

## 16 “Tus pinches leyes yo me las paso por los huevos”

### Isela Vega and Mexican Dirty Movies

*Sergio de la Mora*

Isela Vega's dynamic near five-decade career is defined by scandal. Vega herself interprets these 'scandals' as acts of rebellion that shake people up and push them to think critically (Díaz, 2007: 12). As Mexico's most notorious sex symbol, Vega has had, since the early 1960s, a very diverse career, appearing in close to one hundred films ranging from sexploitation (*SOS Conspiración Bikini/The Bikini Conspiracy* [René Cardona Jr., 1966] and *La pulquería/The Pulque Bar* [Victor Manuel Castro, 1980]) to art cinema (*Las apariencias engañan/Appearances Can Be Deceiving* [Jaime Humberto Hermosillo, 1983]), as well as more difficult to categorize hybrid films that combine both low- and highbrow filmic conventions (*Puños rosas/Pink Punch* [Beto Gómez, 2004]). Her films exhibit the rebellious and anti-status quo attitude of the sexual revolution and the women's liberation movement. As such, her films challenge social taboos, prejudices, sexist double standards, and oppressive Catholic morals regarding women, the body, sexual expression, and freedom of speech. She is also one of the few women to direct a feature film, *Los amantes del señor de la noche/Lovers of the Lord of the Night* (1984), before the full-fledged entrance of women into feature length directing in the late 1980s. A transnational figure, she has worked with noted film auteurs, including Sam Peckinpah (*Bring Me the Head of Alfredo García*, 1974), and has crossed national boundaries and national cinemas, moving mostly between Mexico City and Los Angeles. In the 1970s and 1980s, at the height of her career, she acted in three other U.S. productions, two made-for-TV films, and appeared in the miniseries "The Rhinemens Exchange" (Burt Kennedy, 1977) and TV shows ("The Greatest American Hero" [Robert Culp, 1983], "The Yellow Rose" [John Wilder, 1984], "Rituals" [Arlene Sanford et. al, 1984], "Stingray" [Charlie Picerni, 1986]). She works across high and low cultural categories and across media and the performing arts, alternating between film, television, classic, and countercultural avant-garde theater (*Zaratus-tra*, Alejandro Jodorowsky, 1970) as well as feminist postmodern performance and cabaret theater (*Pedro Paramount*, Jesusa Rodríguez, 2003). In the 1970s and 1980s many of her films broke box-office records in Mexico and in the U.S. Spanish-language cinema circuit. Her histrionic talents have

been recognized with three Arieles (the Mexican film industry's equivalent to the Oscar), including one for her comeback performance in *La ley de Herodes/Herod's Law* (Luis Estrada, 1999) after a fifteen-year absence from any significant big-screen production.

Vega's mere name incites heated passions and strong opinions across the emotional spectrum, from "a woman destroyed by all vices" (Monsiváis, 1990: 346) to "the woman who created a revolution in the history of Mexican erotic cinema" (Macías, 1997). Yet despite her position in Mexican cinema and her considerable impact on Mexican and greater Mexican popular culture, she has to date not been the subject of scholarly research.<sup>1</sup> Her cultural impact is only now being accessed by the academy, although public intellectuals such as Carlos Monsiváis and Elena Poniatowska wrote about her in the 1970s. A primary reason for this glaring omission among academics may be attributed to her participation in both trash cinema, such as *fichera* (brothel) comedies and internationally acclaimed auteur cinema, which makes it difficult to categorize her body of work within conventional cinematic hierarchies and topologies.<sup>2</sup> While her films occupy an uncertain status, her oeuvre has unique historical and aesthetic importance. This chapter attempts to fill the gap in Mexican film scholarship regarding Vega by performing a star study of her self-presentation in the press, interviews, films, and the marketing and critical reception of her work. It focuses on films that exploit the representation of sexuality but that also purport to be 'artistic,' exploring how elements of sexploitation share the risqué qualities of art films. It takes into consideration how sexploitation promises a commodity through "four primary sexual appeals: excitement, adventure, curiosity, and experimentation" and how excitement, in the form of "shock," dangles the possibility of "shocking viewers or to shake their sensibilities" (Schaefer, 2007: 29). It also explores how sexploitation and exploitation cinemas in general share much with high art "the same images, tropes, and themes" and "often handle explosive material that mainstream cinema is reluctant to touch" (Hawkins, 2000a: 3, 7). This chapter thus explores Vega's cross-genre leaps between art and (s)exploitation to argue that her star persona exceeds her films, suggesting that she has consciously constructed her own persona in the press as a 'bad' girl who rebels against tradition and that this offscreen persona influences the characters she plays in her movies. It also suggests that the same characteristics appear throughout her oeuvre, irregardless of whether she is acting in a high-art auteur film or a low-budget sexploitation flick.

The skewed focus in Mexican film scholarship on either Golden Age cinema (1935–1957) or the new cinemas of the 1970s and 1990s has, with few exceptions, overlooked other periods, film trends, and stars deemed not worthy of scholarly attention. Latin American film scholars such as Victoria Ruétalo (2004), Dolores Tierney (2004) and John King (2003) have noted how the considerable academic interest in these and other areas (i.e., New Latin American cinema) has meant that the continent's commercially

popular lowbrow cinemas have been overlooked. Meanwhile, Mexican film star studies scholarship is still in its infancy. Monsiváis is the major pioneer of this new area of study, with his chronicles focusing primarily on the major figures from the Mexican Golden Age (1940–1955). Following his lead, English-language star studies have also focused on the stars of the Golden Age, including the work of Ana M. López (1998), Joanne Hersfield (2000), and Paulo Antonio Paranaguá (1999), spotlighting primarily the transnational careers of the leading divas of the classic period, Dolores del Río and María Félix. Rosa Linda Fregoso (2003) and William Anthony Nericcio (2007) examine Lupe Vélez's scandal-filled career in Hollywood while I take up the career of Pedro Infante (2006) from a queer perspective. Most of these star studies are indebted to the pioneering work of Richard Dyer (1992), who has taught us to understand the ideological operations which create the star as text.

Exploitation is a relatively new concept in Mexican cinema scholarship. No Mexican critic or historian has used the term thus far to refer to any aspect of the national cinema, although Anglo scholars like Doyle Greene (2005), Andrew Syder and Tierney (2005) have. Films which could be said to fall within the exploitation category (including many of Vega's) are highly stigmatized in Mexican film scholarship but in a way that is different from the stigmatizing of U.S. exploitation indicated by Schaefer (1999), Sconce (1995), and others. Mexican exploitation films are often referred to as *churros*—the filmic equivalent of a deep-fried, inexpensive pastry, a category that identifies low-budget movies made in short shooting schedules and primarily for profit. The bulk of feature film productions made after the Golden Age period (1960s–1980s), with the exception of the new cinemas of the 1960s and 1970s, were popular commercial movies known as *churros*, which could also be labeled exploitation cinema. Indeed, it is likely that more *churros* than 'quality' films were made during this period. Vega, like other actors who work in these kinds of films, would have easily been able to participate in other production categories; in fact, there would be a need for such high-low category hopping in an industry as volatile as Mexico's. This mobility across production categories and taste draws our attention to the blurring of lines between exploitation films and art films (*cine de calidad*) in the Mexican film industry. Vega is intimately associated with low-budget films, especially soft-core *fichera* movies, often singled out as one of the major causes of the decline of Mexican cinema. Because of these disreputable films, the 1980s is seen as one of the darkest periods in the history of Mexican cinema, although Vega has in the past defended these films, citing their huge commercial success and appeal to popular audiences.<sup>3</sup>

In U.S. exploitation scholarship, star studies are rare because exploitation itself is precisely defined by lower budgets that necessarily preclude access to star players (Schaefer, 1999). Nevertheless, in a very different industrial and economic context, Latin American exploitation produces its

own stars, including Santo (the Mexican masked wrestler), Mario Almada (Mexican border/drug film), Isabel Sarli (Argentinean sexploitation star), and José Mojica Marins (Brazilian horror director/star Zé do Caixão). In Latin America and particularly in Mexico, a recurring pattern of cinematic boom and bust as well as film industry union quarrels have pushed many mainstream stars to work across genre and taste boundaries in order to secure employment. Furthermore, genre boundaries between exploitation, mainstream and art cinema are porous in Mexico, with some films simultaneously residing in more than one of these categories.

Vega was extremely influential in the sexual education of Mexicans and Chicana/os who came of age in the 1970s and 1980s. Like others, I first discovered what I interpreted as raw sexuality watching Vega at the movies. She got to bed all the beefy hunks, all of them my forbidden objects of desire. She signified an absence of inhibitions and the embrace of outlaw desires and pleasures, as well as a degree of freedom of expression previously unimaginable in the national cinema but permissible during the so-called democratic opening of the 1970–1976 presidential period. While heterosexual males appear to be the target audience of Vega's films, they also offer pleasure to women and queers (areas that require further study). This essay comments on affirmation of the female look, female sexual desire, and the eroticization of nude male bodies by characters played by Vega in *El llanto de la tortuga/The Turtle's Scream* (Francisco del Villar, 1975). Unlike other Mexican female actors before her, sex scenes with Vega show her enjoying sexual intercourse, taking pleasure in orgasms, and being an active sexual partner (i.e., she is not confined to the missionary position). In *Las apariencias engañan*, where she plays a hermaphrodite, she is shown penetrating her virile fiancée. This essay suggests that through Vega audiences can vicariously experience taboo sexuality. However, at the same time, the characters she plays rarely have an interior life; costumes, camera work, and lighting render her a sexual object.

#### A STRAIGHT-TALKING STAR WITHIN CLASS AND GENDER STEREOTYPES

Since the beginning of her acting career, Vega has cultivated the image of a tough and fierce woman, the complete opposite of the traditional submissive Mexican woman. Her characters have consistently challenged gender norms. She has displayed masculine qualities; strong on all fronts, assertive, bold, outspoken, articulate, and sexually promiscuous. Vega cemented this image in *Las pirañas aman en cuaresmal/Piranhas Make Love During Lent* (Francisco del Villar, 1971) where she plays a man-eater, a modern version of María Félix as Doña Bárbara, who, as in the classic 1943 film, rejects all local men but then falls in love with the same man as her daughter. While she is independent, she is also a sexual object as much as she wields sexual

agency. This contradiction is evident throughout her career. For Monsiváis, the use of improper language popularized in Vega's movies (e.g., her cursing like a man in *La ley de Herodes*) and the new, antiestablishment "status" of bad words in the 1970s is the product of two movements: *La Onda* (the new wave) urban youth literary movement and the 1968 student movement (1990: 343). Her use of bad words links her to the tradition of the *albur* (wordplay), the *pelado* (urban bumpkin), and thus to the popular classes. Playing the haggard and bristly brothel owner in *La ley de Herodes*, doña Lupe usurps language coded as male (for example, "tus pinches leyes yo me las paso por los huevos"/Your fucking laws can suck my balls), and with it male privilege, but she inhabits it with such authority that it does not seem forced or out of place. Doña Lupe runs her third-rate brothel with an iron fist and exploits the sex workers. Yet masculine qualities do not make her androgynous or erase her sexuality, perhaps because her legacy as sex icon codes her body as insistently female. If anything, male elements open up a space for reading her as a butch dyke, although this is a role that is not prominent in her filmography and extrafilmic materials. However 'lesbian' seductions and relationships are not uncommon in her work, notably in *El festín de la loba/The She Wolf's Orgy* (Francisco del Villar, 1972). Her on-screen propensity for straight talk, spouting obscenities, and stripping naked earned her the nickname of "Chichela," an obvious reference to her frequent exposure of her breasts (*chichis* in Mexican slang) during her youth. An online Web site dedicated to the subject of censorship in Mexican film notes, "If Isela doesn't get naked in her films she is not being herself."<sup>4</sup> In the general public's view, Vega is characterized as a vedette (little better than a whore), rather than a serious actress. Part of the problem with this (mis)perception is that Vega is viewed as always performing herself on-screen; her film roles are conflated with the real person rather than seen as the fictions they are. Vega is constantly coded as lower-class and sexual object by the press and fans alike.

### ISELA'S SEXUALITY IN THE LIMELIGHT

Vega is conflated with her on-screen characters precisely because she has played an active role in shaping her image, both on-screen and off. In an early interview with Poniatowska she emphasizes how she tries to be as true to her beliefs as possible; this entails modifying the characters she plays, most notably the script. Well known for being a highly intelligent woman, she is aware of how she is partly responsible for her own sexual commodification in roles where she is both sexual object and subject. In another interview she doesn't hesitate to articulate how, although she *wanted* to play "free spirits," the polar opposite of what a good Mexican woman should be, by playing these kinds of roles she ultimately set herself up to be typecast in the same kinds of roles (Reyes, 1999: 36).

While Vega's sex-symbol image clearly follows the cinematic tradition of her previous compatriots who also made it big in Hollywood, she is more of a liminal figure, somewhere between the feistiness of Vélez and the powerful independence of Katy Jurado. Although Vega had two different husbands, her star text never portrays her as being shackled to men. Fiercely independent off and on-screen, Vega agrees that her films' shocking themes were not there merely to shock but were in fact a politically strategic response to the conservative and repressive social context (Moreno, 2000): designed to break with the masochistic archetype of the submissive, chaste, suffering woman all too common in Mexican national cinema. If women characters ever broke with the established gender norms (as in the *cabaretera*/cabaret or dance-hall films that were popular in the late 1940s and early 1950s), they would be punished for their transgression by death or abandonment (Cuban bombshell Ninón Sevilla's characters, especially Elena in *Aventurera/Adventuress* [Alberto Gout, 1951] are a notable exception).

In *El festín de la loba*, the sexual curiosity of Teresa (Vega), an utterly proper daughter, interested in becoming a painter, is contained by the intolerance of her embittered, paralytic, and hypocritically religious mother (played by Golden Age icon Gloria Marín). Upon the death of the matriarch, Teresa proceeds to seduce everyone in her path, from a young priest to her half brother, to the nuns at the convent she enters at the film's conclusion. The film is ambiguous in its message, celebrating Teresa's sexual debauchery but also marking it as a threat and a source of corruption—it leads her sexual partners to tragic ends. *El festín de la loba* registers the necessity of breaking from stifling religious oppression. The lesson to be learned, however, is uncertain since, on the one hand, Teresa's escapades encourage the audience to indulge sexual fantasies regarding the rebellious lead actress while, on the other, both ethics and sexual education are implicitly posited as measures to balance excess and religious hypocrisy. These ideological tensions index how *El festín de la loba* struggles to break with bourgeois morality while simultaneously reinforcing it, a pattern that Salvador Elizondo (2001[1961]) argues characterizes Mexican cinema's approach to the representation of sexuality.

As part of the promotion for her leading role in *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia*, Vega famously posed for *Playboy* in 1974 in a multiple-page nude spread with the headline "Viva Vega!" The photos were taken during one of her long-term relocations to Los Angeles, a period when, in addition to her performance in Peckinpah's film, she appeared in several U.S. exploitation films, including *The Torture Chamber* (Jack Hill and Juan Ibañez, 1972). Part of the *Playboy* headline reads: "Brace Yourself, America; Mexico's High-Combustion Isela Vega . . . is Heading your Way." The nude pictorial plays on her Mexicanness in one photo in particular, shot at a slight angle, where she poses as a revolutionary, sitting in a wicker chair in front of a fireplace. Clad only with a cartridge belt crossed over her exposed breasts and snaked around her waist, an imposing rifle rests near

the fireplace at her feet; whilst her right leg is seductively crossed over the other leg (potentially to prevent a crass beaver shot). She looks straight out at the camera/spectator. The sensuous pose invites while the phallic rifle hints at danger. Both the *Playboy* spread and Pekinpah's film enhanced her international profile and reconfirmed Vega as Mexico's leading sex icon. The photographs trade on the stereotype of exoticism, violence, bandits, and excess associated in the U.S. popular media with the 1910 Mexican Revolution. The *Playboy* photos themselves and their sexy 'Revolution' theme considerably advanced her notoriety as a 'bad girl' and pinup and are evidence of the concrete ways in which she rebelled against the past and tradition.

In the 1960s and 1970s, for a traditionally Catholic society, nudity was read as a rebellion against social conventions. Nudity in the cinema significantly contributed to carving greater freedom, albeit restricted primarily to women in the cinema, visual media, and performing arts.<sup>5</sup> To strip naked was a marker of freedom of expression. For Vega, nudity was a step forward in fighting religious prohibitions against sexuality, a way to reclaim the body as something not sinful and not a source of shame and a vehement rejection of sexually repressed female characters in the national cinema. Furthermore, nudity on screen challenged censorship. Beyond her films, in interviews she repeatedly expresses a healthy relationship to the body and sexuality and is also aware that sexuality is a politically charged field. In an interview from 2004 she reconfirms that nudity was a necessary step for the liberation of Mexican men and women (Vértiz, 2004).

Only the legendary Golden Age actress María Félix rivaled Vega for her arresting transgressions of gender conventions. Like Félix, Vega's on-screen persona is that of the *Devoradora*, a man-eater. However, unlike the Golden Age diva, Vega never cultivated a haughty, upper-class arrogance. In fact, the bulk of her work in cinema is directed toward the popular classes. In a chronicle by Monsiváis she refers to her *carpa* (popular tent theater) audience as "*la raza*" (1990: 341), the well-known populist term used to refer to the common people, racialized as *mestizo* (mixed race). To reach this mass audience of common folks she uses colloquial language when addressing them, for example, as "[my] dirty, *rascuache* [low-class] public . . . You are my audience, like my brothers and family, we are children of *la chingada*" (Monsiváis 1990: 341).<sup>6</sup>

## THE EXPLOITATION INDUSTRY IN MEXICO

The sexual revolution and the countercultural movement contributed to the proliferation of erotic films from 1968 onwards. Out of 103 films produced in 1968, over 50 percent were classified either as "only for adults" or for those "21 and over" (García Riera, 1998: 263). According to Emilio García Riera, the eroticization of commercial Mexican cinema was a box-office

strategy for producers more interested in catering to middle-class desires for picaresque vulgarity rather than in maintaining family values (1996b: 8). That more and more films were classified as adults only was because of increasing amounts of female nudity (usually not full frontal), risqué themes, and 'adult language.' García Riera notes that these filmic conventions were indicative of the supposed modernity of the national cinema that sought to imitate an increasingly more daring foreign cinema (1996b: 8). This period of eroticization in Mexican cinema was continued and further radicalized by the liberal regime of Luis Echeverría that followed in 1970. The bottom line was that Mexican spectators lined up at the box office for almost any combination of sex and comedy as proven by the two-decade reign of *fichera* movies, sexy comedies, and *albur* comedies.<sup>7</sup> Images of strong self-empowered women proliferated from this period onwards as a result of women's liberation. Also key in these images of strong women was the participation of film-school-trained women directors in the film industry (Marcela Fernández Violante) and the films of 'out' gay filmmaker Jaime Humberto Hermosillo.

Exploitation cinema occupies a contested position in relation to Mexican national cinema. However, despite its low status, the sheer volume of exploitation-type films made and their enormous commercial success makes their inclusion in any account of Mexican national cinema almost inevitable, if only as examples of naïve popular culture. Low genres (masked wrestler movies, sexy comedies, *albur* comedies, narco traffic action films) consistently earned the most money at the box office from the 1960s through the 1980s. In fact, if we take consumption (i.e., what audiences are watching) as a marker of what constitutes a national cinema, as Higson suggests (1989: 38), it can be argued that exploitation effectively *became* Mexican national cinema from the 1960s onwards when in the midst of an ongoing crisis due to the advent of television and loss of foreign markets the majority of Mexican film production (and the biggest audience draws) became cheap, often low-quality serial/compilation genre films. Jorge Ayala Blanco, an institution in Mexican film criticism, is one of the few Mexican critics to champion this 'trash' cinema. The attention he gives to films that could be classified as exploitation validates trash cinema as legitimate popular cinematic expression (Ayala Blanco, 1974, 1986, 1991).

Many of Vega's films draw on conventions of exploitation and its related fields of trash and 'badfilm,' including those 'art films' made by famous Mexican auteurs (Arturo Ripstein and Paul Leduc). In keeping with Hawkins's argument cited earlier, these films, often transgressive in a Mexican context, generated huge amounts of publicity and were highly censored, particularly because of their sexual content: male and female homosexuality (*Las apariencias engañan*) and pedophilia (*La primavera de los escorpiones*); prostitution, substance abuse, and lesbianism (*Las reglas del juego/ The Rules of the Game*, Mauricio Walerstein, 1970); incest (*El festín de la loba*); graphic displays of women taking pleasure in sex acts (*La india/The*

*Indian Woman*, Rogelio A. González, 1976); audacious depictions of taboo subjects, such as the combination of sex and religion (*La viuda negra/The Black Widow*, Arturo Ripstein, 1977); and black-white racial miscegenation (*Drum*, the sequel to the cult film *Mandingo*, Richard Fleischer, 1975). Other more politically transgressive films she worked on also include critiques of Mexico's historically corrupt political system (*La ley de Herodes*) and a recent exposé of the links between terrorism and the exploitation of 'Third World' human labor and resources, *Cobrador, In God We Trust* (Paul Leduc, 2007). The titles of most of these films reveal how Vega has been enshrined as a figure connected with the daring, the liberated, and the sexual in the popular imaginary and in Mexican film history. The films' daring subject matter, representation of taboo subjects, explicit sexuality, and excessive violence are all elements that mainstream cinema tends to shy away from but are the mainstay of exploitation cinema (and also, according to Hawkins, of European art cinema and avant-garde films).

Despite depicting Vega as a rebel and 'liberated' woman, many of her films can also be seen as conservative and sexist in their objectification of her body, catering to male heterosexual voyeuristic pleasures. However, although edgy content is easily contained by these heterosexual, mainstream tendencies in the films, their subversive quality lingers. A case in point is the daring Oedipal drama *La india*, where Vega appears nude 90 percent of the time figuring seemingly as *only* a body that functions as visual spectacle and object of sexual desire (she has no more than ten lines of dialogue in the entire film). Vega's performance in *La india*, however, contests this conservative interpretation, because her sheer excessiveness suggests an ironic undermining of her as body/object (this is the case in many of the films she made with Francisco del Villar). In most of del Villar's films she portrays independent women with agency who speak their mind and are unafraid of social norms or the potential threat of male sexual aggression. Even when she is a survivor of sexual violence she is never a passive victim. In *La viuda negra*, for instance, a seemingly proper small-town doctor attempts to rape her but, to his surprise, she fights him off with fists and screams. A similar rape scene is repeated in the film *El llanto de la Tortuga*, which, in its treatment of daring, outrageous, and shocking subject matter is very typical of Vega's films, but shows some of the problems with seeing her work as purely progressive.

### WHO HAS BIGGER PECS, ISELA OR JORGE?

Rather than focusing exclusively on Vega's star image in *El llanto de la tortuga*, this next section explores how she became a notorious figure by looking at the film's marketing and international reception. Although her fourth and most commercially successful collaboration with zoophilic del Villar includes an all-star cast of regulars in (s)exploitation-type movies,

Vega gets top billing. The film is set in an opulent ocean-side mansion in Acapulco and was advertised as a raw exposé and social denunciation of the decadent excesses of four young and wealthy individuals from Mexico City. What starts out as a weekend birthday bash in honor of Héctor (Hugo Stiglitz) escalates into an aggressive orgy, culminating in murder. The party is attended by Héctor's virginal sister Isabel (Cecilia Pezet), with whom Héctor has an incestuous relationship; Carlos (Jorge Rivero), his childhood friend and rival; and Diana (Vega), Carlos's partner. At the film's conclusion, their social status makes them immune to punishment; the detectives assigned to investigate the (butler's) murder choose to look the other way as the group leaves for a party that evening. In the stalwart tradition of Mexican melodrama, class conflicts are contained by simply affirming that the wealthy middle classes are an unhappy crowd.

The camp elements in this film make it a highlight of Vega's career. As the first evening progresses, hosts and guests, drunk on champagne, are portrayed as utterly cynical, arrogant, perverse, cruel, and decadent; as they (particularly Diana and Carlos) continually hurl insults at each other (e.g., "you're full of debts and stupidity" to "shut your latrine, you bitch!"). Their actions continually reinforce their callousness and dehumanity. The ultramuscular Carlos, a playboy architect and unsuccessful gambler, who is supported by Diana, has an inferiority complex, especially in relation to his childhood friend Héctor, a successful millionaire architect from a prominent family of unscrupulous politicians. To feel better, Carlos continually invokes Héctor's lack of sexual experience while Héctor and Diana, in turn, take every opportunity to humiliate Carlos for being an economic failure and a coward. Diana's use of crude language is contrasted to the proper expressions used by Isabel. The film maximizes Vega's image of a woman with a dirty mouth. Out of all the relationships, described as "sickly" and "tortured" in publicity materials, the ultimate symbol of decadence and deviance is the incest between the rich siblings.

*El llanto de la tortuga* aims to fulfill the conventions of sexploitation as outlined by Schaefer previously cited. Lurid teasers in newspaper advertising promise difference and transgression. The 'adults only' content is suggested through use of key words such as "orgy," "intimate," "raw," "violate," "degradation," and "violent." These adjectives emphasize how the film is also unusual and courageous, 'boldly' revealing secrets about the jet set's social transgressions with one tagline reading: "An audacious chronicle that bravely reveals the intimate life of a privileged class." In sexploitation fashion the latter tagline makes explicit the film's claim to a critical content of denunciation (in the style of yellow press). Promotional materials also highlight the film's timid staging of lesbianism, one of the film's many allegedly racy sexual variations. The ad's text that highlights lesbianism reads, "behind every act an offense, after every word degradation": a close-up two shot of Vega and Pezet standing very close and face-to-face while looking into each other's eyes is the corresponding visual image. Vega holds one of

Pezet's hands while with the other she touches the younger woman's lips. Only a glass of liquor in Pezet's hand stands between them, hinting of what is to come once the liquor is consumed. Another ad focuses on wealth, leisure, and promiscuity. A woman's full nude figure stands center frame with her back to the camera and her arms akimbo; she is standing in front of a huge pool, with the ocean in the immediate background. The woman seems to follow the figure of a muscular man in tight swimsuit who's on the other side of the pool in the background. These teasers appeal to viewer curiosity, promising privileged access to intimacies never before caught on film and enticing audiences to witness the novelty of previously invisible orgies: "We invite you to attend one of these intimate gatherings about which so much has been said but that no one has witnessed" and "narrated with a raw cinematic language." The ads underscore how the film treats controversial topics using realistic language and explicit sexuality.

What is most interesting about this film is its overt sexualization of men (which makes it apt for queer appropriation). Male bodies are displayed in skimpy swim trunks and skin-tight clothing like jumpsuits. They also appear shirtless a great deal of the time, with the ex-bodybuilder Rivero displaying his formidable six-pack at every possible opportunity. Both Rivero and Gregorio Casal (the Butler, Sergio) are objects of the camera's desire while Casal, fetishized as the only working-class character in the film, is also the object of desire for the female characters. Not coincidentally, Sergio occupies the conspicuous narrative function of being the most sexually desirable and available since both women make advances on him and he becomes a rival for Héctor and Carlos. After spending a good deal of time trying to seduce Sergio, Diana spurns his come-on and he retaliates by raping her. Earlier in the film, Sergio has sex with Isabel. Throughout *El llanto de la tortuga* Vega emphasizes her own subjectivity, swearing and being positioned as the subject of erotic pleasure. However, at one point in the film she is gang raped by four fishermen (which causes her to spontaneously miscarry). Hence, although Vega never loses her edge, her character is punished for being aggressive and rebellious.

Critics almost unanimously discredit Vega's collaborations with del Villar. The screening of *El llanto de la tortuga* at the Cartagena International Film Festival received virulently negative reviews in the Colombian press when it screened in the mid-1970s. Reactions included general indignation and accusations that it was a basic imitation of "pornographic films from New York" (Cineteca Nacional). In another critic's opinion, the film was excessive in its risible insults but held back on the graphic nudity it had promised. The critic also noted the sexism of displaying female full frontal nudity during sex scenes in which men keep their pants on. The film, however, did upset critics. One critic, commenting on the film's title and offensive content, states, "the one crying here is the spectator who screams for an end to so much infamy, mediocrity and trash accumulated in an hour and a half" (Cineteca Nacional). Another critic claims the film is repugnant

and induces nausea. The film is successful in shocking audiences. Yet, as these critics note, it is also involuntarily comical in its accumulation of profanities and acts of degradation.

*El llanto de la tortuga* is excessive and artificial in many respects. The acting is hyperbolic with characters shouting the cruelest and most hurtful things possible at each other. *El llanto de la tortuga* effectively shows that



Figure 16.1 Isela Vega in *Las reglas del juego/The Rules of the Game* (Mauricio Wallerstein, 1970).

sex is power and that sexuality is a mechanism for economic well-being as well as an instrument for exploitation. The cryptic title, which refers to the displacement of tortoises from their oceanic realm, underscores the film's recurrent theme of loss of innocence, while also drawing a parallel between animals and the primitive behavior of the characters.

As Vega matured in years, her career took a turn in the late 1990s toward greater prestige, symbolized by award-winning performances in roles that departed from her sexual icon image but continued her signature blunt talk. No longer shackled by obligatory nudity and sexuality, her career revival in her 'old age' confirmed Vega as a serious character actor, especially in campy comedies such as the queer, postexploitation border *narcofronteriza* (border/drug trafficking) prison film, *Puños rosas*. In this highly stylized homage to 'bad' cinema, she plays La Güera, a ferocious matriarchal figure involved in the trafficking of cars whose daughter's husband is romantically involved with an amateur boxer and ex-con. Vega continues championing edgy films that blur the boundary between art and mainstream cinema.

## NOTES

1. Aside from numerous journalistic pieces, the most significant popular press account is a chapter-length homage by Reséndiz and Villareal (1995).
2. Fichera films are Mexico's major contribution to Latin American sexploitation and a contemporary counterpart of Brazilian *pornochanchadas*.
3. "We need optimism and these films that intellectuals do not concede any value to, are optimistic. They are entertaining and thus fulfill a very valuable function." A. Talavera Serdán, (1980), "Isela dentro y fuera," *Cine*, 24 April, 55.
4. <http://www.cinemexicanosincensura.org/cine/viewtopic.php?p=1859&sid=021219e100b43e5818501072bb611e4> (accessed 18 February 2008).
5. José M. Ponce (2004) makes a similar argument for post-Franco dictatorship in Spain.
6. *La chingada madre* refers to the historical figure of La Malinche, Hernán Cortez's translator, symbolic mother of the Mexican mestizo, mythologized as being a product of rape.
7. These comedies are among the few examples of contemporary Mexican cinema available for rent at chains like Blockbuster both in Mexico and in U.S. Spanish-language markets.