occupied a somewhat ambivalent position within this confrontation. Demonstrating Mexico’s proximity to its northern neighbor, they were considerably more impacted by the political and intellectual development within US feminism than many of their Latin American and/or Third-Worldist counterparts, and significantly more aligned with countercultural currents, also

broadly associated with the US. As such, the rights of sex workers and sexual minorities, domestic violence, and general resistance to the culture of machismo were central to most Mexican women's activist platforms. At the same time, they were highly aware of issues of broader economic and geopolitical inequality as constitutive of patriarchy, making their position one of mediation between the two emergent currents at the Mexico City conference.

Overall, however, the event itself brought additional attention to both sets of issues confronting women in the country. And throughout the 1970s, the question of "women's condition" found an equally visible expression in the cultural sphere—from the reluctant but increasing inclusion of women writers within the literary establishment, preparing the stage for the *boom femenino* of the 1980s, to the interconnected circuit of television, movies, and women's magazines, all of which actively shaped public perceptions of appropriate models of femininity.²⁰

WOMEN'S MAGAZINES IN MEXICO

One of the reflections of social and cultural changes and economic transformations in Mexico was the sharp increase in the number and general orientation of women's magazines in the 1970s, pointing to women's increased spending potential. Thus, in addition to the already existent *Claudia*, *Buenhogar*, and *Kena*, debuting in 1973 were *Nueva Vida*, *Bienestar*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Fascinacion*, joined in 1975 by *Casa*, *Mujer*, *Ser Mujer*, and *Activa*. All of these magazines were geared toward women readers—primarily of the middle and upper-middle classes—and included a considerable amount of writing by women about women. They marketed a vision of the modern and increasingly "liberated" woman primarily through cosmopolitan consumer culture in its broadest definition—from fashion, cosmetics, design, food, and domestic products to luxury travel, vacations, and the book and music industries. At the same time, many saw their mandate in educating their readers, which entailed engaging in cultural and social debates on issues affecting women's lives. This didactic role is implicit even in their featured interviews with and articles on Mexican actresses and singers—including all the main protagonists of this book—as well as in their international coverage, which extended as far as the Socialist Bloc. In these magazines, we can decipher ongoing negotiations between notions of romantic love, marriage, sexuality, and femininity refracted in various domains.

The explosion of women's magazines in Mexico during the 1970s also marked the increasing corporate synergy of an integrated cultural industry and, more specifically, the growing power of Televisa as a cultural and media monopoly. Rómulo O'Farrill Sr., one of the owners of the publishing company behind *Claudia* and *Novedades* (the latter serving as a springboard for many aspiring women journalists, who regularly contributed to all the women's magazines at the time) was also one of the leading associates in Televisa (and TSM before it), and thus directly

connected to the production of telenovelas.²¹ It was O’Farrill who, in 1977, signed the first agreement between Televisa and the Soviet Union facilitating the broadcast of Mexican music programs on Soviet TV.²² Provenemex, which published *Activa* and *Buena Vida*, also published *TV y Novelas* (since 1978) and *Historietas* (directed by Frank Calderon, the ex-director of *Cosmopolitan*).²³

This media synergy effectively integrated women’s cultural consumption—of magazines, novels, historietas, films, and telenovelas—within one shared field, even if the class and cultural identities of these outlets were very clearly marked and did not allow for as much slippage as one would imagine. For example, during much of the 1970s, *Kena* and *Claudia* included very few mentions of telenovelas (let alone historietas), as these were cultural objects presumably belonging to a different class and social milieu. Yet, much like historietas, melodramas, and telenovelas, despite their different class orientation, magazines such as *Claudia* and *Kena* constructed the image of a modern and “liberated” woman through modes of empowerment that could be contained within—while occasionally exceeding and renegotiating—traditional patriarchal norms. Self-fashioning through consumption offered a perfect outlet for such modes of empowerment.

As has certainly been the case historically throughout the twentieth century, these modes also explicitly engaged in mediations of national belonging and imaginaries of the global. In the coverage of foreign cinema and stars, for example, we see a significant overlap between changing notions of femininity and an orientation toward foreign models of culture: to be a cosmopolitan woman increasingly meant being a liberated woman, and vice versa. And despite the increasing politicization of gender issues (even conservative women’s magazines began to frame women’s conditions in relation to broader social and political developments), this notion of a liberated cosmopolitan woman was primarily framed through greater sexual agency and mediated through romantic tropes. Both sexual and romantic self-fashioning are ultimately realizable through consumption. The same dynamic is visible in cinema’s and television’s addresses to women, and even historietas addressed to lower-class readers gave many of their heroines culturally exotic—and yet relatable—identities that could be emulated through fashion and other forms of personal consumption; conversely, narratives of the humble heroine’s transformation were also visualized through their increasingly more modern—and international—self-fashioning. But as underscored by Yolanda Vargas Dulché’s comments quoted in chapter 1—“I have always tried to teach a lesson,” and “*historietas* have taught the people to read better”—this self-fashioning was filtered through a highly didactic narrative of self-improvement.

The range of contributors to *Kena*, by far the most conservative of the women’s magazines of the era, reflects both the diversity and the internal contradictions of the available positions on women’s liberation. All three main contributors to the magazine in the late 1960s and early 1970s—Emma Godoy, Esperanza Brito de Martí, and Helen Krauze—were established women writers, were highly educated,

and belonged to prominent and culturally elite families in Mexico. They were also part of the same sphere of literary production as the authors of romance novels and historietas, occupying the only space available for women writers in the male-dominated Mexican literary establishment during the period. In the 1960s, journalism became an increasingly available option for women writers but many of them still had to find their footing in publications that were associated with female cultural consumption. The three did not, however, share exactly the same political positions, including on women's issues. Brito (who became a major activist for women's reproductive rights in the 1970s) was decidedly more radical in her pronouncements, while the considerably more religiously conservative (and older) Godoy took a cautionary tone, reminding readers that the excesses of sexual freedom were dangerous. Krauze (the mother of Enrique Krauze, one of Mexico's leading liberal cultural brokers, and grandmother of Daniel Krauze, the writer of some of the most popular recent Televisa and Netflix Mexican TV series), on the other hand, limited her discussions of women's roles specifically to the area of arts and culture, steering clear of any direct associations with contemporary feminist positions. Overall, in the early 1970s, these magazines gave an impression of coming to terms with social changes. As *Kena's* summary of its article "Love and Sex: Liberation or Subjugation?" clarifies, "this article doesn't censor or applaud the so-called 'sexual revolution' but rather confronts its existence."²⁴ And alongside the difficult topic of sexual liberation, the magazine's cover features two additional, apparently equally pressing queries: "Blond or Dark Hair? Secrets of a Good Hair Dye" and "When Should You Hit a Child?"²⁵

But what is perhaps most striking in both *Kena* and *Claudia*—the two most widely read women's lifestyle magazines in the early 1970s—is not the diversity of their contributors' positions or the relentless focus on consumption (through fashion and cosmetics advice and advertisements), domestic arts (food recipes, DIY décor, and crafts), and various forms of "light" occult content (horoscopes, articles on magic, palm reading, Nostradamus's predictions, etc.), perfectly coexisting with occasional appeals to Catholicism. Instead, what consistently comes across is the emphasis on self-perfecting narratives as a way to bring out the social/political/ethical dimensions of women's culture—constructed as distinct and gender-specific. Not only are there regular sections dedicated to women in politics—mostly foreign in *Kena*, from Indira Gandhi to Golda Meir, and markedly more Mexican in *Claudia* (although still frequently featuring wives of politicians)—but even the discussions of fashion models, singers, and actresses often take a decidedly didactic turn.²⁶ Thus, a 1970 issue of *Kena* contains an article on the "Russian Twiggy," a twenty-two-year-old Muscovite named Galia Milovskaia, presenting her not just as a fashion model but as a model for self-improvement. She is contrasted with the "real" (British) Twiggy, who apparently was unable to adequately answer questions in an interview in the *Saturday Evening Post*. Conversely, in her responses to the same questions, Milovskaia speaks eloquently of her role as a cocreator of fashion,



FIGURE 7. “Russian Twiggy” in *Kena*, 1970. Hemeroteca Nacional de México.

her learning French, her plans to enter the foreign language institute to pursue a career as a translator, and her interest in politics (“How could anyone nowadays not be interested in politics?” she asks), thereby setting the cultural standards for other women’s looks and behavior.²⁷ Similarly, an article about the former teen star, actress, and singer Angélica María (known as *La Novia de México*, Mexico’s Sweetheart) in *Claudia* is titled “Angélica María Became Self-Aware,” reflecting on her personal and social growth as a woman and a politically engaged artist.²⁸ In

other words, women's culture and the agency of its protagonists are reclaimed as serious business—albeit via their most traditional cultural spheres.

Over the course of the decade, the articles in *Kena* and *Claudia* became more aligned with Mexican feminism, extending their discussions to topics such as how women can achieve financial independence, the benefits of entering the workforce, improved education for young girls and women to encourage aspirations beyond matrimony, fathers' responsibility not to undermine daughters' self-esteem, and, above all, mothers' responsibility for instilling new progressive values in sons. On the pages of these journals, women were encouraged to find their sexuality (usually within the confines of marriage—although curiosity about extramarital sex appears even in the most conservative articles on the subject) and to direct their husbands to provide pleasure and avoid harm. This is best illustrated by the statement, from an article in *Claudia*, that “in the present day, just as the woman is demanding the right to vote, she is demanding the right to have an orgasm.”²⁹ This extension of the political and consumerist fields—framed as a matter of rights—was paradigmatic of the liberated subject as it emerged from the pages of women's magazines throughout the 1970s.

These various facets of self-realization were presented through a dense apparatus of consumer practices, most of which were highly sexualized. From fashion advice on how to achieve maximum femininity with “the new colors of intimacy” and “modern” styles of underwear³⁰ to cosmetic beauty tips for breast enlargement and other kinds of plastic surgery (advertisements for which were heavily featured even in *Kena* as early as 1969), advertising discourse was fully interwoven with articles that discussed the self-fashioning of a “real woman.” A case in point is an advertisement for the “Institute of Personality: Elegance Paris,” which offered classes in “the incredible art of increasing your personal attractiveness,” covering topics such as the perfect wardrobe, makeup, hairdos for all occasions, and social comportment (the ad features a demure, silk-clad woman with Yesenia-style hair, elegantly holding a champagne glass).³¹

And if social modes of perfecting oneself, as the name Elegance Paris suggests (complete with an extra accent, just to underscore its “Frenchness”), were culturally and geographically specific, these same discourses on womanhood were underwritten by universalist scientific-medical frameworks like psychology and psychoanalysis (the latter much debated on the pages of these journals) and by references to cutting-edge medical practices, from plastic surgery to “scientific cosmetics.” The latter advertised the use of innovative computer technologies to determine one's skin type, making even personal cosmetic preferences appear scientific.

A particularly striking articulation of such a combined approach is evidenced by a special issue of *Kena* in 1970 (the year the telenovela *Yesenia* aired) titled “Super-feminine Edition: Prohibited to Males.”³² The issue features an exposé on the possibilities of human parthenogenesis (reproduction without insemination), presented both as scientific proof of the accuracy of the Bible's notion

of immaculate conception and of the seemingly boundless potentiality of womanhood; an interview with an electrical engineer who designs silicone breast implants titled “How to Get Precious Artificial Breasts: An Electrical Engineer Possesses the Secret of Many Beautiful Mexican Women’s Beauty”; a fashion photo shoot titled “The Road to Liberty,” with a caption claiming that “today’s fashion allows women like never before to choose whatever best fits her personality,” and, in its literary section, a translation of an excerpt from an essay penned by Margaret Anderson, under the title “Love. Love. Love: The False Woman and the Woman Woman.”

The excerpt from Anderson’s essay and its framing are a particularly telling illustration of what the editors promoted as “super-femininity” (as referred to in the title of this special issue). In an editorial, a staff writer explains that Anderson’s goal in the essay is to define what constitutes the “complete woman” by using the writer George Sand as a cautionary tale illustrating its opposite, the “false woman.” Sand, the editor claims, was unable to have fulfilling relationships because she was not sufficiently different from men, thus failing to achieve the complementarity of perfect soul mates. “A true woman is the other in her complete integrity,” demanding the same from her lover, daring him “to live in an implacable realm of passion in which a true woman places her love,” claims Anderson in this published excerpt.³³ The editor, unsurprisingly, fails to mention anything about Anderson herself. Considered one of the so-called New Women of the American literary establishment and openly a lesbian, she edited, together with her lover Jane Heap Anderson, the notorious radical literary magazine *The Little Review* (which, among other things, was charged with obscenity in 1918). In the 1930s, she became a devotee of the spiritual self-development teachings of the mystic and philosopher George Gurdjieff.³⁴ The article excerpting her essay, “Love. Love. Love [. . .],” failed to provide the crucial context—both in terms of sexual politics and religious beliefs—that would have conveyed Anderson’s actual intent, which was to argue that Sand was “butch” and that therefore, to achieve “true universal unity” through love (one of Gurdjieff’s key concepts), she needed a “femme” and not a man. The excerpt published in *Kena* instead serves to underscore the importance of heterosexual passion and femininity as key attributes of the “true woman.” And, of course, this call for spiritual self-improvement was appropriately placed alongside an advertisement for breast enhancements.

The specific references to Sand and the inclusion of Anderson, however, served the additional purpose of pointing to a women’s literary canon that is rooted in the legacy of the nineteenth-century sentimental social novel. This tradition indeed provides a historical link between different melodramatic modes of representation—from the sentimental novel to the feuilleton to the *historieta* to the telenovela. In many ways, these traditions culminate in *Yesenia*, with its corresponding structuring conflicts of women’s personal freedom and communal obligations.³⁵ The excerpt’s literary references to France and the US

further legitimize the message of what constitutes an “authentic woman,” which is curiously presented as simultaneously nationally specific and cosmopolitan.

Indeed, the large majority of the material in both *Kena* and *Claudia* appeals to French, Swedish, American, or even Soviet/Russian models of womanhood or feminism—whether used as positive or negative examples, these models were marked by their national origins. Foreign movie stars such as Barbra Streisand, Vanessa Redgrave, and Katherine Hepburn were featured regularly in these magazines, as were cultural and political figures like the French director of the women’s magazine *Elle*, Indira Gandhi, leader of the Czech Parliament Soňa Pennigerová, and British writer Agatha Christie—all of whom were presented as women pioneers in their respective fields. They were clearly meant to lend appeal to the ideas of women’s liberation not only by their celebrity status but by their belonging to the cosmopolitan class, confirming the idea that being an authentic woman, a liberated woman, and a cosmopolitan woman were intrinsically interconnected. And as much as the phrase “American feminist” was used as shorthand for an “exaggerated” or “unhinged” (both words used frequently in the magazine to describe them) version of the women’s movement, virtually all the sources in psychology, sociology, anthropology, and medicine to which the articles in these journals refer are American (or occasionally British), many authored by women—their nationality and institutional affiliation used as rhetorical substantiation for the validity of their claims. This certainly also reflected the practices and cultural orientation of these journals’ middle- and upper-class readership.

Overwhelmingly, such cosmopolitan ideals translated into specific consumption practices. These ideals mediated between the desirability of foreign and cultural standards and an insistence on the importance of national identity by rhetorically embracing the eclecticism and apparent contradictions of the positions offered to the readers as markers of freedom. In short, being a liberated woman meant having unlimited choice. These discourses on fashion, similarly to variety shows in the US entertainment industry of the Cold War era conveying the image of racial liberalism, were meant to project the idea of freedom and plenitude of choice.³⁶ Starting in 1970, women’s magazines repeatedly declared that you could wear anything—and thus be anyone. The fashion briefs in *Claudia* and *Kena* declared that the newest trend in fashion is “anything goes”: both miniskirts and maxiskirts are in, pants can be just as feminine as ball gowns, and both are absolute “fashion essentials.” Mexican fashion was pronounced “both modern and traditional.”³⁷ Mexican fashion was also international fashion, claimed another headline in *Claudia*, and the pages of both *Kena* and *Claudia* offered a virtual fashion tour of the world, both in their coverage of international fashion shows and in the mode of cultural appropriations of various national styles in the Mexico-made apparel they advertised. *Kena* had its own clothing line in Mexico’s oldest and most luxurious department store, El Palacio de Hierro, including not only Italian, US, and French but also African, Japanese, and Peruvian themed collections, all

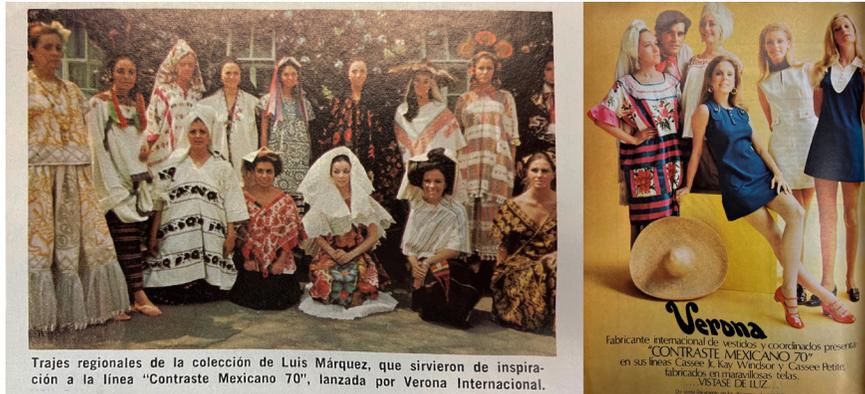


FIGURE 8. Regional dresses as inspiration for Verona's clothing line, "Mexican Contrast 70." Advertisement in *Kena*, 1970. Hemeroteca Nacional de México.

of which combined folkloric elements with space-age looks.³⁸ Needless to say, as is usually the case with fashion in women's magazines, these were purely aspirational choices. As we will see in chapter 4, in the 1970s, even the middle classes increasingly could not afford store-bought retail, let alone the high fashion advertised in the pages of *Kena* and *Claudia*. But the fantasy they constructed was both nationalist (in accordance with President Echeverría's protectionist policies, international brands were not welcome in Mexico in the first half of the 1970s) and cosmopolitan, with a Third-Worldist and indigenous-revival touch (as evident in the Mexican Contrast 70 collection of the Mexican clothing brand Verona that combined folkloric elements directly inspired by "regional costumes" with mini-skirts and pantsuits, advertised on the pages of *Kena* throughout the early 1970s).³⁹

We will return in chapter 4 to the "ethnic" aspects and specifically "gypsy" fashion in Mexico and the Soviet Union in the 1970s. But for the argument at hand, the magazines' emphasis on polystylistic fashion foregrounded the image of the woman of the future—the true, authentic, fully self-realized woman—as, above all, free and individualistic in her self-fashioning. At the same time, as both the fashion and its discourses equally emphasized, the true woman's full self-realization is possible only through romance. This is expressed directly in a *Kena* article titled "The Woman of Today and the Woman of Tomorrow," featuring Eileen Ford, a former fashion model and the cofounder of Ford Models in New York City, one of the earliest modeling agencies in the world and, in the early 1970s, among the most internationally recognized. In the article, Ford praises the freedom of choice and individualism of contemporary fashion. At the same time, she cautions, while it is certain that tomorrow's woman will be more liberated morally and mentally, one shouldn't forget that "when romanticism dies, love dies."⁴⁰ This notion was also continuously affirmed in women's magazines by engaging earlier



FIGURE 9. Advertisements for Verona dresses in the pages of *Kena*, 1970. Hemeroteca Nacional de México.

models of sentimental and melodramatic cultures: from bolero and other genres of romantic music, which dominated the music reviews and advertisements on the pages of *Kena* and *Claudia* throughout the 1970s, to repeated coverage of the stars of the Golden Age Mexican cinema.

This equal focus on sexual liberation and romantic ideals, combined with the ethos of change, is perfectly embodied in a series of advertisements for dresses by the same Mexican brand Verona (“Vestidos Verona”), which were featured in both *Kena* and *Claudia* throughout the early 1970s. One ad outlines the contour of a woman with wild curly hair, wearing a dress onto which a sunset over the beach is projected. The main tagline reads “If today you are feeling romantic, Verona dresses.” Another ad by Verona features the silhouette of a naked woman from the waist down, her private parts covered with a leaf in the colors of the brand, with a significantly longer tagline: “What do I put on? There are some women who do not conform to a simple dress, women who feel the desire to look beautiful, to change and renovate continuously. These special women never have anything to wear—until they discover Verona dresses.” These advertisements clearly outline the two aspects of their projection of an ideal woman as defined, respectively, through romance and sexuality—in a way that is self-possessed (they are the lone figures in the picture), hyper-feminine, fairly explicit in its references to sexuality, and entirely removed from any references to work or public participation.

Through women's magazines and popular cinema, the 1970s discourse of women's liberation was coded through a greater sexualization of all aspects of a woman's life, from fashion to food to money. The image of the modern woman was prescriptively constructed through a combination of consumption and sexuality, in many ways preparing for the further neoliberalization of Mexican culture in the 1980s. *Cosmopolitan* magazine, introduced to Mexico in 1973, famously embodied this notion, codifying it as the "Cosmo woman." However, this ideal was evident in Mexican media even before the magazine's debut. One aspect of this, as demonstrated in *Kena* and *Claudia*, is that over the 1970s, sexual liberation discourse moved away from the normativity of ethics or religion to the scientific/medical framework. Governmentally, this was combined with an aggressive (and largely successful) campaign against population growth that necessitated an expansion of birth control methods, which formed part of the demands of the sexual revolution.⁴¹ At the same time, the emphasis on sex and sexuality was manifested in new discourses on sexuality in women's magazines aimed at a culturally mainstream and middle-class readership,⁴² including the representation of highly sexualized women "without guilt or concealments, capable of desire," in New Mexican Cinema⁴³ and the *fichera* comedies of the late 1970s, when a more radical form of Mexican feminism found a media foothold (the latter best exemplified by the founding of *Fem* magazine). Counterculture provided an outlet for educated youth, while the pairing of romantic ideals with sexual agency was directed at the conservative stratum of the upper and aspiring middle class. This left historietas and telenovelas to speak to the lower classes, translating these changing notions of femininity for a demographic bereft of the spending power required to realize them, thus fully maintaining class hierarchies.

While mandating sexuality as "natural" for a woman—a big departure, indeed, from the patriarchal family norms of previous generations—within this new ideal the norms of femininity were absorbed into the list of responsibilities any "true" woman should take on. This included openly sexual self-expression as part of maintaining—if not augmenting—conventional desirability as the prerequisite for the ultimate goal of upward mobility, mostly achievable through marriage. This logic of sexualization did not necessarily legitimize representations of explicit sex, which remained taboo in Mexican melodramas and telenovelas alike, just as they did in Soviet cinema (although pornography would remain dialectically inseparable from them, looming large as their Other). Instead, sexuality (including increasing suggestions of female nudity) is most clearly manifested through women's self-presentation, especially in fashion and performance.

Yesenia's image in this respect is exemplary: her sexuality is highly feminized, emphasized by flowing "gypsy" skirts, revealing, low-cut ruffled tops, and dresses in soft silky fabrics and colorful, flowery designs. Her iconic hair is particularly telling in this respect—it's long and wild, unmistakably 1970s, so completely unlike the perfectly controlled beehives or helmet hairdos of the 1960s.



FIGURE 10. Yesenia's hair. DVD screen grab.

It is hyper-feminine (long and abundant), carrying unmistakable sexual connotations (“bedroom hair”), and “natural” (suggesting lack of styling), blending the traditional “gypsy” image with the “hippy/flower-child” one. It is noteworthy that the shift in hair fashion took place in 1971, which marked the arrival in Mexican fashion magazines of the kind of long, wavy hair that would culminate in Farrah Fawcett’s famous feathered haircut in the US television show *Charlie’s Angels*. The changes in Yesenia’s hair and dress mark her transformation from the first to the second half of the film. The increasing refinement—and disciplining—of her look culminates in the wedding in the film’s finale, which brings out the most traditional vision of feminine splendor in her moment of ultimate triumph.

In the Soviet context, the contrast between loose hair and the more “contained” hairdos of earlier decades was interpreted in even starker ideological terms, seen by Soviet cultural authorities as an undeniable sign of Western influence, the sexual revolution, and general moral decline. A cartoon from a satirical Soviet Lithuanian magazine illustrates the difference between a “woman” and a “café-goer”—making clear the connection between loose hair and, presumably, loose morals and/or a general state of chaos characterizing the lives of those women who frequented cafés, a common form of leisure and socialization from the 1960s on. Such loose hair became explicitly associated with “Western” sexuality—and, as a result, both extremely popular and publicly criticized—slightly earlier, after the French film *The Blonde Witch* (*La sorcière*, André Michel, 1956), featuring a sexy female lead played by Marina Vlady sporting long, tousled hair, was shown on Soviet screens.⁴⁴ Although the censorious attention of Soviet authorities had shifted by the 1970s, primarily toward men, for whom long hair was seen as evidence of their membership in the “informal” hippy culture, the associations evoked by Yesenia’s hair were still similarly unmistakable in the Soviet context.

Throughout the film, Yesenia’s sexuality is also conveyed by her mannerisms, with her posture and movements drawing attention to her plunging neckline, which is further emphasized by the signature shoulder shake of her Romani



FIGURE 11. “Woman” (left) vs. “café-goer” (right), *Šluota*, 1963. Personal collection.

dancing. She is openly at ease in expressing her feelings, which is coded as an extension of her passionate nature—and, indeed, most of the romantic scenes in the first part of the film take place outdoors, in nature. She “owns” her sexuality in her appearance, dialogue, and actions by pursuing her desires against conventional expectations, whether those placed on her by her Romani community (by marrying an outsider) or by the high society (by refusing, at least for the majority of the film, to accept its bigoted norms). And yet, ultimately, these conflicts are resolved by her incorporation into the aristocratic family, bringing her desires into harmony with the social norm while ensuring her upward mobility.

One interesting example of the complex negotiations between different models of femininity and sexual norms is the way Yesenia stands up to all unsolicited sexual advances, including those of her love interest. She slaps Oswaldo not once, but twice: early in the film, when they first meet and he kisses her against her will, which earns him an immediate slap in the face that sends him flying back into a chair; and later, during their first romantic sojourn, when he makes uninvited sexual advances and she doesn’t merely slap him but knocks him out cold with a rock. The scene is constructed for comic effect, with the eruption of violence underscoring our female protagonist’s impulsive temper—coding her as a typical “unruly woman.”⁴⁵ From its contemporary vantage point, however, Yesenia’s explosion signals not only her unruliness and disobedience, but specifically her lack of tolerance for nonconsensual sex, even with the man she loves. Only after a conversation about, essentially, the importance of consent does the couple join in a reciprocally passionate embrace.

Such behavior comes across as decidedly empowering, especially given that Mexican women (as well as those of the Soviet Union) routinely experienced intense physical abuse. In fact, prohibition of sexual violence in all its forms and the decriminalization of abortion were the two issues that successfully united various feminist movements in 1970s Mexico. Measures against rape and domestic abuse were the crucial axes along which women’s coalitions were formed and upon which they acted, resulting in the establishment of centers of support for rape victims and in other, similar legal and social initiatives.⁴⁶ The embedded thematization of sexual violence in *Yesenia* uncannily prefigures the preoccupation in Mexican audiovisual culture with—and the further exacerbation and eventual



FIGURE 12. María Félix in *Enamorada*, 1946. DVD screen grab.

eruption of—gendered violence and femicide, which came to characterize Mexican life from the 1990s onward.⁴⁷

At the same time, these scenes replay—once literally, and a second time in a more comic and exaggerated form—an earlier iconic moment of cinematic violence: the famous *cachetada* that the protagonist played by María Félix in *Enamorada* (Emilio Fernández, 1946) gives her soon-to-be lover, a revolutionary general, when he makes comments about her appearance—a slap, quickly followed by another.

Against the striking visual similarities between these scenes in the two films (down to the shared mannerisms and body language of the two heroines), the differences between them are worth pointing out. The actions of *Enamorada*'s Señorita Beatriz Peñafiel, who is the daughter of the richest man in town, speak to her expectation of the public respect that her class awards her; its violation, especially from an upstart *pelado* like Pedro Armendariz's character, is not tolerated. In the case of *Yesenia*, the class dynamic is reversed: in the first part of the film, our heroine belongs to a social stratum that makes her particularly vulnerable to sexual advances and all forms of violence. Her actions send a clear signal that she is not, contrary to expectations, a "loose woman"—simultaneously affirming her agency and virtue while subtly underscoring the shared logic of class and gendered exploitation.

The threat of sexual violence is palpable in the film, as Yesenia is continually fighting off men's advances. In fact, she is narratively introduced to the viewer through the point of view of a group of men discussing the chances of sexual consort with her and its repercussions—and before we ever hear her speak, she is forced to push one of them back as he tries to embrace her against her will. Yet we soon find out that she can hold her own in a physical confrontation and has no qualms about initiating one. When, already married to Oswaldo but not yet having been accepted into her aristocratic biological family, she is refused service in a restaurant, she knocks the tray from the waiter's hands, pulls the tablecloth from under the table where a particularly bigoted couple is having a meal, and starts a fight that turns into a massive brawl involving the whole restaurant. As pies fly in the diners' faces, Yesenia finally manages to grab a plate and enjoy both her meal and the spectacle of chaos. This scene, clearly reminiscent of the silent cinema's slapstick conventions, positions Yesenia as both initiating the social disruption and eruption of violence and reveling in it. What leads to violence is her spontaneous embodied reaction to injustice and exclusion, and at the same time she manages to remain very much in control—all qualities associated with feminist readings of the figure of an unruly woman as carnivalesque and ultimately empowering.⁴⁸

Yet this kind of representation of passionate immediacy and vitality has its limits, in that it is also a cultural stereotype specifically associated with racialized people and popular classes (one that rings equally true in both Mexico and the Soviet Union). Ironically, in the course of the film, we find out that Yesenia inherited her temper not from her Romani mother—who is meek, loving, and disapproves of stealing—but apparently from her biological father, an aristocrat. This discovery affirms the “power of bloodlines,” which forms part of the film's essentialist logic, while paradoxically subverting the stereotype, subtly suggesting that such expression of temper and violence, coming from an aristocratic male, is entirely normalized and likely to find many outlets without drawing attention to itself or constituting a disruption of social order. But despite this knowledge, which undermines the more clearly racialized and gendered assumptions of unruliness, within the narrative of the film it is Yesenia's non-belonging to the social and class order of the dominant society that allows for this fantasy of the reversal of structural violence.

In her vivaciousness, Yesenia's unruly persona serves as an allusion to yet another Mexican cinematic archetype: that of the spirited (albeit equally socially vulnerable) heroine of the *cabaretera* or *rumbera* genre—such as, perhaps most famously, Ninón Sevilla's character in *Aventurera*. As scholars from Joanne Hershfield to Julia Tuñón have repeatedly demonstrated, these spirited *rumberas* offered a disruption of the nationalist hegemony of Golden Age representations embodied in María Félix's and Dolores del Río's iconic heroines.⁴⁹ Their temper and expressive sexuality posited a corrective to the tragic passivity of the archetype of the

“doomed woman” in Mexican melodrama (the prostitute as a suffering martyr, whose template is *Santa* or *La mujer del Puerto*). Yesenia’s identity as “a gypsy,” like that of *cabareteras*, is characterized by her sensual dancing and presumptions of sexual transgressions, and is similarly socially and racial marginalized. The racialization is alluded to, in both cases, mainly through stylized “ethnic” dress, hypersexualized dancing style, and music.⁵⁰

As described in detail by Jacqueline Avila and Sergio de la Mora, the integration between the film and music industries in Mexico had particular bearing on melodramas of prostitution. This genre was invested in the theatricalization of “vices”—sexuality and other forms of tainted pleasures. The popular songs that were integral to these films’ diegesis already brought with them associations with brothels.⁵¹ This included the sensuous Afro-Cuban *danzón* and rumba, as well as the romantic *bolero*. Boleros’ greatest performer, Agustín Lara, authored many of the genre’s classics, including “Santa,” “Palabras del Mujer,” “Pecadora,” and “Aventurera”—songs whose lyrics narratively structured their respective films.⁵² At the same time, musical and dance performances expressively and affectively structured elements of sexuality and sensuality in these films, as well as their heroines’ racial alterity.⁵³ While marking Yesenia’s ethnicity with dark-brown wigs, both Fanny Cano (Yesenia in the 1970 telenovela) and Jacqueline Andere were blondes, which underscores the masquerade of their performances.

By the 1970s, however, both the nationalist melodrama and *cabaretera/rumbera* genres had ceased to be the dominant cinematic expressions in Mexico; the latter was transformed by the end of the decade into the *cinéfichera*, while the former found its strongest resonances in telenovela tropes. The porous boundaries between cultural modalities and industrial practices in 1970s Mexican cinema, however, are evident in the career of Isela Vega, the most notorious on-screen *fichera*, whose screen appearances transversed sexploitation films, avant-garde cinema, and independent filmmaking. The latter is, in fact, what allowed for her 1976 participation in the Tashkent Film Festival, despite the notorious puritanism of Soviet film culture, as discussed in chapter 1. While considerably more conservative than Vega, Cano’s and Andere’s hypersexualized star images (constructed through racy on-screen roles and even racier media publicity) never prevented them from acting as leading ladies in highly conventional telenovelas and large-budget historical melodramas.⁵⁴

If the comedic and even slapstick elements are foregrounded in several scenes of *Yesenia*, the classical melodramatic narrative formula of “sacrificial economy,” to use Carlos Monsiváis’s famous description of Mexican melodrama, is tempered in *Yesenia*, escaping a tragic “winner takes all” resolution.⁵⁵ Yesenia’s sacrifice of her love for Oswaldo for the sake of social order (because he is engaged to her half-sister) is short lived. She triumphs even despite her apparent earlier moral transgression (when believing that Oswaldo had abandoned her, Yesenia accepts a Roma lover, who had long been in love with her). And Luisa’s final sacrifice

of Oswaldo for the sake of her half-sister's happiness, which enables the story's happy ending, is rendered less dramatic by the fact that she does not die (as would be her fate in a nineteenth-century sentimental novel). Instead, she leaves for Europe, where she is more likely to find a cure, both literally and metaphorically. The conflict between individual desires and divergent social obligations is further resolved by not one but two marriages in the film, one Romani and the other Catholic, thus honoring—or, at the very least, acknowledging—both communities in a rare case of such symbolic reconciliation. Any sense of tragedy, in other words, is considerably diluted, even as compared to the moral narrative economy of a “classic” melodrama.

Thus, instead of merely reproducing melodramatic clichés, *Yesenia* references and mediates the longer history of the complex dynamics of the constructions of femininity and sexuality on the Mexican screen and its contemporary context of the global 1960s' conflicting demands of sexual liberation outside the more radical, emancipatory, and class-conscious feminist circles. Much critiqued and despised by the Mexican high bourgeoisie and leftist intelligentsia alike, the telenovela and its cinematic incarnations nonetheless successfully condensed both the cultural legacies of the past and the rapid changes of the present into a form that could appeal to those who remained marginalized by both. At the same time, the actual production and consumption dynamics of such sentimental media speak to the much more porous and dispersed cultural field of the 1970s entertainment industries. This was due in no small part to this genre's gendered nature, as many of its producers—in particular, *historieta* and telenovela writers and the journalists writing for *Kana* and *Claudia*—were women, largely belonging to the highly educated bourgeois upper classes, despite the association of the genre with the lower classes. Its female stars likewise moved across different media registers and representational modes. As *Yesenia's* success in the Soviet Union (and subsequently China) demonstrates, such porousness allowed for greater translatability to the gender politics of late socialist culture.

WOMEN'S CULTURE IN THE SOVIET UNION

If, for Mexican viewers, the cinematic version of *Yesenia* was largely an extension of the literary/comic book and telenovela versions, rife with allusions to earlier Mexican melodramas, none of these intertexts were legible to Soviet viewers. While several Mexican Golden Age classics were seen on Soviet screens in the 1950s, this was not the case for the *rumbera/cabaretera* genre, which Soviet authorities would have found too risqué. Serialized television drama was still in its very early stages and tied mostly to historical and detective genres, not to melodrama. There was no historical equivalent of the *historieta* genre (or graphic novels in general) in Russia or the Soviet Union. After its 1917 revolution, the country underwent a more radical form of state modernization than did Mexico (even if literacy campaigns

and state-directed programs for creating classical literature readership among the lower classes played a similarly decisive role in both). The Soviet cultural revolution fully subsumed the more liberal and vernacular forms of expression associated with the prerevolutionary regime, and the genre of women's romance was deemed particularly reactionary by official Soviet culture. Not only was it insufficiently political, but in its associations with lower-class vernacular expressions it clashed with the overall state project of "culturization" (*kul'turnost*), which was oriented toward middle-class Western behavioral codes on the one hand and high culture on the other. The two major magazines directed at women readers were titled "The Working Woman" and "The Peasant Woman," respectively. And although both titles shared some elements with Mexican women's magazines (such as the domestic arts, advice on proper social conduct or appropriate fashion, and concern with the well-being of family and children), they were couched in a highly politicized socialist rhetoric, which excluded romance and sexuality.⁵⁶

Virtually everything we associate with "women's culture"—its emphasis on private and subjective experiences, its melodramatic excesses, its orientation toward gendered consumption—were as much at odds with the 1920s ethos of postrevolutionary radical transformation as with Stalinist-era political jingoism. Thus, after a vigorous but short-lived cultural debate about the didactic possibilities of melodrama for postrevolutionary society (led by Anatolii Lunacharskii and Maxim Gorkii) within the film industry, it was quickly pronounced incompatible with Soviet cinema.⁵⁷ Melodrama's status within Russian and Soviet culture has a complex history. As a literary and theatrical genre in Russia, it deviated from its Western European organic—and arguably progressive—development and function, representing "an imported Western delicacy rather than a theatrical form that gave voice to a new social majority."⁵⁸ This was followed by a short-lived period in the early twentieth century, when popular women's romances (such as Anastasiia Verbitskaia's *Keys to Happiness*) became widely read and quickly adapted to the screen by prerevolutionary cinema, thus at least temporarily integrating the melodramatic mode into mainstream Russian culture. This association with prerevolutionary Russian filmmaking was one of the reasons why, despite the otherwise unreserved enthusiasm of the Soviet cinematic avant-gardes for lowbrow cinematic genres (especially those associated with American cinema—from slapstick comedy to Westerns), melodrama in Soviet film culture carried exclusively reactionary connotations. And although a number of popular Soviet 1920s films were clearly perceived as melodramas—and were advertised as such (as film exhibitors were eager to capitalize on the genre's earlier popularity with the audiences)—in criticism and official culture the term was harshly criticized. As a result, some of the same films were reclassified retroactively, and the clearly melodramatic structures and effects within subsequent Soviet films were attributed instead to other genres, whether musical or lyrical comedies or historical epics.⁵⁹

While melodrama continued to be studied and critiqued in various cultural discourses, including Russian formalists' and early Soviet film theorists' writings, it was mainly discoverable in latent and vernacular cultural forms, perhaps most evident in popular music. But as we saw in the preface, the genre's melodramatic and sentimental impulses resurfaced again with the liberalization of the Thaw, evidenced by the enormous success of *Lolita Torres*, and with it came a reconsideration of both gender norms and the discourses on romantic love. After the broad destabilization of cultural norms that characterized the Thaw period during the late 1950s and early 1960s, the polemics on the role of love and gender within Soviet society—and their representation on the screen—intensified in the late 1960s. And finally, in the 1970s, the status of melodramatic culture in the Soviet Union underwent a significant transformation, in the context of a gradual but powerful reevaluation of women's position in Soviet society. As part of this process, melodramatic culture, still decried by critics, gradually came to occupy a stable place on 1970s–1980s Soviet screens.⁶⁰ This included the emergence of the so-called “woman's film,” such as *Stepmother* (*Machekha*, Oleg Bondarev, 1973) or *I Want the Floor* (*Proshu slova*, Gleb Panfilov, 1975). Ideologically compliant with the demands of socialist realism in that they dealt with issues of labor and social conditions in women's lives, these melodramas were decidedly women-centered and ultimately argued for the primacy of the private over the public, most frequently by creating a diegetic contrast between an unhappy public life and a promise—and sometimes the unattainability—of a happy private one (most notoriously in Panfilov's film). They also proved to be some of the highest-grossing films of the decade, serving as “an important harbinger of commercial genre cinema in the Soviet film industry.”⁶¹

As part of this cultural dynamic, such “low” genres as melodrama and the television serial—which emerged in the Soviet Union in the 1970s—became a site of ideological contestation over the status of mass culture under socialism. The goal was to transform popular culture into a form of cultural and political education. For example, in the context of Soviet television production, serials, as Christine Evans argues, were initially not associated with women's culture but instead were understood as “a public, masculine cultural form” charged with politically and culturally elevating tasks on a par with documentary films.⁶² Within these early examples of Soviet TV serials, melodrama was the dominant mode—but it was usually linked to the grand themes of revolutionary and war martyrdom, socialist heroism, and collective histories, frequently with a focus on a male protagonist.⁶³ But the melodramas from Asia and Latin America, along with emerging Soviet women's films during the same period, “posed a formidable challenge to the Soviet rejection of the sentimental and ordinary women's cultures,” emerging as “key mediators between the official Soviet norms for gender, sexuality and romantic love, and their vernacular forms, which persisted against the state's ‘educational’ efforts of the previous forty-some years.”⁶⁴ Despite all the official attempts

to frame these productions through their historical and literary associations, the education they offered to the Soviet—as much as to their domestic—audiences, as Glushneva argues, was first and foremost a sentimental one.⁶⁵ And it is evident that the enduring popularity of *Yesenia*—in Mexico through its adaptation from *historieta* to telenovela to film to telenovela again, and in the Soviet Union through the enormous commercial success of the film and its longevity on cinematic and TV screens—was in no small measure due to the iconic status of its protagonist, as a model of both identification and emulation through fashion and other forms of gendered consumption.

The intensification of the debates on gender during this period, which shaped both the production and reception of these films in both countries, was due to the impact of the sexual revolution, which manifested in the two countries in rather different ways. In official Soviet discussions, the sexual revolution was equated with the “degeneracy” of capitalist culture and was seen as a major threat to the socialist social and moral order, as evidenced in the “demographic crisis” (low numbers of children born to families within the European part of the Soviet Union) of the 1970s.⁶⁶ And yet, acknowledgments of the enduring manifestations of patriarchy, unchanged by socialist policies, were becoming increasingly more public. The 1969 publication of Natalya Baranskaia’s story “The Week Like Any Other” in the journal *Novy mir* (The New World) famously voiced, in a fictionalized form, the experience of women’s exhaustion with their work and family life, which triggered more open conversations over the “double burden” faced by women.⁶⁷ The disproportionately high demands on women were even eventually recognized by the state: the head of the government himself, General Secretary of the Communist Party Brezhnev, addressing the Trade Union Congress in 1977, admitted, “We men . . . have thus far done far from all we could to ease the dual burden that [women] bear both at home and in production.”⁶⁸ In effect, as Mary Buckley argues, the Brezhnev era officially negated the old official line that the Woman Question had been solved—it was now officially unsolved.⁶⁹ These official debates, however, were nonetheless couched in the logic of socialist productivist values, positioned within the positivist parameters of political economy.

The state’s response to this situation was to further differentiate and demarcate what was appropriately “male” or “female” labor, following their assumed “anatomical-physiological peculiarities” and “moral-ethical temperament.”⁷⁰ It also became apparent that women occupied a disproportionately high percentage of low-skilled positions and fewer managerial or administrative roles, despite having more educational training in virtually every field of employment, which resulted in poorer working conditions and lower wages.⁷¹ Thus, Soviet discussions of job and pay disparity among men and women—written by both male and female social scientists and policymakers—tended to center on the need to move women “out of unsuitable jobs and into more appropriately feminine positions.”⁷² This was also often seen as a way to address the high divorce rate and increase the “stability

of the family” (which was never questioned as the main goal). Thus, somewhat paradoxically, the resulting official discourses and policies turned considerably more conservative in their gender heteronormativity.

Such positions were, of course, far from monolithic. As Lynne Attwood describes, in a debate between B. Ryabinin and E. Andreeva in the pages of a pedagogical Soviet journal, *Sem'ia i shkola* (Family and School), Andreeva launched a very familiar critique of patriarchy: “In order to believe in his strength, the modern man requires weakness in his female partner, and in order to believe in his intelligence he needs her to be stupid. This need for self-affirmation through the abasement of another person is, in fact, weakness.”⁷³ Her opponent, on the other hand, adhered to the Party line on the need to accommodate the natural limits of women to ensure the most productive outcomes. It was his position that came to dominate public discourses—and find an even greater resonance within popular culture—in the 1970s.

Increasingly departing from a conventional socialist position that more education and better employment for women would lead to greater sexual equality within the family, by the 1970s even official Soviet discussions began to claim the opposite. The documented discrepancy between the division of domestic labor between men and women was largely unquestioned, as these changes further normalized the domestic part of the “double burden” for women as “natural.” This nonchalant attitude extended to rampant sexual violence and abuse, which was exacerbated by increasing levels of alcoholism.⁷⁴ The relative lack of official Soviet intervention into cases of domestic violence was particularly paradoxical: regulated under the misleading general legal category of “hooliganism,” such enforcement was understood as the prevention of violations of public order, therefore seemingly not extending to the private sphere.⁷⁵ Police intervention in domestic disputes was largely geared toward reconciliation, even as, by “the 1980s, women in Russia were almost three times more likely to be murdered by their current or former intimate partner than women in the United States, where the rates were also comparatively high.”⁷⁶ And despite early legal interdiction of sexual harassment of women in the workplace, which took place in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, such cases were never prosecuted. Similarly, marital and acquaintance rape, which remained common throughout the Soviet period, was largely unreported and ignored by the authorities.⁷⁷ Lack of contraception and the general taboo regarding official discussions of sex and sexuality remained throughout the Soviet period, even though sex before and outside of marriage was extremely common across social classes for both men and women, despite the image promoted by the official norms.

Yet the coexisting norms of both *kul'turnost'* and romantic chivalry remained dominant, if contested.⁷⁸ As anthropologist Anna Rotkirch has shown, the cult of romantic love and courtship (part of unquestionable social rules throughout the Soviet period) and its integration into the collective socialist norms created a

latent contradiction with actual sexual practices. The romantic ideal of courtship was based on its prohibition of sexual (or even sensual) expression. This enabled its symbolic integration with the socialist collective, as well as the dominant behavioral code of *kul'turnost'* (which, in turn, was based on middle-class values, which similarly prohibited free expressions of sexuality). Gestures such as flowers or gifts served as its symbolic substitutions. As such, romanticism was linked to the high value placed on tokens of luxury. This was, in fact, the legacy of a romantic courtship model constructed in prerevolutionary Russian culture, which was in other ways precisely what the revolution presumably overthrew and replaced with socialist norms.⁷⁹ As we will see in chapter 4, negotiations of feverishly increasing consumerism, which formed an essential part of the Soviet culture of the 1970s and 1980s, partly expressed this paradox as well.

In the face of such stark discrepancy between official norms and the realities of lived experience, over the course of the 1970s and 1980s, popular perceptions of gender relations increasingly departed from both romantic codes and those of *kul'turnost'* and turned to notions of brute physical—and specifically sexual—power as foundational for interactions between the sexes.⁸⁰ A good illustration of this thesis is found in *The Princess on a Pea* (*Printsesssa na goroshine*, Boris Rytzarev, 1976), a film adaptation of several Hans Christian Andersen fairy tales. In a sequence based on the tale “The Most Incredible Thing,” a contest has been proclaimed: half the kingdom and the hand of the princess in marriage will be the rewards of he who can produce “the most incredible thing” to impress her. In the film version, various suitors present themselves to the princess, trying to woo her with their various talents and arts. The one who finally wins her heart, however, is a knight who arrives and ruthlessly destroys all the artful creations presented to her by the other suitors, taking her by force. The episode affirms the masculinist myth that women’s interests in culture and learning are merely skin-deep, and what women actually find arousing is sheer brutal power. This notion had long existed in the vernacular figure of the “real man” (*nastoiashchii muzhik*). But until the 1970s, such an aggressive view of male sexuality was deemed unacceptable within official Soviet culture, associated exclusively with the uneducated lower classes, something to be transformed by *kul'turnost'*. The film—with its genre’s implicit address to children!—demonstrates instead wholesale cultural acceptance of this notion by the late 1970s. Indeed, this would eventually become the hegemonic model of masculinity in the post-Soviet period.⁸¹ Also remarkable is that this rendition of Andersen’s tale directly reverses both the ending and the moral of the original story, in which the princess realizes that “the most incredible thing” referred to in the title is, indeed, art’s ultimate ability to withstand both violence and the test of time, and marries the artist. In the film version, the only lesson offered is that of the finale of the title story, revealing the true nature of yet another princess, this one in disguise, celebrating her fine aristocratic sensibilities through her inability to tolerate the pea hidden under

her many mattresses (a sentiment that likewise goes against the Soviet emphasis on endurance and asceticism).

Thus, as this example demonstrates, the late Brezhnev period also saw a corrosion of early Soviet principles of proletarian ethics and the gradual disappearance of all celebratory portrayals of the working class, whose symbolic capital was almost absent from 1970s cinema.⁸² While serving an important function of de-mythologizing the old Soviet ideology and socialist realist iconographies, this furthered the sense of alienation and antagonism between the urban (largely Moscow- and Leningrad-based) intelligentsia and those outside of its cultural circle, leaving popular entertainment to provide “the masses” with a sense of emotional belonging.

The breakdown of the representation of the heroic proletariat in cinema was inseparable from the cultural discourse on the “crisis of masculinity,” which symptomatically signaled the gradual but inescapable bankruptcy of Soviet patriarchy’s symbolic power. This crisis was commonly perceived as a direct, albeit belated, result of revolutionary gender politics (“women’s emancipation”), which supposedly led to the masculinization of women and their loss of “natural” sexuality—and the corresponding loss of masculinity in men.⁸³ In the face of this perceived crisis of gender identities, the essentialist notions of what makes “a real woman” and “a real man” were further reinforced—yet in ways that may not be quite obvious.

One common articulation of this “gender panic” within artistic and intellectual circles “advocated a return to a bifurcated gender order in which Russianness . . . [was] represented by rural folk culture that allegedly remained pristine and unaffected by imperial decadence, communist ideology and/or Western excesses.”⁸⁴ Such rural folk culture offered the space for expressions of emotional authenticity, which was characteristic of the earlier culture of the Thaw in both its “high” and “low” iterations, but which by the 1970s had turned into an unmistakable marker of provinciality and social marginality, reflecting the increasing cultural segmentation. Melodrama—especially historical melodrama set in prerevolutionary times—adopted these idealized imaginary structures and provided a space to code the audiences’ vulnerability, powerlessness, and pain as a guarantee of moral superiority and the promise of release.

Mexican melodramatic women’s culture—and *Yesenia* in particular—offered a comparable iteration of nostalgic historical temporality with corresponding gender dynamics, as we’ll explore at length in chapter 3. Insofar as the period was perceived as a certain crisis of patriarchal authority in both countries—of the state, the party, and the relationship between the intelligentsia and “the people”—it also brought about the need to reconsider the gender norms that undergirded such authority. Yet the more radical political manifestations of the women’s movement in the global 1960s were seen by many conservative Mexicans as too threatening to the social order, and for most Soviet women were too reminiscent of earlier postrevolutionary radicalism (which, as we have seen, by the 1970s carried almost exclusively negative connotations). At the same time, decades of full exercise of

public agency and cultural and professional participation in social life (as well as, some would argue, longer-standing cultural dynamics) made Soviet women unlikely to accept the notion of women's passivity as a natural or desired state of things. Instead, across the social spectrum these developments translated into an increased emphasis on sexual agency and romantic representation. We can see the repositioning of love and sex(uality) at the center of cultural discourse—as well as the acknowledgment of oppression of women within the domestic sphere—in both Mexico and the Soviet Union as responding not only to local conditions but also to the cultural and political impact of the global 1960s. Demands for change vis-à-vis the status quo, however, were rendered as a return to more traditional models, albeit mediated by some of the more recent socialist transformations as well as by contemporary capitalist forms of sexual commodification.

At the same time, the power of the cultural and affective politics of *Yesenia*, while projecting these modes, also speaks to the overwhelming shared sense of social and political injustices that the progressive position (whether that of the state or of radical intellectual elites) failed to address. Melodramatic culture carved out a socially legitimized space for articulating such sensibilities, which had previously been largely absent from the Soviet cultural sphere. The realm of private feelings, mobilized by melodrama, offered an alternative form of imagined collectivity and shared experiences to those previously prescribed by socialist culture. Melodramatic identification with the suffering of the characters defied the socialist ethos of struggle as the fundamental engine for social and political transformation and solidarity: socialist martyrs, populating Soviet melodramas, suffered a great deal—but always for a greater cause, and they usually died fighting.

In broader terms, the contradiction between the cultural pressures of public participation and performance of agency and the oppressive domestic and private experiences of millions of Soviet women challenged the official ideologies that privileged public over private, and civic over subjective realms. By the 1970s, the contours of public and private were reified once more. The official Soviet discourse simultaneously doubled down on its patriotic and political collective sentiments (with its celebration of the Great Patriotic War and the strengthening of the rhetoric of anticapitalist vigilance) and on the “emotional and spiritual qualities that defined features of the new Soviet person and of Soviet socialist civilization as a whole.”⁸⁵ Within popular cinema and TV, unlike in the previous decades, the collective emotional life centered increasingly on “private feelings” and a subtle, tacit avoidance of communist ideology. The melodramatic mode, in particular, allowed for the possibility of detaching the representation of love and sexuality from “meaningful” social and political relations, which characterized the official socialist women's movement.⁸⁶ As the authors of *Film and Television Genres of the Late Soviet Era* demonstrate, in the 1970s, women's struggle against patriarchy, once a staple of socialist cinema, was depicted almost exclusively in the historical contexts of revolution and war. Elsewhere, in contemporary melodrama, women's

professional and economic emancipation was toned down, questioned, or even downright condemned, such that “women’s individual self-realization becomes completely separate from the Soviet public sphere, which was usually presented as male-dominated, but simultaneously impotent and corrupt.”⁸⁷

Developed explicitly in opposition to official Soviet norms (however much those norms themselves were, indeed, in retreat), this ideological retreat to the private sphere provides the first glimpses of what would prove to be an enduring (neo)liberalization of gender norms and further sexualization of heteronormative femininity characteristic of the postsocialist era.⁸⁸ And yet, I would argue, in the 1970s this mode of representation was still in its transitional phase, successfully mediating between the older norms and newer models. As we have seen in the discussion of the film within the context of Mexican women’s culture, this kind of transitional gender regime is perfectly embodied in *Yesenia*: foregrounding women’s sexuality and individual agency without threatening either the conservative patriarchal order or the importance of communal cultures beyond the hegemonic state-sanctioned norms. As such, *Yesenia* could provide Soviet viewers with the desired qualities they saw as lacking in their contemporary culture (i.e., the emphasis on sensuality and sexuality, along with consumerism associated with femininity). Yet it did so without losing such socialist gains as the ideals of social integration of marginalized groups, or general acceptance of women’s agency, both social and personal. This seemingly contradictory position was anything but new for Soviet women, who had been highly accustomed to exercising their agency for several generations. For example, through the Soviet period, women frequently left husbands who didn’t satisfy them in marriage and, in the absence of other forms of birth control, resorted to abortion on a massive scale. This was done with or without their partners’ consent, and apparently without compromising their strongly held beliefs in the utmost importance of being a mother and a wife, or in the persistent norms of romantic courtship.⁸⁹ This effective mediation of deeply seated internal conflicts and contradictions characterized Soviet gender politics for decades.

The intersections between the “feminine” sphere and popular culture, which for much of Soviet history were at best quietly tolerated and at worst actively eradicated by state cultural policies, proved to be crucial for such renegotiations. And unlike in the 1950s, when Lolita Torres’s popularity arose against the general context of a relative lack of genre cinema, especially in its musical and melodramatic forms, *Yesenia*’s reception in the 1970s took place precisely in concert with the increasing presence of such genres and modalities on Soviet screens and in the culture at large. Melodrama—with its power to effect catharsis—dealt with the inherent and ongoing social contradictions between what was said, what was felt, and what was done. Such contradictions in many ways characterize sexual and romantic life under patriarchy more generally, but they were perhaps felt most acutely in the late socialist context, when official discourses,

everyday practices, and affective experiences were especially incongruous. These contradictions structured both the production and reception of melodramatic media and the kinds of global icons that emerged in the period—finding in *Yesenia* a perfect reflection.

The next chapter investigates more closely the specific aesthetic regimes of bad taste and kitsch that have historically been associated with melodramatic media and the feminine spheres of cultural production and consumption, focusing on their intersecting Mexican (and, more broadly, Latin American) and Russo-Soviet articulations and expressions, both in music and in cinema.