

The People, the Gray Market, and the Ballroom Gown

There are many historical reasons why the discourses on “the popular” and “the people” reached a certain fever pitch in the 1970s, in countries as geographically remote, and politically and economically distinct, as Mexico and the Soviet Union. The aftermath of the global 1960s, exacerbated by the events of 1968 (the Prague Spring in the Soviet Union and the Tlatelolco student massacre in Mexico), brought to a head the state’s crisis of legitimacy. At the same time, the vibrancy of the counterculture that arose from the same period, and its demands for radical democratization of all spheres of life, exercised considerable pressure on all aspects of cultural production. And yet, unlike in the earlier (postrevolutionary) periods that demanded—and succeeded in bringing about—a mass restructuring of society, it was no longer clear either who would be leading such a project or what “mass” entailed, in human terms. In both countries, the gaps between the notion of “people” as conceived by the socialist state or nation-state, “the masses” as they were derogatively and despairingly conceptualized by the cultural elites, and the actual collectivities formed by all those marginalized by these respective hegemones became increasingly visible.

Dismissed within traditional Marxism as the Lumpenproletariat, celebrated in postcolonial studies as the subaltern, its collective power conceptualized in autonomism as the multitude—this new non-hegemonic polity has come to stand, in recent decades, as an alternative to the earlier leftist vision of political organization of “the people.”¹ In the 1970s, it was already evident that this emerging collective identity could no longer be easily mapped out through unproblematic identification with the nation-state, traditional class structure, or party affiliation, all of which provided its earlier cohesion. The promises that

these institutions made in the subsequent decades were increasingly failing. Even in the Soviet Union, despite the absence of capitalist class exploitation, a growing sense of inequalities and radically different accesses to privilege further increased. The late capitalist shift to immaterial labor, globalization, the debt economy, and the collapse of state socialism (aka “The End of the Cold War”) would irrevocably transform social organization everywhere in subsequent decades; in the 1970s, however, these developments were far from overdetermined. The transitional nature of the period makes the questions of how to understand and where to locate “the popular” during that decade, in both Mexico and the Soviet Union, particularly challenging. Yet it is evident that the members of this polity exercised their agency through a wide range of political, cultural, and artistic practices and preferences—and it was to them that *Yesenia* apparently spoke so powerfully.

In Mexico, on the militant end of the spectrum, the impact of the eruption of state violence of 1968 pushed many activists and artists to seek independence from both state and market forces, or a “singular form of relating the autonomous and the political,” as argued by Susana Draper and others. These attempts found their cinematic expression not in the Echeverría-supported film industry but outside of it, through groups such as the Cooperative of Marginal Cinema and other Super 8 experimentations.² These attempts, however, remained at best disconnected and at worst perceived as antagonistic by a nonradicalized majority that was drifting further away from the projections of the new political Mexican culture they could offer. Soviet dissident culture, while powerful in its own right, likewise remained at best marginal to the majority of the people. Thus, rather than the utopian space in the making, or the public sphere in its liberal-democratic iteration (itself barely existing under Mexican *dictablanda*, let alone under Soviet socialism), the mainstream polity operated largely through and within the gray zone of informal practices and shadow economies, albeit inseparable from the state itself. In turn, this sphere shaped its collective identity in many ways. Various theorized as pirate modernity, the black or gray market, globalization from below, or the penumbra, the development of informal practices of (re)production and circulation that form part of this social space are usually associated with the 1980s and 1990s.³ Within the mediasphere in particular, it has been linked to the availability of audiovisual recording technologies such as VHS. At the same time, these informal modes of media reproduction were furthered by neoliberal globalization with its imposition of punitive structures of legal and economic governance, such as the World Trade Organization and the World Intellectual Property Organization. As such, they were inseparable from the breakdown of state structures (culminating in Mexico’s debt crisis of the 1980s and the collapse of the Soviet Union), which made informal economic activity one of the only available ways for many people to stay afloat—while, at the same time, its status was increasingly criminalized, especially with the introduction of antipiracy campaigns.⁴

It is certainly the case that such informal economic activity intensified with the arrival of neoliberal globalization and its “legitimate” consumer culture of shopping malls with international brands, credit cards, and, increasingly, the digital economy, and its legal status changed drastically. Yet one often forgets that prior to these changes, especially under the regime of import-substitution (which characterized both Mexico and the Soviet Union in the 1970s), various informal economies—from popular markets to domestic DIY practices—and their corresponding modes of sociability and cultural expression were firmly embedded in everyday lives in much of the world, and certainly in Mexico and the Soviet Union. From our contemporary perspective, therefore, the 1970s appears to have been a crucial transitional phase, in which the state still attempted to both subsume and mediate the spheres of (re)production and consumption but was ultimately unable to address the social and cultural fragmentation, with new forms of populism emerging on its margins. Crucially, the state itself was enmeshed in this informal black or gray market on both the macro and micro levels, and this dynamic was equally visible in both Soviet and Mexican film and media cultures.

The history of *Yesenia*'s international circulation belongs to just such a transition zone: produced in the period of fragmentation of the previously unified film industry and the rise of the new media hegemony of Televisa, it was purchased through a minor distribution company by the Soviet state for a flat sum without royalties. For decades, the Soviet state suppressed information about its exhibition and box office revenues, in fear that Mexico might challenge the legal terms of its export.⁵ In the Soviet Union, *Yesenia* was exhibited in theaters fully controlled by the state, but whose profits often relied on informal practices by the local exhibitors—such as switching the prints to increase the number of screenings of more popular foreign movies.⁶ The appeal of such productions depended not least on their distinctive styles of personal apparel, simultaneously reflecting and promoting global fashion trends—but in a way that required considerable mediations in both Mexico and the Soviet Union. The audiences relied on the informal or black markets for realizing the desires fueled by films like *Yesenia*. Much of this chapter, then, examines the specific modes of (re)production and consumption of fashion associated with *Yesenia* as another major area of resonances enabling the film's transnational reception and its affective community—modes that belonged to the gray area between market and traditional economies and state socialism, and that relied on a wide range of informal practices, technologies of individual self-realization, and communal sociability.

The relationship between melodrama, alongside other presumed “women's genres,” and the production and consumption of clothing and fashion has been at the center of much scholarship in the past several decades.⁷ Positioned at the intersection of feminism and cultural studies, the turn to fashion and other forms of consumption was itself an attempt to redirect film studies away from highbrow questions of aesthetics and art cinema and toward the ways in which



FIGURE 17. *El Informador* ads, 1971: “Yesenia wig” (top left); “Gypsy haircut, layered or curly” (left center); “Gypsy dresses, Yesenia-style” (right center). Hemeroteca Nacional de México.

cinema penetrated the everyday experiences of mass audiences. At first glance, however, *Yesenia’s* nineteenth-century period and “ethnic” costumes couldn’t be further away from the everyday fashion of the 1970s, either in Mexico or the Soviet Union.⁸ Nor were the Soviet and Mexican economies of the time attuned to or capable of the kind of corporate synergies that characterized film and fashion industries in the West.⁹ And yet, the most enduring cultural impact of *Yesenia* in both countries is, indeed, associated with fashion and personal care: it persists in the names of hairstyles, clothing shops, and beauty salons, as well as in designs for dresses, including homemade knitting and dress-making patterns.

In 1971–72 alone, the Guadalajara newspaper *El Informador* featured—alongside numerous retail items, from scarves and baby bottles to washing and sewing machines (the latter will be crucial for our discussion later in the chapter)—advertisements for “Gypsy dresses, Yesenia-style,” “Yesenia” wigs, and a “gypsy haircut, layered or curly.”¹⁰ Its lifestyle section described children’s costumes at a dress-up party as “Hungarian Yesenia outfits.”¹¹

These articles establish a clear link between *Yesenia* (as a brand or a fashion icon) and women’s consumer culture, and announce its appropriateness and apparent availability for middle-class clients in local venues, though, in both Mexico and the Soviet Union, consumption fueled by the trends in “international” fashion

seen on screens was more readily available through the more informal commercial spheres. These informal spheres capitalized on (re)selling American (or, in the Soviet case, generic “Western”) goods or their locally, often nonindustrially, produced versions: the kind of consumer “culture of the copy” that was equally characteristic of Second and Third World countries in the 1970s and 1980s.¹² This was especially the case with women’s consumer products and fashions. The Soviet Union couldn’t offer anything comparable to US department stores (so closely associated with the rise of women’s culture—and the Hollywood women’s film in particular—in the American 1930s) or British or European “high street” fashion shops with their industrially produced emulation of couture fashion for women.¹³ In Mexico, the US department stores did exist—but were affordable only to the middle-class consumers whose numbers decreased dramatically over the course of the 1970s. Moreover, President Echeverría’s economic policies strongly favored local production of consumer goods, but development in that area proved slow and limited in many parts of the country.¹⁴

More available in both countries were street markets with locally, “artistically” produced versions of the fashion items or knock-offs brought from abroad by entrepreneurial black marketeers. By the 1970s, DIY domestic production (especially of clothes and domestic consumer objects) was virtually the norm—creating more intimate relationships to these consumer goods and greater possibilities for self-fashioning. At the same time, because these practices were highly gendered, as Lilya Kaganovsky reminds us, they had the effect of further increasing the demands on women’s domestic labor.¹⁵ Like sheet music, which in the Soviet Union was still published and circulated in the face of gradually dominant bootlegged tapes (of various formats) and smuggled vinyl records, the paper patterns for dress making were published in magazines, passed around, and used to recreate domestic versions of international favorites. The sewing machine advertised right next to Yesenia wigs on the pages of *El Informador* is a casual illustration of this relationship. This mode of production and circulation was indeed both reflexive and productive of the kind of populist or subaltern collectivity that emerged in this period—positioned somewhere between the aspiration of individual neoliberal self-realization through consumption and the social interdependency of the communal network of producers and consumers characteristic of societies peripheral to “fully developed” consumer capitalism.¹⁶

This cultural formation is successfully reflected in the aesthetics of the films and TV serials of the era, which certainly contributed to audiences’ affective engagement with them. The (relatively) low budget of *Yesenia*—and, subsequently, of the Latin American telenovelas—certainly contributed to the perception of its inferior status as “trashy.” Yet this look affirmed its audiences’ cultural practices and aspirations, furthering a sense of recognition, playing a key role in the creation of emotional authenticity and intimacy, which the melodramatic mode relies on. This was the very affect that was frequently perceived as missing from the

European and North American cultural products whose high production values mirrored their respective geopolitical and economic privileges—lacking that very *cursi* regime of the copy that was both recognizable and, ultimately, imitable. To fully explore this dynamic, we need to turn once again to the relationship between melodrama and consumer culture—in its historical and comparative dimensions.

CONSUMER CULTURE AND MELODRAMA

The relationship between melodrama and consumer culture (as an extension, more broadly, of women's culture as rooted in consumerism) has been the subject of numerous studies: in the US context, star glamour in Hollywood women's pictures has historically been connected to the rise of department stores; soap opera, in turn, takes its name from assumed associations between gender, genre, and cleaning supplies, alluding to women's domestic labor.¹⁷ The assumed givenness of the precise implications of this relationship, however, deserves to be challenged. First, for Latin America, the primacy of gender in this context has been much debated—insofar as melodrama has historically functioned in relation to broader nation-state ideologies and global market forces, thereby necessitating address to audiences of all genders. And unlike soap operas, the telenovela in Latin America has been linked primarily to class—although likewise aspiring to a broader, cross-over audience.¹⁸ Neither should we assume the primacy of industrial consumption (of fashion or otherwise) as being at the core of the relationship dynamic between gender and consumption in melodramatic media. Thus, while in the case of US cinema, as Michelle Tolini Finamore explores, the shift from films that emphasized the production of fashion to those that encouraged its consumption took place in the first decades of the twentieth century, such a neat division, as this chapter will demonstrate, had not taken place as of the late 1970s, either in Mexican or Soviet cinema—or in their respective cultures.¹⁹

Given this conventional emphasis on gender and consumption, scholarship on this topic, like much of feminist cultural studies, has been divided. One approach is characterized by critiques of such practices as vehicles of passive consumption and the subjugation of women into normative gender self-expressions. The other espouses them as a liberating force for women's modern self-realization, an exercise of agency, and the emancipatory expression of gender fluidity with other identities available through the act of dressing up. While the problem of gender and consumption remains of crucial importance to our understanding of the politics of Yesenia's reception as a global icon, my approach to its analysis is more influenced by what Daniel Miller demonstrates in his study of the reception of the US soap opera *The Young and the Restless* in Trinidad.²⁰ Miller argues that the relationship between media reception and consumer culture needs to be understood through its mediations by distinctive local cultural frameworks. He focuses in particular on the dynamics of Trinidadian audiences' identification with style

(in distinction from the consumption of mass-produced street-wear), as well as the multiple functions of informal social communication engendered by it.²¹ While the latter is more pronounced for serialized melodrama (which will prove to be the case in the Soviet Union as well), *Yesenia's* reception provides an interesting variant on Miller's Caribbean-specific observations.

Indeed, Neia Zorkaia begins her discussion of the apparently inexplicable popularity of *Yesenia* by pointing to the centrality of informal networks for "spreading the word" about the film in the context of a total lack of official promotion. Zorkaia identified such word-of-mouth publicity using the Russian term *sarafannoe radio*—literally, a sarafan (referring to a traditional Russian peasant sundress) radio, a term usually reserved for gossip, with unmistakable gender and class connotations. She sees this mode of informal communication, "secret channels, unknown to sociologists, film critics, and Goskino employees, spreading its unprecedented advertisement to the whole country," as yet another manifestation of the "late-folkloric" (nonindustrialized) mode of cultural and social production that, according to her, constitutes the core of such popular cinema, emblemized by *Yesenia*.²² But the very informality of this mode of reception, as we'll see, speaks more precisely to its contemporary moment. And the term *sarafannoe radio*, too, through its invocation of earlier technologies (radio) and peasant dress, uncannily encapsulates both the anachronistic but highly mediated temporality of the collective at play and its link to women's fashion.

Miller's observations concerning what he describes as a "special relationship" between fashion and transnational soap opera reception in Trinidad are particularly relevant here: "Clothing and style have for a long period had a much more significant position in many Trinidadians' conception of themselves and their identities than may be the case in other regions. This may be directly linked to the dualism of transcendence devoted to the domestic regime, the interiorization of values, and the cultivation of 'roots' or religiosity, as against the transience associated with individualism, the outside or exterior, and a refusal of institutionalization."²³

While rooted in entirely different histories, Soviet publics certainly had their own special relationship to commodities, "cultivation of style," and material culture more broadly. Cultural historian Alexey Golubev argues that Soviet citizens' social and cultural experiences were characterized by particular "attentiveness to human-object relations—a product of particular historical conditions shaped by the planned economy, welfare state, and socialist discourses."²⁴ Borrowing from Engels, he terms this relationship "elemental materialism": "a set of spontaneous and situational cultural forms that gave Soviet people ways to make sense of this social agency."²⁵ Soviet objects and spaces, Golubev argues, "interfered in the processes of subjectivation by suggesting forms of selfhood that fell out of the civilizing frameworks of the Soviet enlightenment project."²⁶

Beyond such philosophical and *longue durée* aspects of the Soviet relationship to commodity culture—some aspects of which we encountered in the discussions of

byt and *poshlost'* in chapter 3—in the 1970s, consumption began to loom especially large in the Soviet imaginary and everyday realities, as Natalya Chernyshova demonstrates: “Soviet sociologists in the early 1980s found a strong link between material prosperity and one’s perceptions of self and others. One study showed that over 70 percent of those respondents who negatively assessed their current life situation and prospects were those who found fashionable clothes largely beyond their means.”²⁷

This is merely one illustration of Chernyshova’s overall argument that “rapid growth in private consumption and consumerism became a defining social characteristic of the era, inviting recently the suggestion that Brezhnev-era society was the scene of nothing less than a consumer revolution.”²⁸ As is evident from the cited study, “fashionable clothes” featured particularly prominently within this consumer revolution—much more so than, for example, domestic appliances, which might rationally seem like more desirable objects given the “double burden” faced by Soviet women, which such technology was designed to alleviate. Chernyshova’s chapter on fashion in her book *Soviet Consumer Culture in the Brezhnev Era* begins with this statement: “There was hardly any other consumer item in Soviet history that aroused as much controversy and passion as clothes.”²⁹ She describes a culture consisting of shops that were full and yet unable to meet consumer preferences, and shoppers who were highly discriminating, attuned to the latest changes in fashions, and eager to go to great lengths to obtain the desired outfits. They relied largely on informal networks of tailors and black marketeers, their own dress-making abilities, secondhand trade among friends and strangers, and designs obtained abroad or in fashion magazines and foreign cinema as a reliable source of information and inspiration.³⁰ The aesthetic and cultural translation and instrumentalization of the look of a Mexican “gypsy” melodrama set in the nineteenth century into wearable fashion, or, more generally, the “deciphering” of the relevant information from a culturally obtuse film, was a mechanism that for Soviet viewers was part of a familiar hermeneutic practice.

It appears that as in Miller’s observation about Trinidad, commodities as markers of fashion and style ultimately performed a particularly complex, culturally and socially symbolic function. This is especially true in regard to gender politics. Personal styling—dependent on material goods and services—in the Soviet Union, as elsewhere, was a screen onto which individual and collective fantasies, aspirations, and frustrations were projected. The interactions with the material world in this process entailed—nay, required—a great deal of skill, imagination, and social and political savvy. This was often experienced as a battlefield, a fight not only for status or comfort but for essential selfhood.

Cinema provides a perfect projection for such masquerades, so it should not be surprising that a survey conducted in the Soviet Union in 1969 showed that television and movies were the most influential means of the diffusion of fashion.³¹ Foreign films, in particular, were similarly important models for femininity: specifically the hyper-feminized and sexualized ones. This dynamic is visible even in

the reviews of *Yesenia*. The protagonist's wardrobe was even noticed by the film's first (male) Soviet reviewer, Iurii Smelkov—who, characteristically lamenting the poor taste of the audiences, mentions “beautiful dresses” several times, as both an attribute of bad melodramatic movies and an explanation for their popularity.³² And despite her critiques of “fairground” popular taste evidenced by *Yesenia*'s popularity, Turovskaia makes an exception for this mode of gender representation as “natural,” given “a sharp deficit of normal life and of eroticism of women's image” in Soviet cinema.³³ In an essay published in English in the 1990s, “Notes on Women and Film,” she further elaborates on this “deficit,” linking it to what she perceives to be a form of “radical alienation” of the Soviet woman from the “sphere of simple material consumption.”³⁴ It is worth quoting Turovskaia at length here again. Her discussion implicitly elucidates the logic governing the reception of *Yesenia* as linked to fashion, notions of gender, and material culture at large.

In identifying differences between the idea of liberation as understood by a Soviet woman (like herself) and the Western feminist one, Turovskaia recounts an anecdote a German feminist filmmaker cited as an example of sexism: being asked to appear at a film festival wearing an evening gown. In response, Turovskaia reflects that “a mean thought occurred to me—that a Soviet woman would have gone crazy with happiness to have received such a proposal. But the difference consists not only in the fact that a Soviet woman—even a director—would not always have a dress to wear for such an occasion. . . . In her everyday life there simply is no chronotope for such a dress. . . . In the crude life of the Soviet woman a ball gown is not provided for, not only materially, but morally.”³⁵

She elaborates on the total lack of “the institution of fashion, advertisement, cosmetics, perfumes, and jewelry” in the life of a Soviet woman—the lack of “normalcy,” which, she argues, renders Western feminist critique not only inapplicable to Soviet (and post-Soviet, since the piece was written in 1995) reality, but makes its exact reversal the only possibility for the Soviet version of feminism. Turovskaia summarizes her point with a saying from her grandmother: “One woman cries because she has thin pearls, another because she has thin soup”—interpreting it for the readers by concluding that “for each, the tears are equally salty and bitter.”³⁶ As with many folk sayings, the actual meaning of this proverb is rather ambiguous: one can see it either as a claim that emotions are a kind of surface phenomenon, covering the more fundamental rift between the rich and the poor; or that all women suffer from injustice, regardless of their class, constructing emotions and especially tears as a shared space—the very melodramatic community Berlant talks about. Of course, for the context we are considering, both are simultaneously true. And an evening dress—or, more specifically, a ball gown—within this discourse functions as a symptom not only of luxury per se, but also of leisure time away from the dual demands of work and domestic labor, a manner of self-realization as well as basic self-preservation. But, foreshadowing the logic of “self-care” within third-wave feminist discourse, a “ball gown” became the ultimate point

of cathexis within Soviet women's culture, both from "above" and from "below." In its associations with the prerevolutionary aristocratic culture of balls, which, indeed, in many ways defined the Russian cultural imaginary of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century aristocracy, the desire for a ball gown is a highly anachronistic and nostalgic gesture, which, as we have seen in chapter 3, coincided with the 1970s Soviet intelligentsia's idealization of prerevolutionary Russian life as a period before the gender crisis brought about by the Soviet regime.

It is worth pointing out that Turovskaiia's claims about the absence of such feminine attire from Soviet life can only be understood in the most literal terms. It is certainly true that throughout the Soviet period, many prominent film and television stars dressed themselves—as neither stylists nor ball gowns or properly fabulous stage apparel were provided by the state entertainment industry.³⁷ Thus, Soviet realities, even in the case of the very elite—stars, who projected the fantasy of glamour and luxury—were not entirely removed from the struggles of everyday consumers. At the same time, throughout the existence of the institution of Soviet (and socialist Eastern European) fashion, highly conventional evening wear was extremely prominent and projected as its essential component. In fact, from the 1960s on this marked a significant and much-commented-on difference between socialist and Western fashions, since the latter during that period became less formal and structured, and more oriented toward youth culture.³⁸ The expectation of and demand for such formal evening women's wear was, indeed, fueled by the Soviet state institutions themselves, as an indispensable part of Soviet gender ideology. At the same time, for much of the intelligentsia this was yet another proof of the regime's hypocrisy and/or of the philistinism of the official culture.

This highly contradictory and phantasmagorical significance of a gown may be one of the reasons for the exceptional popularity, in the Soviet Union in 1976, of the otherwise utterly unremarkable Egyptian melodrama *The White Gown* (*Al-Reda'a al-Abiad* / الرداء الأبيض, Hassan Razmi, 1974). One of many Egyptian melodramas released in the Soviet Union, and one whose status in Egypt's national film history is considerably lower than even that of *Yesenia* in Mexico's, its plot revolves around the female protagonist's desire for a fancy dress in the window of a shop in post-Nasser, economically liberalized Cairo. The dress, indeed, serves as a narrative catalyst for the whole film, which proved to be one of the highest-grossing films of the Soviet 1970s and the most popular Egyptian film in Soviet history.

An excessive and almost obsessive attention to dress, however, has long been something that melodrama and costume drama are known for—to the extent that spectators' reverie for the "design extravagance" of these genres seems to somewhat distract, if not detract, from melodramatic affective charge—what Jane Gaines has called "the costume idiolect" independent of narrative codes.³⁹ Thus, it should not be surprising that the number of dresses *Yesenia* wears in the movie draws attention to itself. Used in one instance to demarcate the passing of time early on in the film (when she makes Oswaldo wait for her for three days, while looking at



FIGURE 18. Yesenia's dresses. Collage of DVD screen grabs.

him from afar—each day alluded to by a different dress she wears), such variety of clothing is otherwise in excess of meaning. If we associate having a lot of clothes with a certain class status, this is certainly not the case in *Yesenia*, as these scenes take place early in the film, while she is part of the “gypsy camp”—forcing one to contemplate where she keeps these dresses, given the close quarters she shares with her mother and grandmother, and their famously mobile lifestyle.

In fact, despite the fact that her new dresses are thematized as a diegetic object of marvel and attention in the second half of the film, changes in her wardrobe once she joins her biological aristocratic family are no more or less frequent than earlier in the film, and they look considerably stodgier, more generic, and less connected to contemporary fashion—while remaining very much on display.

Such attention to wardrobe, however, and especially to dresses, was highly resonant with Soviet audiences—while constituting a crucial part of the expectations of pleasure associated with the genre of historical melodrama everywhere, but in Soviet times extending to any foreign movie or TV program.⁴⁰ The obsession with evening-wear played out as comedy even in *Holidays in Prostokvashino* (*Kanikuly v Prostokvashino*, Vladimir Popov, 1980), one of a series of enormously popular late-1970s to early-1980s animated films for children. The fashionable mom of the boy-protagonist refuses to spend their holiday at the dacha in the countryside. Her response to



FIGURE 19. *Holidays in Prostokvashino*: Mom and her closet of evening-wear. DVD grab.

her husband's and son's pleas to go to the country is "And what am I going to do with all my evening dresses there? Chop wood in them?" Instead, she insists on going to a resort where she can wear a different evening dress every night of the week. This line became a much-quoted joke owing to its obvious misogyny—as "Mom" is clearly expected to overcome such outrageous desire for a glamorous vacation and settle for a simple life of domestic labor in the countryside. But it was probably also due to a certain bitter irony embedded in it, as most Soviet women in the 1970s couldn't possibly have had so many evening dresses, as much as they would have loved to (as we know from Turovskaia). At the same time, embedded critiques of such desires were increasingly common in official discourses as part of the Soviet fight against philistinism (as we have seen in the discussion of the category of *poshlost'* in chapter 3), which intensified in the 1970s precisely because of increased consumerism, when, as Chernyshova describes, "the ranks of the intelligentsia had swelled to include much broader segments of the population, and new arrivals often strove to assert their membership in this ideologically anti-materialistic class by means of conspicuous consumption. Consequently, the intelligentsia now found itself under pressure to defend its own moral integrity as a group. Fighting against materialism came to mean fighting within one's own expanded class for a kind of purity and for the intelligentsia's ethical right to retain its traditional perception of itself as society's moral guardians."⁴¹

This position, however, was particularly vexed for women within the intelligentsia, such as Turovskaia and Zorkaia. On the one hand, as Soviet film critics, they occupied the position of guardians of good taste and antimaterialism against the philistine culture (as is evident in their attack on the “cheap” melodramatic genres). On the other, as Turovskaia’s later writing makes clear, privately they saw the lack of material resources and personal styling choices—crystallized in the image of the evening dress—as a crucial part of the oppression of women by the Soviet apparatus. And in the 1970s, for the Soviet Union, as we have seen in earlier chapters, the desired liberation of the self from the oppression of the state was seen as regaining one’s essential status as a “real woman”—despite or against the “desexualizing” Soviet ideological norms.⁴² Following the common logic of “femininity as masquerade,” so often discussed by Western feminist and film scholars alike, such an “essence,” therefore, not only was externalized but was best found “elsewhere”—in the past, or abroad, or among the internal ethnic or cultural “others”—thus offering both a stable sense of self-realized essential selfhood and an imaginary escape and freedom from it.⁴³

This dialectic is, of course, far from unique to Soviet women. For example, Pam Cook, in her discussion of British postwar costume drama, links the genre to popular adventure and historical women’s fiction: “‘Escapist’ literature of this sort, populated by gypsies, pirates and smugglers, and featuring heroes and heroines dedicated to wandering over land and sea, was prevalent during the 30s and resurfaced in the 40s with the wartime intensification of social mobility. This vagrant spirit provided the inspiration for the Gainsborough costume romances.”⁴⁴

Beyond any presumed limitations of a costume drama, both Yesenia’s “gypsy” look and her “high society” dresses strongly resonated not only with the cultural obsessions of late socialism but with those of the Mexican 1970s, as well as the global fashion trends they were mediating. Combining European ballroom gowns and the opulence associated with Empress Carlotta (of Maximilian-era Mexico), the hippie free spirit and “natural femininity” of the “gypsy style,” and the self-possessed sexuality of a modern liberated woman (and the endless consumer choices confronting her), the so-called “boho-chic” and “ethnic” fashions of the 1970s served as a powerful cultural context for *Yesenia*’s production and reception.

ETHNIC AND BOHO-CHIC FASHION COME TO MEXICO AND THE SOVIET UNION

Combining the hippie image of a “flower child”—colorful floral prints, maxidresses, big skirts, ruffles, abundant inexpensive jewelry—with various eclectic “folk” elements, the ethnic and boho-chic trends were, indeed, some of the most prevalent elements of 1970s European and US fashion, equally visible in both haute couture and mainstream clothing, as well as, of course, in movies. The adoption of the so-called “gypsy style” was part, and an extension, of this larger trend.⁴⁵ It began to

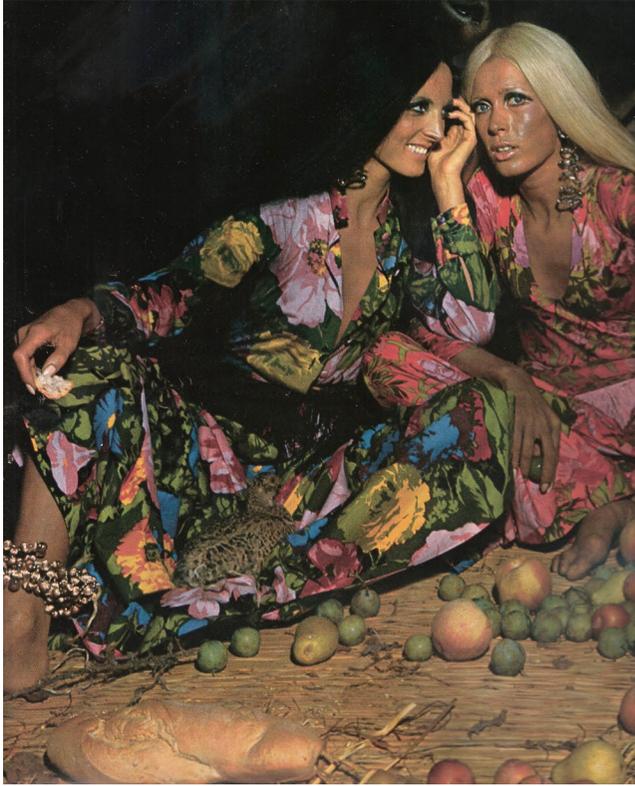


FIGURE 20. “Let Yourself Go Gypsy” photo shoot, *Look*, 1967. Public domain.

flourish in high fashion in the late 1960s, as is evident from a 1967 issue of *Look* magazine, featuring a photo shoot titled “Let Yourself Go Gypsy”—with two Italian models apparently dressed to represent the high-end fashion take on the Roma.⁴⁶

In some ways, this style and its chain of cultural appropriations—already familiar to us from the cinematic histories discussed in chapter 3—culminated in the fall of 1976, with an Yves Saint Laurent show that has been referred to interchangeably as “Carmen,” “Russian,” “Peasant Rive-Gauche,” or “Opéras-Ballets russes” (brought back the following year as “Les Espagnoles et les Romaniques” ready-to-wear collection). Mixing toreadors and models in black corsets, lace, and Bermuda shorts with fur-clad “Ballet-Russe-inspired” kaftans, turbans, and bright multicolored shawls, with banded and fitted high-hipped full maxiskirts, the collection was meant to evoke Cale Roma, Andalusian folkloric figures, and czarist-era Russian peasants in one look.⁴⁷

Nor was such conflation of various signifiers of exotic ethnicity in any way exceptional. For example, a 1968 issue of *Vogue* featured a so-called “Mexican” photo shoot titled “Fashion at the Zenith of the Sun”: models with long, flowing hair, wearing

“bohemian” maxidresses in bright colors with shawls, scarves, and oversized and ornate costume jewelry pose at various Mexican archaeological sites as a way to reference Mexican folk and indigenous culture—with an inclusion of virtually every element of “gypsy style.”⁴⁸ The high echelons of “ethnic fashion” thus indiscriminately, and at times virtually interchangeably, mixed national markers and stereotypes of primitivism—whether identified as “gypsy,” “peasant,” “Russian,” “Mexican,” or “indigenous”—with the more countercultural image of a hippie or a bohemian.

Indeed, in Mexico, “ethnic fashion” was most visible within the social stratum seemingly most opposed to global fashion trends: the counterculture. At the same time, the Mexican *jipies* began to include indigenous elements (sandals, huaraches, Oaxacan shirts and beads) in their clothing in imitation of their Western counterparts—“the reabsorption of styles that youth from abroad had already appropriated in their mutual yet quite distinct flights from and expressions of modernity,” as described by Eric Zolov in *Refried Elvis*. “In rejecting their own middle-class lifestyles,” he writes, “Mexican youth were simultaneously embracing its transnational manifestation, literally embodied in the countercultural practices of foreign hippies. This embracement, in turn, stimulated a nationalist gesture reflected in a return to the land and the revalorization of indigenous cultures. It was in this way that Mexican youth adopted the gestures of a postmodern cultural politics guided toward a counterhegemonic strategy of popular (versus ‘official’) nationalism.”⁴⁹

“Official nationalism,” however, also used ethnic clothing as a marker: thus, María Esther Zuno de Echeverría, the wife of the Mexican president, was known to appear at public functions wearing traditional indigenous clothes—although, as Mexican essayist José Agustín notes, instead of the intended associations with Frida Kahlo, these clothes brought to mind the uniforms of waitresses in the mid-dle-brow Sanborns chain.⁵⁰

At the same time, as is extremely clear from the pages of women’s magazines during the time, ethnic motifs in all their manifestations were prominent in Mexican fashion: as discussed in chapter 2, Mexican clothing line Verona’s 1970 collection—“Mexican Contrast ’70”—featured a mix of folkloric dresses, evidently inspired by regional costumes, mixed in with miniskirts and jumpsuits. Nor was the ethnic element limited to Mexico’s own heritage: thus, *Kena*’s 1972 selection of its “romantic and sophisticated style for youth fashion” features entirely incongruous “Russian-style” head scarves—demonstrating that the imaginary of an exotic Russianness was an equal part of the “ethnic” repertoire.

In many ways, these ethnic, indigenous, folkloric styles culminated, once again, in the notion of “the gypsy style”—which, as *Kena*’s review of the latest fashion trends of 1971 affirms, is “without a doubt, the big success story of contemporary fashion . . . adopted all around the world.”⁵¹ Later that year, *Kena*’s own clothing line, *Kena*, sold in the department store El Palacio de Hierro, featured two dresses “in the popular gypsy style.”⁵² *Yesenia* was released that same year, and its protagonist’s iconic look is certainly a perfect reflection of these trends.



FIGURE 21. “Romantic and sophisticated,” Russian-style, *Kena*, 1972. Hemeroteca Nacional de México.

In the Soviet Union, however, “ethnic” or “folkloric” fashion was not only already well known by the 1970s, but had a much longer history than in the West. Its deployment was one of the crucial ways that the Soviet establishment tried to reconcile the growing desire for Western cultural consumer models within official socialist parameters. Just as folk-dance elements were introduced into ballroom dance routines and folk melodic roots were emphasized in popular music (as discussed in the prelude), from the 1950s onward the “folk elements” were consistently incorporated into socialist fashion, from formal evening wear to the most casual. This incorporation performed a number of ideological functions: to claim a connection to national folk culture as a way to diminish its mass-produced status and differentiate it from its Western bourgeois capitalist origins; to infuse fashion with “politically-imposed historical references” to national cultures and demonstrate their vitality within a multinational socialist state; to underscore the connection of the fashion industry with “genuine peasant art” and encourage collaboration between professional urban artists and “the countryside.”⁵³ Thus, a showcase of formal linen dresswear in the Lithuanian fashion magazine *Banga* would be accompanied by an article on the importance of traditional fabrics in socialist production of clothing titled “Linen: the Pride of Lithuania.”⁵⁴ And despite announcing that “folkloric style converges with romantic style, and national costume elements



FIGURE 22. "Without a doubt, the big success story of contemporary fashion has been the gypsy style, adopted all over the world." *Kena*, 1971. Hemeroteca Nacional de México.



FIGURE 23. Summer fashion as seen in the pages of the Soviet Lithuanian magazine *Banga*, 1980.

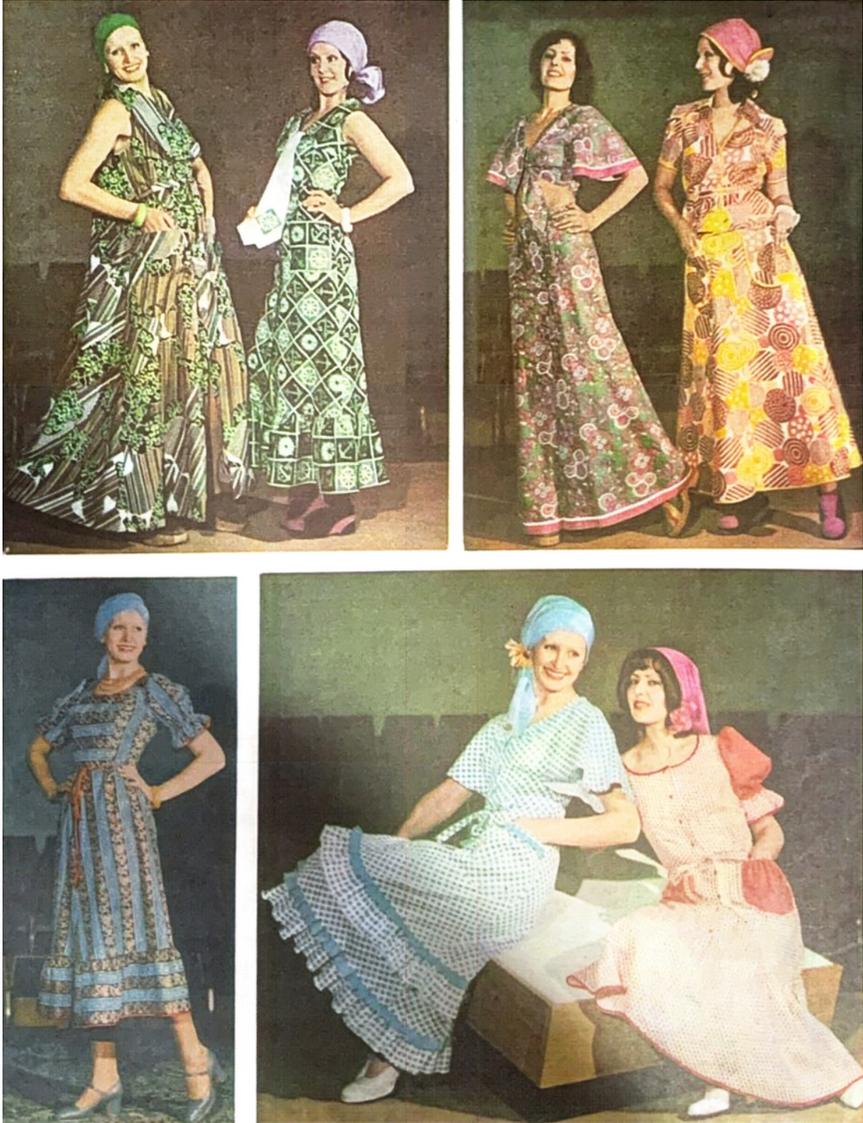


FIGURE 24. Dresses for summer resort vacations, *Banga*, 1976.

are used more moderately than before,”⁵⁵ a photo shoot depicting “combinations for sunny summer days” in the very same issue of *Banga* seems to defy that claim.⁵⁶

By the 1970s, however, even in the Soviet context these folkloric elements became detached from any such officially imposed signifiers, blending in with international fashion trends. We see this in the clothing collection of Soviet premier couturier and

fashion ideologue Viacheslav Zaitsev, nicknamed in the 1970s “the Red Dior.” His writings from the period reflect the usual cult of *kul'turnost'* with programmatic discussions of Soviet “culture of clothing” (*kul'tura odezhdy*), as opposed to the Western notion of “fashion” (*moda*), along with his prerequisite critiques of Western hippie and ethnic fashions and their “ridiculous imitations by boys and girls on Soviet streets.”⁵⁷ Yet it is hard to reconcile his continuous rhetoric of aesthetic restraint in defining the socialist culture of clothing with the eye-popping look of his 1975 collection, which seems to mirror precisely the “boho ethnic chic” and the *Yesenia* look in the very year the film took the Soviet Union by storm. Its less extravagant variations appeared on the pages of the various Soviet women's magazines, although with a caveat that they were recommended to young women only.⁵⁸

BALLROOM GOWN, WEDDING GOWN, AND QUINCEAÑERA DRESS

It wasn't only the “ethnic” or “gypsy” style that was characteristic of fashion in the 1970s. Despite all the emphasis on freedom and on youthful and informal wear, evening gowns remained firmly within the repertoire of both Soviet and Mexican fashion. Thus, *Kena's* “indispensable fashion items of 1970” included not one but two options of “essential” women's evening wear: one identified as “gala” (and resembling most closely a ball gown), and the other simply as “maxidress.”⁵⁹ In fact, much of the ethnic/gypsy fashion itself entailed elaborate long dresses—but its romantic associations were meant to connote freedom and nature, as well as unabridged passion and sensuality as definitive femininity.

But just as in *Yesenia's* narrative, bright chiffon dresses eventually gave way to formal empire wear, culminating in a wedding gown. And in Mexican fashion and culture, a formal gown occupied a very particular place. With its stylistic signifiers of complex class and historical dimensions, it remained most visible in Mexico through the persistence not only of the wedding gowns, but also of the *quinceañera* tradition: a celebration of a girl's fifteenth birthday, which entails not only a lavish party and dancing, but also a special dress. The *quinceañera* dress code (like the wedding dresses in much of the West to date) is specifically associated with the imaginary of European nineteenth-century ballroom culture—and, in the case of Mexico, specifically the Maximilian era depicted in *Yesenia*, such courtly fashions were brought from France. At the same time, the ritual celebration of a girl's reaching fifteen (*quince*) years of age as a rite of sexual maturity in Mexico has been persistently understood as an expression of national identity and “national roots”—therefore frequently attributed both to pre-Columbian indigenous practices and to the Virgin of Guadalupe. The latter as a national symbol likewise plays an important role in the narrative of *Yesenia*: *Yesenia's* true family—and Christian identity—is restored due to a locket depicting the Virgin; the film's last scene depicts *Yesenia's* (church) wedding and her praying to the Virgin, signifying her integration into the body of the nation.

While the associations between the Virgin of Guadalupe and Mexican national identity would have escaped the film's Soviet audiences, the symbolic significance and the very iconicity of her image would be equally powerful, especially as the ornamental ritual elements of worship (referred to in Russian Orthodoxy as *obriadnost'*) became an object of widespread fascination in the Soviet 1970s. This public interest, fueled by Soviet official prohibition on religion, was focused in particular on the ritual and aesthetic elements of service, including the emphasis on icons, especially of the Virgin Mary (albeit referred to in the Orthodox context as the Mother of God). Thus, such imagery became increasingly common in Soviet 1970s cinema as well.⁶⁰

And in the absence of the *quinceañera* tradition in the Russian culture, on the level of lived experience it was the traditional wedding dresses that for many in the Soviet Union became an important attribute of religious ritual, conveying authenticity of feeling in contrast to the reified bureaucratic rituals of civil marriage—while also invertedly connoting the aristocratic culture of the ballroom dress as well. In Mexico, against the ubiquity of religious culture, even more so than weddings, *quinceañera* celebrations are important across economic classes, playing a wide range of social symbolic functions. These are particularly class-coded affairs, as the choice and quality of the dress is intensely scrutinized (easily earning the pejorative description not only of being *cursi* but of being *naco*, that other culturally specific, racially inflected Mexican category of bad taste, now referring specifically to urban lower classes, as is evident even in contemporary online social media).⁶¹

The expressions of class differences through formal dress are highlighted in one of the earlier films by the director of *Yesenia*, Alfredo B. Crevenna's *Quinceañera* (1960). This film, in turn, provided a blueprint for several subsequent teen telenovelas made by Televisa in the 1990s through 2000s.⁶² In addition to illustrating once again the direct link between Mexican film melodrama and the telenovela genre, the drama of Crevenna's film—which follows three girls, one lower-class, one middle-class, and one upper-class, in their preparation for this important party—is visually marked through the characters' party dresses and narratively through the challenges of their acquisition.

In the title sequence, the three actresses are introduced one by one, dancing in their fancy *quinceañera* frocks (as seen in the film's poster). The culminating sequence of the film features two girls who appear resplendent in their gowns, while the lower-class girl, María Antonia, whose parents cannot afford the celebration, is wearing a casual dress, self-consciously pulling on its plain collar, clearly heartbroken. But María Antonia's father informs her that everyone contributed money to make sure she could have her *quinceañera*; and as the white gown is carried across the ballroom while everyone applauds, she is told that her friend's aunt made the dress for her, while the other friend gifted the fabric for it.

While the melodramatic lessons of the story—that virtue triumphs over misfortune, and that a true community, despite its internal discords, can come together to help a young girl's dreams come true—are articulated through the image of



FIGURE 25. Alfredo B. Crevenna's *Quinceañera*. DVD cover.

this dress, underscoring the symbolic importance of the (*quinceañera*) ball gown to Mexican culture, it is rather the mode of its making that particularly interests me here. The fact that the dress was literally made through communal efforts, of course, carries metaphorical meaning within the film's narrative. But it also reflects the realities of production and consumer practices in Mexico in 1960—realities that would carry into the 1970s. If, in the North American or European context of the 1960s, “high street fashion” was indicative of middle-class status, and “tailor-made clothing” pointed to higher-class positionality through its proximity to haute couture, in Mexico (as in the rest of Latin America—and, indeed, much of the world) the more artisanal modes of production were prevalent and persisted across class lines.

RETAIL, INFORMAL ECONOMIES, AND DIY PRACTICES

In Mexico, the period of transition to the market dominance of global retail took place primarily in the second half of the 1970s. While a handful of American department stores that opened in the late 1940s set the standards (and aspirations) for middle-class consumerism during Mexico's economic boom, and advertising agencies in their use of nationalist rhetoric successfully reconciled revolutionary goals with those of prosperity and consumerism, the existing industrial

manufacturing infrastructure simply couldn't keep up with the demand.⁶³ In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the US retail company Sears became the model for a new kind of apparel industry centered on readymade clothes—and women's dresses quickly became the most popular item in the store (making Mexican Sears an exception compared to its US chain, which largely specialized in hardware and big-item retail).⁶⁴ Yet the purchasing power of what Sears identified as its target consumers—the Mexican middle class and those aspiring to that status—was entirely at the mercy of the volatile economy, and even at the height of the economic boom of the 1950s and 1960s, this kind of readymade retail could never become a dominant form of consumption for the majority of the population, due to its relatively high cost. Moreover, as hard as the company tried to reconcile its commercial practices with the rhetoric of consumer nationalism, the store was continuously associated with US economic and cultural primacy—a feeling that became further magnified in the increasingly politicized 1960s and 1970s.

On the other end of the retail spectrum, in 1967, the creation of the International Salon in El Palacio de Hierro was a big gesture toward Mexico's opening up to international luxury brands. But this gesture was entirely symbolic—and the openness was rather short lived, as for much of the decade during Echeverría's presidency the fashion industry and retail market, from haute couture to street wear, remained a closed system.⁶⁵ Over the course of the decade, while various local brands (such as Verona and Kena, as we have seen in their advertisements) began to gain ascendance, the international fashions were promoted largely through the women's magazines, movies, and television—while remaining largely inspirational and adapted through local practices. With price hikes on basic and luxury goods in the 1970s, Mexicans were expected to “kick their addiction to luxury goods,” which had become the expectation of the middle class—a government-held position that was entirely at odds with the increasing advertisements in the multiplying lifestyle magazines.⁶⁶ At the same time, government-sponsored consumer credit (Fonacot) and bank credit cards were introduced to encourage spending but were largely available only to the middle classes. Essentially acknowledging that even a middle-class income was not sufficient to support the “modern” lifestyle that was so tirelessly advertised and ardently desired, at the same time, these policies further aggravated the disparities in standards of living (and began developing the economy of debt, which would fully flourish in the 1980s); however, the line between “essential” and “luxury” goods was virtually impossible to categorize.⁶⁷ The government consumer credit program, Fonacot, sponsored design competitions “with the dual goal of reducing production costs and increasing style by imitating (with cheaper materials, to be sure) high-end products.”⁶⁸ Mirroring these national industrial practices—which were themselves “copies” of the desired high-end, foreign-made luxury goods—was the persistence of homemade “luxury” items such as women's dresses and evening gowns.



FIGURE 26. Making dresses out of scarves, *Tarybinė Moteris*, 1979.

Within the Soviet context, ironically, an object comparable to a ball gown in desirability was, in many ways, its opposite: denim blue jeans. And yet, both of their meanings as markers of cultural and class status were entirely different from those in the West and/or Mexico. As Chernyshova notes, “jeans may have been the ultimate symbol of classlessness in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s, but in the Soviet Union they had become a symbol of class” and “increasingly became a prerogative of the educated urban middle classes with material aspirations.”⁶⁹ The fantasy of a ballroom gown apparently cut across various social strata, unlike jeans, the acquisition of which required both considerable skill and economic viability. The ballroom gown or “fancy dress,” however, was a fetish that was everywhere and nowhere, and this was particularly true for the “ethnic-inspired” kind of dress we see Yesenia wear. In Bartlett’s words, “An opulent dress adorned with ethnic-inspired decoration was a mythical object par excellence within the

socialist fashion narrative. Visually, the lavishness of the ethnic motif fulfilled the myth's aesthetic criteria. Moreover, due to the richness of its complicated handmade embroidery and lace ornaments, which involved highly skilled techniques, such an outfit could not be mass-produced. Instead it languished in an everlasting, perfect mythical world.⁷⁰

This aura of handmade artisanry was dialectically opposed to jeans, the symbolic value of which depended almost entirely on their being mass produced—and in the US. As Chernyshova explores, there were, indeed, many local attempts to produce denim jeans in the Soviet Union, as well as import them from countries that had friendlier trade relations with the Soviet Union. But such attempts were in vain, because “real” jeans, which could fulfill the symbolic function of social and cultural distinction, had to be from specific US brands, and consumers and local marketeers alike were highly attuned to the minute indications of inauthenticity.⁷¹

This, however, was not the case with other fashion items, whose variations and permutations were perfectly acceptable. One of the most ingenious solutions to the difficulties involved in the production of fashionable clothes is presented on the pages of the Soviet Lithuanian magazine *Tarybinė Moteris* in 1979, which proposes “to sew very playful clothes out of colorful shawls that are plentiful in our stores.”⁷² Consistent with the aesthetics of “gypsy fashion,” the article urges readers to “not be afraid to combine fabrics and shawls of different patterns” to achieve the desired results. We can see how the kind of fashion inspired by *Yesenia* did lend itself more easily to creative reproduction, allowing for freedom that rested not only on the fluidity of style and self-definition, but on adaptability to specific material conditions.

Despite very different overall economic systems, the creative ingenuity of Soviet consumption culture in the 1970s was surprisingly similar to its Mexican counterpart. Of course, the Soviet economy notoriously produced scarcity and consumer deficit, and did not have Sears, or any other American companies, to provide even the upper classes with readymade US street fashion. But on the level of an average citizen's experience, the difference was a matter of degrees, as they struggled to meet their desires for fashionable self-styling through a range of nonindustrial and informal practices: mediating Western or American consumer imagery through domestic reproduction, repurposing, or tinkering. These practices also often depended on resorting to the black market or other informal arrangements, from acquiring fabrics and designs to the more advanced domestic technologies and prototypes. This, in turn, was often enabled by the elites' travels abroad, which also increased during this period—due, somewhat ironically, to the promotion of Third-Worldist (in the case of Mexico) or cross-socialist (in the case of the Soviet Union) ties. José Agustín recounts with hilarity the shopping craze of the top echelons of the Mexican intelligentsia on the way back from a writers' conference in Argentina, when the plane had a stopover in Panama, whose Canal Zone was at the time US territory and therefore offered a full array of consumer

goods.⁷³ Similar accounts are of course plentiful in Soviet memoirs—in addition to the more systematic smuggling of goods but also, crucially, fabrics and designs, and their subsequent circulation through the black markets and other forms of informal economy enabling alternative local production and resale of clothes.

In addition to the more fluid relationship between production and consumption in the 1970s, even the more recognizably “developed capitalist” forms of consumer culture in Mexico and the Soviet Union were, above all, communal practices that relied on highly developed social skills and forms of cooperation. As Chernyshova puts it, “A Soviet consumer was a dynamic and skillful social operator, not a loner browsing boutiques or department stores at leisure. . . . [C]onsumption was a way to engage with the Soviet collective rather than isolate oneself from it.”⁷⁴ Unlike postfeminist self-fashioning and self-care as a form of neoliberal self-reliance, consumption in these contexts was embedded in community and depended on the ability to navigate its various contours and negotiate its needs. For the popular classes, in Mexico and in the Soviet Union, the primacy of the community and communal values was, more generally, still the prevailing *habitus* and the dominant cultural model—in the face of the increasingly evident betrayal of these very values by the ruling elites.⁷⁵

In the Soviet case, those ruling classes, however, still enforced the normativity of such collective practices. Golubev and Smolyak demonstrate, in their analysis of Soviet media’s construction of women’s “homemade” culture through advice columns, how “these practices established a normative basis of social communication: the norm was to exchange designs and patterns, as well as to ask each other’s advice.”⁷⁶ They further underscore the crucial role of the broader visual regime, and in particular of foreign cinema, for the construction of such communal culture as a distinctly modern practice. This was specifically the case with the adoption of “ethnic fashions”—such as those embodied by *Yesenia*. “The discourse of Soviet women’s magazines transferred do-it-yourself practices from the traditional rural domain to the normative urban culture, since ethnic patterns in one’s dress or apartment proved, as the magazine claimed, ‘an excellent taste: not a sign of backwardness, but that of the Soviet modern.’”⁷⁷ While necessarily collective, this “Soviet modern,” however, was not merely gendered as a way to produce rationally organized social space, through which gender was defined. The distinctive collectivities and spaces of collective DIY production and consumption corresponded to the reciprocally exclusive social functions men and women were supposed to perform, thus further essentializing gender identities. And such everyday gender essentialism further affirmed, and was affirmed by, the melodramatic worldview projected in *Yesenia* and other popular favorites.

In short, a quick glance at the various imaginaries and practices within the Mexican and Soviet cultures of the 1960s and 1970s, which constitute the broader context for the *Yesenia* production and its subsequent Soviet reception, attests to a more complex and distinctive relationship between melodramatic media

and women's consumer culture—one that defies many simplistic assumptions based either on the conventional US model or on the more contemporary globalized flows of commodity culture, which came to be dominant in much of the world from about the 1980s onward. While profoundly influenced by cinema and television, the social and cultural dynamics of this transitional consumer culture were deeply rooted in collective and interpersonal social networks, and in forms of individual and communal labor. In the 1970s, they were also characterized by profound ambiguities in the status of the original and the copy: a distinctive regime of mediation between state and official culture and the Western (or, in the Mexican case, often specifically American) imaginaries.

Nor can the kinds of transnational affinities activated by *Yesenia* be easily reduced to familiar forms. It does not fit within earlier forms of Third-Worldist internationalism or identifiable notions of political solidarity. The concept of “vernacular modernism” developed by Miriam Hansen, which has frequently been used to account for the international circulation of popular cinema, rooted as it is in the exemplary role of early Hollywood, clearly cannot account for this formation either. Despite the evident relevance of the legacy of vernacular cultural practices for both Russia and Mexico, their relationship to Hollywood is, if anything, reversed as compared to Hansen's concept (see chapter 3).⁷⁸ What emerges at this moment of the 1970s, then, as seen in the example of *Yesenia*, is a highly hybrid formation, mediating its earlier models of reception and circulation with new emerging forms of global media. It not only predates but also, in some ways, sets up the later patterns of what Ghosh and Sarkar theorize as the global-popular: cultural productions that are a clear extension of the commercial entertainment industry with its own patterns and interests, and yet, in their consumption, circulation, and reproduction, continuously mediated by bottom-up cultural practices relying on DIY cultures and informal economies.⁷⁹

Thus, these shared dynamics of consumer culture and fashion, as refracted in *Yesenia*'s reception, offer a framework for understanding its transnational affective power and the desires, aspirations, and attitudes that shaped its complex and contradictory politics—as well as the new potential politics it evokes. These new aspirations, practices, and communities, however, extended to the mediasphere not only via the impact of the representations projected by films and TV programs. It is through the mode of the material (re)production of media that we can locate a particular kind of collective agency, constituted through a series of social exchanges that render the subject part of the community of creative coauthors rather than a mere individual consumer. This informal circulation—first of images, texts, and music and then, with the introduction of VHS recorders and tapes, of audiovisual media at large—through its cycles of transformations further enhanced the powerful intimacy of transcultural appropriations. At times, such exchanges further solidified some of the hegemonic (patriarchal) norms and affective economies and, increasingly, reaffirmed and reproduced the unequal

economic relations and power hierarchies. At other times, though, they could trigger unexpected openings, at odds with the original producers' or distributors' motivations. Such "unruly" collective agency is recognizable to us through the familiar discourses on fandom—and here, too, most of the scholarly discussions of this phenomenon tend to focus on contemporary, internet-era creative economies, but their earlier iterations likewise offer unexpected insights. While the audiovisual media of the 1980s, with the widespread availability of VHS recorders, provides the best example of these dynamics, informal music circulation and (re) production had already set these patterns in place, as we have seen in the prelude.⁸⁰ Like fashion, which offered its virtual models through its representations within media, but whose reproduction and circulation depended on informal social circuits, music, too, was embedded in the representational regimes projected by audiovisual media—and yet its material infrastructures of circulation likewise reflected and reshaped those same social and cultural regimes.

“BÉSAME MUCHO” AND MOSCOW
DOES NOT BELIEVE IN TEARS

The specificities of this aspect of the Soviet cultural sphere are particularly well demonstrated by the reception and circulation of that ultimate hymn of Mexican melodramatic sensibility, “Bésame Mucho”—a history that reframes *Yesenia*'s, tying together many of the strands this book explores. Its popularity in the Soviet Union, unlike that of *Yesenia*, is far from unique: the song, written by a young, unknown Mexican composer named Consuelo Velázquez and first performed in Mexico in 1941 by Emilio Tuero, quickly became a hit worldwide after its US cover first reached number one on the Billboard charts of 1944. That same year, the song appeared in two “entertaining the troops” Hollywood films—*Follow the Boys* (Edward Sutherland, 1944) and *Cowboy and the Senorita* (Joseph Kane, 1944), and over the years it has been featured in dozens of films and performed by musicians ranging from Frank Sinatra to the Beatles, from Lucho Gatico to Il Divo, from Dalida to Luis Miguel. It is frequently cited as the most popular Spanish-language song of all time and a song that has generated the largest number of versions in history.

What sets the Soviet covers of “Bésame Mucho” apart from this broader history, however, is the fact that unlike their Western counterparts, they did not pay licensing fees or royalties to Velázquez. Already in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the song was performed by several Soviet singers—Gleb Romanov, Nikolai Nikitskii, and, perhaps most famously, by Ruzhena Sikora (whose career we discussed in the prelude). Given the similar popularity of *Rio Rita* on the Soviet music scene throughout the 1930s and 1940s, we can assume that the inspiration for the Russian versions of “Bésame Mucho” likewise came from the song's US covers, reflecting the US Latin boom of that period, which arrived in the Soviet Union via Hollywood wartime imports and the so-called trophy films (also discussed in the prelude).⁸¹

But after the International Festival of Youth and Students in Moscow in 1953, where the song was memorably performed by several groups from Latin America, Spanish-language versions of “Bésame Mucho” came to dominate the Soviet soundscape. In 1956 the song was included on the record released by the Trio Los Panchos, a group that was originally formed in New York City but that had relocated to Mexico (where two of its original members were from) by the 1950s, alongside a selection of other boleros, some originally written by the Trio and another by Lara. Los Panchos were themselves a crucial part of US-sponsored Cold War cultural diplomacy. Having performed for the US Army, thereby earning US citizenship, they toured not only the Soviet Union but Japan and Korea under those auspices.⁸² Thus, even these Spanish-language versions of the songs were still heavily mediated by the US mediasphere.

Velázquez’s name as the composer of “Bésame Mucho” was included on the Soviet record, and this was the version of the song that remained the standard in the Soviet Union throughout subsequent decades, while it continued to be performed everywhere by a wide range of musicians, both foreign and local, as noted by Rodolfo Echeverría on his 1972 visit.⁸³ The song’s popularity was further revived when it was included on the soundtrack of the highly successful (and Oscar-winning) Soviet melodrama *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* (1979). On the film soundtrack the song is performed by another famous trio, Los Paraguayos, with a similar genesis as official representatives of cultural diplomacy: the group was first sent to Europe in 1953 on a cultural mission to promote the music of their native Paraguay. Once in Europe, they signed on to the record label Philips, with which they would eventually sell over twenty million records, which included a range of popular Latin American romantic standards: their 1960s album is appropriately titled *The Ambassadors of Romance*.⁸⁴

This was certainly a perfect choice for the soundtrack of a film that turned out to be the most popular Soviet melodrama (selling seventy-five million tickets upon release, and securing a long life on television), and evidently the most internationally known one: the film’s Oscar for best foreign language film ensured its worldwide international distribution, which included Mexico, where it became the most successful Soviet film since the days of Eisenstein and was screened commercially and broadcast on TV.⁸⁵ The film tells the story of a young woman, Katerina, and her two girlfriends over the course of twenty years—from their arrival in Moscow in the 1950s to Katerina finally finding true love, all the while raising a child as a single mother and working her way up to become a factory’s executive director. “Bésame Mucho” plays an important narrative function in the film. The song appears as a leitmotif accompanying Katerina’s history of failed love affairs: from her first, which results in her pregnancy, to a failed relationship with a married colleague some twenty years later. In addition to serving to cue the emotional (and moralist) interpretation of these relationships as passionate but doomed, the song also serves as a link between the two epochs. When the song is first heard in the film’s

diegesis, it stands in as a marker of the period of the 1950s associated with the Thaw and emblemized by the Festival of Youth and Students, which is also featured in the film. When the audience hears its more contemporary instrumental version in the film's second part, which takes place in the 1970s, it provides additional continuity between these two historical periods and parts of Katerina's life.

Much has been said about *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* as a paradigm for the gender relations of the late Soviet period. On the one hand, it's a story of a self-made woman who comes to the capital as a provincial outsider and a factory worker and, through hard work and dedication, rises to the position of the factory's executive director, despite the challenges of being a single mother.⁸⁶ On the other hand, Katerina ultimately finds true happiness only when she finally meets Gosha, a "good decent man"—one who believes in traditional gender roles, refuses to be criticized or contradicted by a woman, and even breaks off the relationship when he realizes that Katerina earns more than he does, providing for the film's last bit of dramatic suspense. The narrative resolution, as many critics have noted, comes across as particularly successful because the heroine, in the end, can have it all: a professional career that comes with a high standard of living, motherhood, and a "real" man who can finally let her be a real woman. Gosha is a relic of Thaw-era Soviet romanticism—played, appropriately, by Aleksei Batalov, the protagonist of such seminal Thaw-era films as *Cranes Are Flying* and *Nine Years of One Year*. He is an antimaterialist (he lives in a room with barely any conveniences and has no interest in fashion or design) but also a "master builder" in his work as a mechanic, inventor, and tinkerer—all highly prized qualities of a member of the Soviet technical intelligentsia, perfectly corresponding to the gender divisions of Soviet society (he is also, inexplicably, very good at karate, as seen when he "neutralizes" a group of teenagers threatening Katerina's daughter Aleksandra and her boyfriend).⁸⁷

The characters in the film are all marked by their musical associations: thus, Katerina's affective life for much of the film is expressed through "Bésame Mucho"—passionate, romantic, and decidedly *cursi*, as befits a provincial girl in search of happiness. Her teenage daughter in the 1970s listens to Boney M, the Euro-Caribbean disco group, marking her generational belonging and hinting at the more updated international version of "bad taste" and consumerism (associated with Western music and disco in particular)—a choice that likewise would have been fully recognized by Mexican viewers in the early 1980s, when the band was enormously popular in Mexico (as in much of the world, except for North America). On the other hand, Gosha, the ultimate Soviet good guy, enjoys the Russian singer-songwriter/guitar music of *bardy* (a movement akin to the Latin American *Nueva Trova* or Italian *Canta-Autore*), a choice that is specifically associated with the previous generation of Soviet intelligentsia (of the 1960s, to whom he certainly belongs).⁸⁸ It is Gosha's choice that ultimately frames the film as a whole: the title of the main theme song, "Aleksandra"—which belongs to the same



FIGURE 27. Spanish-language poster for *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears*. Personal collection.

genre of bard music—references the name of Katerina’s daughter. The song thus serves as an integration of Katerina’s whole family under this cultural formation, subtly directing the bildungsroman of the protagonist’s sentimental education—as well as her daughter’s!—into a more appropriate, at once more tasteful and patriotic, Soviet cultural norm.

Despite the primacy of the song to the film’s soundtrack, the producers of *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* never asked for Velázquez’s permission to use it or paid fees associated with it, despite its international distribution or the fact that, in 1973, the Soviet Union had officially revised the Soviet copyright laws to conform with the Universal Copyright Convention—whose main objective was to extend copyright protection to foreign authors.⁸⁹ Velázquez granted her

permission retroactively, after her trip to Moscow in the early 1980s, where she became confronted with the ubiquity of the song in the Soviet Union—and finally received official recognition as the song’s author. Velázquez, who was well known in Mexico as an advocate for authors’ intellectual rights, served as president of the Association of the Authors and Composers of Mexico (Asociación de Autores y Compositores de México) and as the vice-president of its Panamerican Guild Organization, and seemed to have delighted in accounts of Soviet interpretations of her work.⁹⁰ According to one interview given decades later, she first heard her song immediately upon arrival in Moscow, when her taxi driver kept whistling it during the trip, and when she told him that she wrote the song, he explained to her that it was just included in *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears*—and refused to take any money from her, as a gesture of gratitude for her musical creation.⁹¹ In another interview, she remembers hearing “Bésame Mucho” in Moscow, performed by the Soviet Army choir as the final concert at the International Tchaikovsky Competition, where it was announced as a “Cuban folksong,” leading to her confronting the Soviet minister of culture regarding her authorship of the song, of which he was apparently unaware.⁹²

This purported lack of awareness of Velázquez’s authorship conflicts with the oral accounts included in the Russian TV film *Kiss Me Stronger, or Operation Bésame Mucho*, which not only reconstructs the story of the attempt by a Velázquez fan to hijack a plane (which opens the introduction of this book), but also includes accounts of how, in the 1960s, postcards featuring Consuelo Velázquez were produced on the black market and circulated all over Russia. Gennadii Mitrofanov, a deaf-mute who in the 1960s was making money by selling postcards and calendars on commuter trains, recounts in detail how he found foreign magazines with Velázquez on the cover at the house of his neighbor who was a sailor and thus traveled abroad. Mitrofanov was so taken with the photos—and even more so once he found out who this beautiful woman was—that he had another friend print them as postcards. These postcards, he claims, were “more popular than pornography and sold at higher prices,” providing him with steady income for years.⁹³ Thus, not just the song, but even the image of its composer entered into the informal economic circuit, partaking in the emotional charge—and extending the sexuality and romanticism of the music not to the performer but to the author (which, of course, was already inscribed in the original photo taken from an American magazine). In the best *cursi* style, the black-and-white postcards were decorated with hand-colored drawings of flowers or hearts, a total throwback to turn-of-the-century low-class commodity culture.

As such, this mode of circulation stands in a dialectical relationship to official Soviet efforts to similarly integrate “Bésame Mucho” into the representational regime by rendering it as a military march performed by the Soviet army choir—serving as its opposite, yet intrinsically related. Such militarization of sound is both a mode of disciplining its subaltern origins through a European nationalist/colonialist and socialist military framing and a way of imposing the collectivist



FIGURE 28. A homemade postcard featuring Consuelo Velázquez in *Kiss Me Stronger* or *Operation Bésame Mucho*. DVD screen grab.

and public onto the “personal” and private aesthetic. A perfect example of “the colonization of the ear”—particularly striking in the context of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which was taking place exactly at that time, and of the military’s overall role in Soviet society more broadly—such a rendition is as terrifying as it is ridiculous.⁹⁴ Indeed, by the late 1970s, such juxtapositions couldn’t be perceived as anything but kitschy; the pathos was as exaggerated as in the song’s performances by Andrea Bocelli and Plácido Domingo, but not as likely to generate strong positive feelings among audiences. Instead, the reception of the song’s more conventional versions, such as the ones used in *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears*, is anything but ironic—instead, the nostalgia it evokes endows the song with additional markers of sincere, if misplaced, affections and desires.

All in all, Velázquez, who was PRI deputy at the time and was married to the vice-president of the Mexican branch of RCA Records, Mariano Rivera Conde, for many years—and who, according to numerous accounts, traveled with a handbag full of diamonds, much to the dismay of Soviet customs and the various composers asked to receive her as a guest in their humble Soviet apartments—took these Soviet copyright infringements in good cheer. Velázquez’s authorship of the famous song was publicly celebrated in Russia in the early 2000s, at the international celebration of its sixtieth anniversary (occasioning many interviews and the film *Operation Bésame Mucho*). More surprisingly, her trip(s) to Moscow in previous decades had not generated the kind of publicity that could be expected of the famous composer’s visit.

What emerged clearly in the 2000s, however, was the link in the Russian public consciousness between the song and broader Latin American melodrama

production, at the very moment when Mexican telenovelas had just reached their peak on post-Soviet TV. Asked about this relationship—her song’s “preparing the population of the planet for the reception of telenovelas”—Velázquez responded merely by saying that she herself did not watch television except for classical music programs, but was not ashamed of having contributed music to telenovelas over the years.⁹⁵ Post-Soviet cultural and film critics likewise arrived at a consensus that the passions and a particular sense of recognition that “Bésame Mucho” generated in the Soviet Union were directly transformed into those the late Soviet audiences had for Latin American telenovelas. The latter was equally perceived as “far removed from the ethos of Protestant ethics and capitalism” of American culture on the one hand and from the drabness of Soviet life on the other.⁹⁶ Although they do not mention *Yesenia*, the filmmakers and critics interviewed by the makers of *Operation Bésame Mucho* perceptively construct a shared cultural and affective field of reception and its uneven nonlinear temporality—which, as I have argued here, constitute, together with the mixed informal/state-created mode of reproduction, a peculiarly socialist mode of circulation of Latin American melodramatic media.