

THE RETURN TO DEMOCRACY AND THE SEXUALIZATION OF MEDIA CULTURE

In 1982, journalist Rolando Hanglin asserted with a humorous tone that “we live in the most moralistic country in the world. Here you can be a thief, rip-off artist, liar, slanderer, hypocrite, and even murderer. You can do anything. Anything! Except show your rear. Because that’s when things get serious.”¹ Hanglin was referring to how the military dictatorship, while embracing the titles of guardian of the nation and protector of the family, censored sexual content in mass culture, misinforming and infantilizing the citizenry, and curtailing freedoms of choice and of expression as a result. Only in the last two years of the dictatorship, with the regime in crisis and restrictions weakened, were critics like Hanglin able to more or less openly bring attention to the contradiction between the social decay unleashed by an anticonstitutional regime that persecuted and killed its citizens and that regime’s public moralistic views on sex and nakedness.

Cultural censorship did not begin after the 1976 military coup; it had been a common practice in the twentieth century despite evident historical periods of liberality. However, cultural critics agree that it is difficult to identify the birthdate of censorship in the country. Instead, they suggest that it built up over time, in both democratic and military governments,

into a repertoire of practices, institutions, and laws with different degrees of application and different goals, notably involving the control of sexual content in culture.² In his classic study, Andrés Avellaneda maintains that cultural censorship reached new heights with the military regimes of the 1960s that, for example, launched “moralizing campaigns” against sex and nudity, banning magazines and cutting movies. Yet, Avellaneda argues, it was the 1970s dictatorship that expanded and perfected censorship; this was a period when “the loose ends of the two previous decades were tied tight.”³ The most original aspect of this censorship, and one of the reasons for its efficacy, was that it operated in a historically unparalleled context of state terror and violence that both overtly and tacitly empowered cultural censors and terrorized creators. Pilar Calveiro condensed this idea best when she asserted that “the *proceso* did not simply take existing elements to a whole new level but instead reorganized them and added others, thus giving rise to new forms of power circulation within society.”⁴

The profusion of sexual images and discourses in television, radio, literature, advertising, theater, cinema, and the print media in the transition to democracy called the *destape* was a powerful reaction to the censorship, prohibition, and self-control imposed by the 1970s dictatorship. It was also the result of the cravings and active support of the audiences; business acumen; creative choices based on artistic, economic, and ideological reasons; and in some cases, like in cinema, the financial support of the state. This chapter explores the censorship of sexual content during the dictatorship and the subsequent sexual bombardment brought about by the *destape* in the return to democracy. In so doing, it demonstrates the fundamental role of the mass media in bringing sex from the discreet, private realm of the bedroom, where the dictatorship wanted to keep it hidden, into the public sphere—what had been only suggested and implied was now openly showed and discussed to an unprecedented level.

However, I argue that the *destape* was more than a commercial spectacle of sex and nudity; it was a vehicle for experiencing and defending values and ideals obliterated during the dictatorship. Thus, while ultra-Catholics and conservatives denounced the *destape* as a symbol of social decline and moral degeneration, for most Argentines, including journalists, cultural critics, writers, sex educators, and government officials, it became a metaphor for democracy, freedom, modernity, national adulthood, self-expression, and the exuberant enjoyment of life. In showing that the *destape*

was both a field of ideological construction and confrontation connected to broader political, cultural, and social discussions as well as a cultural symptom of larger historical transformations, I elaborate on historian Dagmar Herzog's suggestion that "the value of the history of sexuality lies just as much in what it can teach us about how meaning-making happens in quite diverse political circumstances—and how it is shaped by and shaped those circumstances."⁵ Although this chapter focuses on the media rather than the audiences, an exploration of meanings contributes to our understanding of why Argentines became fervent consumers and participants of the destape.

SEX AND CENSORSHIP

The 1970s dictatorship considered culture and education to be fields of "ideological infiltration" that were vulnerable to "foreign influences" ranging from Marxism, Communism, and atheism to nihilism and hedonism. In fact, sex and revolution were twinned concerns in Cold War counter-subversion. In 1977, Admiral Emilio Massera declared that the adoption of the "terrorist faith" among the young was the culmination of an "*escalada sensorial*" (sensual escalation) that was preceded by sexual promiscuity.⁶ Therefore, the war against Communist infiltration required fighting moral dissolution and the decline of civilization.⁷ The military regime argued that in spheres such as the arts and the media, which were "unruly" by nature, that fight would be longer and harder than the armed struggle against the guerrillas. Appropriately, anthropologist Antonius Robben has defined the mission of the military in Argentina as a cultural war that legitimized the use of inadmissible violence to reap victory. In addition to annihilating the opposition and demobilizing society, the cultural war waged by the dictatorship required the "conquest of the mind."⁸

Ultimately, the goal of the military dictatorship was to subordinate culture and all forms of creative expression to a certain type of morality that extolled Christianity, family, modesty, children, the fatherland, order, and tradition. Morality was so central to the military's social and political project that a few months after the coup, the Ministry of Education developed a new subject, moral and civic education, that became a mandatory course in high schools and aimed to teach students the characteristics of "a moral order based on God's will." This order was centered on the Christian

family, where the father, as the “natural holder of reason and authority,” commanded, and the mother, “the epitome of love and tenderness,” and the children obeyed.⁹ This moral order was, however, under attack. Government authorities used metaphors of disease and war prolifically to emphasize contamination and the destruction of morality as well as the military’s fundamental mission as rescuers. Sexual content in the arts and the media was considered a serious danger by moral technocrats—from state officials to right-wing and ultra-Catholic interest groups—who were concerned with the corruption of propriety, excess, perversion, obscenity, and debauchery.¹⁰

The Ministry of Interior identified obscenity, immorality, and subversive immorality as the most serious threats to the moral order and formulated a division of labor to face them, although in practice, zealotry and resources blurred the lines among agencies, powers overlapped, and implementation was uneven. Obscenity or pornography extolled eroticism, excited *bajos apetitos sexuales* (depraved sexual urges), offended *pudor público* (public modesty) and *buenas costumbres* (good manners), and fell under the realm of criminal courts. Immorality promoted hedonism, exacerbated indulgence and the enjoyment of the senses, displayed licentiousness, and encouraged “pleasure for pleasure’s sake,” and should be repressed by city and state governments. Finally, subversive immorality showed contempt for life, society, the family, ethical values, and the national tradition, and should be the target of the national government and particularly the Ministry of Interior.¹¹ Morality, then, functioned as a malleable and all-encompassing banner that justified censorship and prohibition. Censors at different levels condemned writers, journalists, researchers, movie directors, and artists for producing works with sex and nudity, which they considered a menace to rectitude, and thus banned, cut, purged, and publicly devalued these creations.¹²

For ideological validation of this project, the military authorities especially turned to ultra-Catholic and right-wing sectors that had been demanding an end to excessive cultural and social permissiveness and the restoration of a Christian way of life.¹³ In 1976, for example, eight months after the coup, a communiqué by the Liga de Padres de Familia (Fathers League) and the Liga de Madres de Familia (Mothers League)—organizations founded in the 1950s and committed to the defense and promotion of the family and Catholic values—maintained that “grand



Figure 1.1. Emilio Massera, Rafael Videla, and Orlando Ramón Agosti, members of the military junta that took power in 1976. Courtesy Archivo General de la Nación, Buenos Aires.

economic, political, and social plans to support family and community will be futile unless we fight immorality on all fronts, driving out eroticism, pornography, and violence from the media.”¹⁴ This is what Avellaneda has called the “*discurso de apoyo*” (supporting discourse), an efficient and ideologically analogous complement to the military’s official discourse. The dictatorship capitalized on these allies—as the allies made the most of the new context—appointing, for example, representatives of different Catholic organizations as members of the film censorship board and, in 1978, naming a prominent member of the Liga de Padres de Familia as the board’s director.¹⁵

In addition to creating new institutional and legal censorship mechanisms, the military dictatorship made full use of existing ones, such as the 1966 law that prohibited the post office from carrying “immoral

materials,” and reactivated dormant agencies such as municipal commissions and the police “morality squads” employed to monitor and prohibit publications and shows.¹⁶ With no central agency entrusted with policy and implementation, and lacking clear guidelines—except in cinema and broadcasting—censorship was not always consistent but was more strict, comprehensive, and effective than in previous repressive contexts.¹⁷ In 1981, writer Héctor Lastra affirmed that “the censorship that plagues our country must be one of the toughest and most virulent, fundamentally because it is applied without any attempt to conceal it, with bluster and with arrogance, and with the intention to make it noticed and felt at first sight. It is the typical censorship that serves as punishment and as a clear form of intimidation.”¹⁸ For this reason, and because of deep fear in the face of increasing state violence, self-censorship rapidly became the norm among those determined to protect themselves and survive.¹⁹

On the day of the 1976 coup, communiqué 19 announced that publication of statements or images from those involved in “subversive activities” would be penalized with an indefinite prison sentence, while the printing of news or images that could harm or discredit the armed forces was punishable with up to ten years in jail. Thus, all periodicals had to submit their content to the Servicio Gratuito de Lectura Previa (Free Prior Reading Service), housed in the Casa Rosada—where the President’s Office is—for government approval. Although this requirement lasted only a month, it set the tone for the strict print media censorship that the new government enforced.²⁰

The Secretaría de Prensa y Difusión (Press and Publishing Office) compelled publications to uphold “the fundamental values of Christian morality” against “subversive ideologies”—a wide-ranging and flexible concept that encompassed everything from liberation theology and syndicalism to sexual freedom and abortion, all considered threats to the “Christian way of life.” As a result, treatment of sex matters in the press was scarce, dated, and reactionary, condemning audiences to misinformation. In 1985, sexologist León Roberto Gindin argued that during the dictatorship, the press dedicated three times less space to issues related to sexuality than it would after the return to democracy. Furthermore, Gindin maintained that the quality of the content was substantially different during these two periods. During the dictatorship, the discussion of sexual matters in the media was oblique, ominous, and demonizing; the emphasis was on the dangers, threats, and problems related to sex.²¹

To control sex content, the Secretaría de Prensa y Difusión demanded that the media adhere to a series of “Principles and Procedures” that included “defending the family,” “striving to reduce and eventually eradicate any sexual stimulus,” “working continuously and decisively to battle vice in all of its manifestations,” and “fully eliminating words and images that are obscene, lewd, troubling, or risqué, erotic suggestions or double entendres.”²² The resulting overall tone was so puritanical that articles on sexual matters usually referred to “wife” and “husband,” to emphasize marital sex, instead of “women” and “men,” which could imply sex outside marriage. In the same way, journalist Alcira Bas recalled how, to illustrate its articles, health magazine *Vivir* only published photos of couples wearing wedding rings.²³ Tomás Sanz, one of the founders of the legendary humor magazine *Humor*, created in 1978, confirmed that especially during the first three years, the magazine refrained from publishing about sex to prevent government confiscation and closure—even though its political satire made *Humor* the most critical media voice against the dictatorship.²⁴

The “Principles and Procedures” were also effective tools for persecuting editors, confiscating materials, and shutting down magazines. This was the case, for example, for *Padres*, a magazine about parenting and health whose chief editor Mario Muchnik was kidnapped and forced to leave the country. Similarly, women’s magazine *Emanuelle* was closed down “to protect the moral health of the population and preserve the values at the core of our nationality,” and its editor in chief Oskar Blotta, who had already been forced to shut down the bold humor magazine *Satiricón*, also left Argentina after being briefly detained.²⁵ *Satiricón*, first published in 1972, offers a good example of the qualitative change in cultural repression that took place during the 1970s dictatorship. Purged and banned because of its irreverent sexual humor, *Satiricón* survived the repressive Peronist years but was unable to endure after the 1976 coup.²⁶

In many instances, state agencies and courts of law responded to formal complaints and accusations by institutions and individuals who singled out periodicals, publications, plays, and movies for challenging the standards of appropriateness. In other cases, the regime manipulated accusations of immorality to ban publications for transgressing more than the limits on eroticism. In December 1980, for example, the city of Buenos Aires confiscated and prohibited an issue of *La Semana*, contending that a cover featuring American actress Bo Derek—dressed in a tunic and

showing only her shoulder and part of her covered breast—and an article illustrated with several pictures of Derek in a bikini “were an attack on morality and good manners.” Yet the same issue had a piece criticizing the government for canceling a public transportation discount for media workers and another about hardships in a Buenos Aires slum, content as provocative as Derek on the beach.²⁷

In one way or another, the use of erotic and nude images became a grueling task, and publications had to find creative ways to include them. Journalist and writer Cecilia Absatz remembered that while she was working at *Status*, a magazine devoted to travel, exotic cuisine, and art that targeted a sophisticated readership, nude models were deliberately placed behind fabrics, curtains, and furnishings.²⁸ But even these strategies could be ineffective, such as when in September 1980 the city of Buenos Aires banned the circulation and sale of general interest magazine *Siete Días* for a cover featuring the famous Italian actress Stefania Sandrelli clad in a bikini and a five-page article about fashion trends and modesty illustrated with women in miniskirts, shorts, and two-piece swimsuits.²⁹ The sanction was in line with the idea, explained in an article in the army’s *Revista de Educación del Ejército*, that bikinis and miniskirts not only undermined a traditional decorous dress code but also unleashed hidden passions, promoted disrespect and immodesty, and dissolved moral values, which ultimately subverted people’s defenses against Marxism.³⁰

Sex and nudity were also targets of film censorship. The Instituto Nacional de Cinematografía (INC; National Film Institute), the most important state source of financing for film production, was subjected to military intervention after the coup, dampening an industry that was profoundly dependent on state funding.³¹ In 1976, Captain Jorge Bitleston, the first INC military interventor, declared that support would only be granted to “[national] films that exalt the spiritual, moral, and Christian values of nationality, be these current or historic, or that reaffirm the concepts of family, order, respect, work, healthy efforts, and social responsibility, striving to create an optimistic attitude towards the future, and avoiding lewd scenes or dialogues.”³² To aid the INC in controlling national film production and censoring both Argentine and foreign films prior to their theatrical release, the military regime employed the Ente de Calificación Cinematográfica (ECC; Board of Film Ratings). In addition to rating, expurgating, and prohibiting films and scripts, the ECC regulated

titles, trailers, and movie posters; ensured that theaters only showed films that had received an exhibition permit; and verified that the version of the film showed was the one approved by the board.³³

The ECC was created by law 18,019, passed under the military government of Juan Carlos Onganía in 1968 and inspired by Spanish censorship legislation during Francisco Franco's dictatorship. The law remained in place during the democratically elected governments of Héctor Cámpora (1973), Juan Domingo Perón (1973–74), and Isabel Perón (1974–76), and continued throughout the military dictatorship. Upon its creation in 1968, the ECC was part of the *Secretaría de Educación y Cultura* (Department of Education and Culture), but after the 1976 coup, it was placed under the influence of the *Secretaría de Información Pública* (Department of Public Information) and thus under direct control of the presidency. Miguel Paulino Tato, a film critic who had been appointed as ECC director in 1974 and would become an icon of censorship, remained in the post. During his four-year tenure—he retired in 1978—Tato censored 1,200 films and prohibited 337 in the name of “cinematic prophylaxis and hygiene.”³⁴ After his departure and until the dissolution of the ECC by the democratic government in 1984, the director was Alberto León, a lawyer and board member of the *Liga de Padres de Familia*. During León's tenure, an average of ninety films were banned annually.³⁵

In addition to the director, two adjunct directors, and a secretary, the ECC comprised an honorary advisory council of fifteen members; nine were representatives of state agencies such as the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Defense, and the Department of Culture and Education, and six were members of private institutions “known for their work in defending the family and the moral values of the community,” most notably Catholic organizations such as the *Liga de Padres de Familia*, the *Liga de Madres de Familia*, and the *Liga por la Decencia* (Decency League).³⁶ There were also occasional external advisors, most famously Bishop Justo Oscar Laguna, but the ECC lacked representatives from the film industry, film scholars, academics, script writers, or experts in the field.³⁷

All national and international films required an exhibition permit for theatrical release. Local film producers submitted their screenplays—which was necessary to receive state funds—and later, their finished films, and distributors submitted foreign films for approval before screening. In his report, Jorge Miguel Couselo, the film critic appointed by the Alfonsín

administration to shut down the ECC, listed 725 national and foreign films prohibited in the country between 1969 and 1983. During the 1970s dictatorship, Argentine audiences were particularly deprived of international cinema since foreign directors rarely approved the cuts and modifications imposed by the ECC, and as a result the films were not released. Some famous exceptions were *Casanova* (1976), directed by Federico Fellini; *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1981), by director Bob Rafelson; and Bruno Barreto's *Dona Flor e Seus Dois Maridos* (1976), steamy films that were only screened in Argentina because the ECC-mandated cuts had been made.³⁸

The ECC issued ratings for films based on five categories: recommended for children, suitable for all audiences, forbidden for minors under fourteen, forbidden for minors under eighteen, and banned. In numerous cases, the ECC simply opted to not classify a film, resulting in an unofficial ban as films could not be screened without a rating. Sex figured prominently on the list of subjects that law 18,019 banned in movies. Justification of adultery or affronts to matrimony and the family; justification of abortion, prostitution, and sexual perversions; and lascivious scenes (violence, drugs, vice, and cruelty) against morality and *buenas costumbres* were completely prohibited. The ECC embodied the cultural and social mission of the military as the self-proclaimed defender of the moral order and custodian of good taste, and, in so doing, contributed to impoverishing culture while grossly violating the freedoms and rights of audiences, artists, and the film industry. The agency operated under the premise that cinema unilaterally and uncritically influenced behaviors and ideas, and that audiences lacked proper discernment and were intellectually and ethically unprepared for certain films or types of content. In this regard, Miguel Paulino Tato, the ECC director, declared that “we Argentines are not mature enough for many films that could cause us harm” while overpraising censors for “defending people who do not know how to defend themselves.”³⁹

With sex at the core of the censorship law, most cuts and modifications targeted sex scenes, and most banned films were erotic or pornographic or included prominent or exceedingly graphic depictions of sex.⁴⁰ The ECC ruling against director Armando Bó's film *Insaciable* (1984), starring Isabel Sarli, illustrates the new, more stringent position of the agency during the 1970s dictatorship. Although Bó's sexploitation films—a genre characterized by erotic content and nudity—had been censored and ob-

jects of legal battles in the 1960s, they had always been exhibited in the country. In 1976, in contrast, the ECC prohibited the theatrical release of *Insaciable*—even after the director maintained he was willing to cut or change the most problematic scenes—making it Bó’s first film to be banned. *Insaciable*, the story of a nymphomaniac, was only screened in 1984 after the return to democracy and was the first of Bó’s movies to be shown without state-mandated cuts.⁴¹

Despite rigid censorship, the *comedias picarescas*, a genre comparable to the Spanish *landismo* and the Brazilian *pornochanchadas*, allowed for a mild treatment of sexuality and of otherwise forbidden topics such as infidelity and the dissociation between sex and love.⁴² Starring popular comedians Jorge Porcel and Alberto Olmedo, these movies—banned for audiences under eighteen—relied on a repetitive and sexist formula that combined double entendres with unfaithful men and objectified women in skimpy clothes. Yet because they lacked nudity and sexuality was never explicit, the *comedias picarescas* were tolerated under the dictatorship. Furthermore, the films were conservative, as most ended by exalting marriage, traditional gender roles, and respectability while punishing any sexually liberated characters. Additionally, humor mitigated the potential “threats” of sex.⁴³ When asked why the government was more permissive toward this genre, a censor responded: “We don’t prohibit it because it ridicules sex, making it look clumsy, ugly, and vulgar.”⁴⁴ Consequently, the screening of *comedias picarescas* contributed to a false image of ideological and sexual openness and served as an escape valve while censorship deprived spectators of “real” sexual content, nudity, and eroticism. Moreover, although popular, the *comedias picarescas* represented just 17 percent of all films produced in the country during the dictatorship. Restricted to adults in the movie theaters of mainly big cities, their reach was small and thus their cultural impact more limited than television or press content.⁴⁵ As with all film genres, the destape liberated the *comedia picaresca* in democracy: sexual content became unrestricted, humor was more irreverent, and women wore way less.⁴⁶

Like film, television and radio were also under stringent control during the dictatorship. After the coup, the three armed forces divvied up state television and radio stations for intervention and empowered state institutions such as the Secretaría de Información Pública, the Secretaría de Comunicaciones (Department of Communications), and the Comité

Federal de Radiodifusión (COMFER; Federal Radiobroadcasting Committee)—which were also staffed by members of the military—to mandate and zealously guard content and penalize public and private broadcasting entities for violations.⁴⁷ In 1977, the COMFER sent TV stations a long list of themes that were banned from the air, including material that

undermines the meaning of marriage in sexual relations; presents divorce as a solution to marital troubles; treats adultery or infidelity as a legitimate way out; deals with the subject of abortion . . . ; includes actual scenes of labor, birth and caesarean sections; contains any reference to birth control; subverts the real concept of sex; includes scenes that reveal the underworld of prostitution, in any of its aspects; includes scenes of rape or incest; uses sexual deviance as a core plot theme; includes love scenes, dance scenes, and dialogues or theatrical props that do not fit within a framework of decency or that connote lewdness, impropriety or compulsive exaggeration; or proposes sexual lifestyles that do not fit with our idea of community.⁴⁸

The Secretaría de Información Pública was the most inflexible, especially censoring *telenovelas* (soap operas) that had been approved by the COMFER but were still considered inappropriate for content such as love triangles and adultery. It also limited the number of *telenovelas* that could be on the air and, more than once, moved them to late-night time slots—despite their being traditionally televised in the early afternoon—to protect children.⁴⁹ In a 1979 interview, the famous scriptwriter Abel Santa Cruz avowed that the limits were so rigid that “a married man shouldn’t look at a single woman,” reducing all storytelling to “the good girl and the good boy, nothing else.”⁵⁰ Only in the last two years of the dictatorship were TV shows able to introduce some “explicit” sexy content when the Dirección General de Radio y Televisión (Radio and Television Authority) allowed “decorous” bed scenes and “relaxed” the restrictions on formerly unacceptable themes.⁵¹

The publishing industry also experienced years of firm control after the 1976 coup. Under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Interior, the Dirección General de Publicaciones (Publications General Authority) not only evaluated books and periodicals but also monitored and impounded prohibited materials from bookstores and libraries all over the country, ordering interventions and raids on publishing houses as well as the de-

struction of banned books, all with the assistance of the police and the army. Municipalities also played a central role in censoring and confiscating “immoral” books. Between 1976 and 1982, for example, the Secretaría de Cultura (Department of Culture) of the city of Buenos Aires—an agency particularly zealous and effective in this endeavor—objected to 560 books: 433 were classified as “limited display,” which meant they had to be shelved in the back of bookstores, and 127 were deemed “immoral” and thus prohibited.⁵² Censorship and prohibition had a profound impact on the publishing industry, reducing the number of novels and poetry books printed in the country from five million in 1976 to 1.3 million in 1980.⁵³

Although publishing houses requested clarification about censorship criteria, military-controlled agencies kept the definitions of “obscenity” and “immorality” elusive, and as a result, comprehensive. The range of works banned included erotic fiction such as Reina Roffé’s *Monte de Venus* (1976), about life in a boarding school for girls and with a prominent lesbian character; social drama such as Enrique Medina’s *Perros de la noche* (1977), in which a marginal young man forces his destitute sister into prostitution; sex instruction books such as Graham Masterton’s *1,001 Erotic Dreams Interpreted* (1976); heavily illustrated art books such as Phyllis and Eberhard Kronhausen’s *The Complete Book of Erotic Art* (1978); and best-selling sexology books such as *Sexual Honesty* (1974) and *The Hite Report on Female Sexuality* (1976), both by feminist sex educator Shere Hite.⁵⁴

Sex became more apparent in public life in the last two years of the dictatorship. A number of factors—the 1981 financial and economic crisis, the political weakening of the regime due to increasing social mobilization and protest, the national and international attention to human rights violations brought by the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, and the country’s defeat in the Malvinas War in 1982—contributed to a slight loosening of control over the media and artistic expression as the government struggled on other fronts. Regulation over cinema, radio, and television remained firm, especially until the Malvinas War, but the new flexibility was more evident in magazines and newspapers, allowing for sexual humor in comic strips as well as humorous—but still quite innocuous—articles about sex. There was also an increasing tolerance of provocative images of bikini-clad models and actresses on magazine covers and in pieces devoted to summer fashion trends.

The most notable examples of the new acceptance of sexuality and

nudity on television were episodes of a soap opera and a miniseries, respectively, where two different actresses appeared kissing their partners “as if naked,” with one of the actresses showing her bared upper back and the other, Edda Bustamante—who would become an icon of the destape for her half-naked, racy pictures and sexy film performances—completely covered by a bedsheet. Bustamante declared that the Channel 11 authorities had agreed to the suggested nakedness because “there was nothing that could be taken as erotic.”⁵⁵ Yet as late as 1982, the regime prohibited a TV commercial for Hitachi television sets just three days after it aired. Depicting young women dancing and strolling along the beach in two-piece bathing suits, the ad was banned because the “images were an affront to morality.”⁵⁶

In the last years of the dictatorship, tolerance toward nudity was most evident in the theater, probably because it was less popular and less influential among audiences than movies and television, and because with the exception of Buenos Aires, the country did not have prominent commercial or fringe theaters. A precedent was *La lección de anatomía* by Carlos Mathus, which opened in 1972 and remained on stage during the dictatorship. The play explored themes such as loneliness, suicide, and parenthood, and offered a few minutes of full frontal male and female nudity—but devoid of sexual content. Although the play ran throughout the military regime, it suffered some notorious episodes of intimidation, such as an incident when police officers stormed the theater after the play had begun, jumped onto the stage, and requested identity cards from all the actors and actresses as they were performing . . . naked.⁵⁷ Additionally, dancers and *vedettes* with skimpy clothes had always been the main attraction at the *teatro de revistas* (revues), and the military government did not interfere with this tradition, although full strip tease and naked torsos, which became widespread later, were not common in those years.⁵⁸

Outside the revues, nudity became more accepted on stage between 1980 and 1982, though always in nonerotic contexts. Popular plays that opened in those years, such as *La señorita de Tacna* by Mario Vargas Llosa, *The Elephant Man* by Bernard Pomerance, and *White Wedding* by Tadeusz Różewicz, required actresses to undress for their roles, but like in *La lección de anatomía*, most nude scenes were asexual, depicted partial and non-frontal nudity, and were thus allowed by the government. Although the

new lax standards were a stark contrast to those of the early years of the regime, government control, fear, and self-censorship continued to impose clear boundaries. After the opening of *Violines y trompetas*, a comedy about two musicians, authorities demanded that an actress who undressed for a scene remain clothed. The director and performers obliged.⁵⁹ In addition to suffering government censorship, theaters, as well as movie theaters, were targets of right-wing groups that used bombs and arson as a “means to fight against pornography,” destroying facilities, demoralizing and scaring performers, and terrifying and driving away audiences—crimes that continued for some time after the return to democracy.⁶⁰

Therefore, in quantity and quality, the process of liberalization that began under the dictatorship was just a preamble to the erotic explosion that occurred months later. On the one hand, coverage of the incipient destape in the military-controlled press was more of a convenient distraction from other, more pressing news—the humiliating defeat in the Malvinas War, increasing social upheaval—than the cultural menace and threat to morality that the media attempted to convey. On the other hand, even in the last year of the military regime, numerous examples of censorship show that the government was not ready to relinquish control over cultural and media content and that this domain was still important for the display of power, especially when power was rapidly being eroded on other fronts.⁶¹

In addition, the most conservative and ultra-Catholic allies pushed for more control, complaining about “the alarming wave of permissiveness.” In 1981, the Catholic magazine *Esquiú* argued that the incipient sexual content in the media was “pure subversion” and urged the dictatorship to combat those sectors leading the trend as they had done with the “subversives armed with machine guns.” *Esquiú*, in fact, vehemently clamored for the application of article 128 of the Penal Code, which mandated jail sentences of between two months and two years for those charged with obscenity. The reporter affirmed, “Not only must the government protect sovereignty: it must also protect the individual rights, which go beyond property, freedom, health, and knowledge and encompass the right to faith, the right to become aware of God and put that awareness into practice. And if the State has taken note of this situation, then it must give the courts its approval to safeguard the right that all men have to a better life, but in the sense of rescuing the spiritual values whose absence in society is the cause of this destape.”⁶²



Figure 1.2. President Raúl Alfonsín delivering a speech in 1987. Courtesy Archivo General de la Nación, Buenos Aires.

Despite these demands, change was unstoppable. Defeat in the Malvinas War in June 1982 signaled the imminent demise of the military government, and when General Leopoldo Galtieri, who had ordered the invasion and occupation of the islands, was removed from power just a few days after the British victory and replaced by Reynaldo Bignone, the impending end to the regime was all the more evident. The second half of 1982 saw increasing negotiations between the regime and political parties to agree on the terms for the military's departure, mostly centered on amnesty and immunity from criminal charges once democracy was restored. In the meantime, social protests, political mobilization, strikes, and public discussion about the *desaparecidos* spread rapidly. The democratic transition was now under way. In April 1983, Bignone at last announced elections for October, and when Raúl Alfonsín assumed the presidency on December 10 that year, the *destape* blew the lid off sexual matters.⁶³

THE DESTAPE: SEX AS THE STAR OF THE DEMOCRATIC STAGE

Whatever changes in sexual behaviors and ideas occurred in the bedroom, the classroom, and the offices of doctors and therapists, the first and most spectacular transformation when the dictatorship fell was the rise of “sex as a spectator sport”—that is, the expansion of what audiences could see, read, and hear about sexuality.⁶⁴ Theater offers a paradigmatic case of how the destape amplified sexual explicitness to an all-new level. The timid liberalization during the last two years of the dictatorship burst with the return to democracy, when nudity and sex became ubiquitous on the stages of Corrientes Avenue, “the Broadway of Buenos Aires.” Plays that had been shut down and banned during the dictatorship became emblematic of the destape, such as *Doña Flor y sus dos maridos*, directed by José María Paolantonio and based on the famous novel by Jorge Amado, with its female and male nudity and bed scenes, and *Camino negro*, written by Oscar Viale and directed by Laura Yusem, with its explicit depiction of sexual harassment.⁶⁵ Off-Corrientes, revamped strip-tease clubs and burlesque performances advertised themselves as the “school of destape” or “the only place with total destape,” while the new *pornoshows*, erotic and explicit sex shows, promised “sex with total freedom” and emphasized that “now everything means everything.”⁶⁶

In the print media, all publications, old and new, engaged in the open and vivid discussion of sex. Women’s magazines such as the well-established *Para Ti* and the newly created *Mujer 10*, general interest publications such as *Somos* (which had openly supported the dictatorship) and newcomer *La Semana*, humor magazines such as *Humor* (combative during the dictatorship) and *Satiricón* (closed in 1976 after the military coup and reopened in 1982), cultural magazines such as recently founded *El Porteño*, feminist publications such as *La Mujer* (the women’s supplement of newspaper *Tiempo Argentino*), health magazines such as *Vivir*, and all newspapers, from *La Nación* (established in the late nineteenth century) to *Página/12* (published for the first time in 1987), avidly engaged with the new topic. Moreover, many publications issued popular supplements specifically focused on female sexuality and sex education. There were differences in tone, purpose, and quality, but the mood was festive and joyful. In an editorial in its second issue after the return to democracy,

*Erótico*n, for example, defined sex as enjoyment, gratification, ecstasy, and a celebration of the body, and proposed the magazine as a means to fight “the somber depiction of sexual life as morbid, pathetic, and shameful.”⁶⁷

Female and male genitalia, orgasm, sexual pleasure, sex positions, pregnancy and birth control methods, sex education, sexual fantasies, sexual dysfunctions, sexual abstinence and virginity, eroticism, abortion, orgies, and pornography are part of an illustrative but by no means exhaustive list of subjects now open for discussion. The arenas for such discussion were equally diverse: medical, scientific, and pseudoscientific articles; editorials; investigative reports; humorous pieces; comic strips; short stories; letters to the editor; personal accounts; and interviews with sexologists, sociologists, educators, actresses and actors, writers, and government authorities. In fact, any interviewee was asked about sex in those years, and almost everything was about sex. Publications were filled with articles on the sexual lives of such varying groups as lifeguards, butchers, and blind people; histories of sexuality and sexual repression in Argentina since colonial times; “investigative reporting” on nineteenth-century sex trafficking and cemeteries for prostitutes; and pieces on how diet affected sexual performance and which sex positions contributed most to weight loss. A prototypical example is a 1984 interview published in *Libre* with eighty-eight-year-old Doña Petrona de Gandulfo, the most important culinary referent of the country and the embodiment of middle-class female respectability. In the article, suggestively titled “Doña Petrona Has Lived a Great Life because She’s Got a Recipe That Turns Men On,” the cook offers a recipe for an aphrodisiac stew.⁶⁸

Additionally, the print media devoted countless pages to reflecting on, criticizing, and celebrating the destape in television, theater, advertising, radio, and cinema. By describing sex scenes and sexual language in movies, television shows, plays, and novels, and by publishing explicit photos to illustrate those descriptions, the press added more sexual content to publications already teeming with sexual matters, amplifying and propelling the destape forward. Even periodicals such as *Esquiú*, which fought the destape bitterly, contributed indirectly to its propagation. While its reporting lacked the graphicness of other publications, it provided free publicity for the films, television shows, and plays it severely criticized.⁶⁹

With the outburst of discourses came an eruption of provocative images that the Argentine media had never printed before. From fashion

and general interest publications to health magazines and comic books, the *destape* brought unparalleled levels of nudity and sensuality. Just as a few years earlier nobody would have expected Doña Petrona's advice on how to make men better lovers, many unexpected candidates bared all in the return to democracy, such as actress Cristina Lemercier, who played the sweet and chaste primary school teacher Jacinta Pichimahuida in the popular children's television show *Señorita maestra*.⁷⁰

Equally remarkable was the boom of new publications exclusively devoted to sex and graphic sexual images, with formerly banned frontal nudity included. Many appeared between 1983 and 1984, some of them reaching the newsstands only a few days after Alfonsín's inauguration and thus literally born of democracy. The editor of *Hombre* magazine equated this boom to "opening an ice cream parlor in the desert. The thirsty arrive in flocks."⁷¹ An investigative report published by *Somos* magazine revealed that twenty-four erotic publications had been launched in 1984, distributing 1.2 million issues monthly in the city of Buenos Aires and its metro area alone (a region with 9.5 million inhabitants, according to the 1980 census); these publications made up 13 percent of all periodicals distributed in the area. Corroborating this boom, Norberto Chab, who worked as a writer for *Destape*, affirmed that in their first six months, *Destape* and *Shock* together sold 300,000 issues weekly. *Hombre* sold a similar number each month as well.⁷² Furthermore, a deluge of previously banned erotic magazines from Spain, Brazil, and the United States entered the country with the *destape*. In 1984, for example, customs authorities seized twenty thousand issues of American *Penthouse* in the port of Buenos Aires because they lacked import permits.⁷³

The flurry of local sex publications included humor magazines such as *Eroticón* and *Sex Humor*, the sex-centered equivalents of *Satiricón* and *Humor*, respectively; comics such as *Fierro* and *Historietas Sex*; *Playboy*-inspired⁷⁴ publications such as *Hombre*; erotic magazines of mostly graphic photographic content such as *Mundo Erótico*, *Shock*, *Viva*, *Climax*, *Prohibida*, *Testigo*, and *Don, la revista para Juan*, mostly conceived for a male readership; *Adultos*, a monthly with a strong component of sexology; and *Libre*, *Dar la cara en entrevista*, and *Destape*, which combined general interest articles, sensationalism, and sexual and nude or seminude images. The editor of *Dar la cara en entrevista* explained this formula as "mixing water and oil," but the final product was a spectacular success among readers.

Although far from exhaustive, this list shows a target segmentation of the consumer magazine market that suggests how massive and socially inclusive the *destape* was. *Hombre* and *Adultos*, for example, directed toward a sophisticated readership interested in intellectual and scientific discussions of sex, were intended for middle- and upper-class consumers, while *Viva* and *Shock*, characterized by vulgar language and devoid of “serious” journalism or reporting, targeted a “less-discerning” reader.⁷⁵

The *destape* in cinema was as explosive as it was in the print media. In February 1984, two months after Alfonsín’s inauguration, Congress passed law 23,052, revoking law 18,019 and effectively abolishing film censorship along with the ECC. This had been one of the one hundred proposed measures of Alfonsín’s platform “to change your life.”⁷⁶ Law 23,052 assigned film rating to the INC, with the goal of establishing appropriateness for minors and warning adults about content. President Alfonsín granted the INC a generous budget to be allocated as production loans and appointed Manuel Antín, a film director and screenwriter identified with the 1960s Argentine New Wave, as the agency’s director.⁷⁷ Antín believed that a free Argentine cinema was a symbol of a new era, “an open window abroad that demonstrates the democracy we have established.”⁷⁸

Like in the press, despite differences in degree, tone, and quality, sex became present, more prominent, and more explicit across the cinematic spectrum, extending to all genres and to well-known veteran directors—many recently back from exile—as well as newcomers. The *destape* became a stylistic trend that, based on the use of strong sex and erotic scenes, deeply pervaded domestic productions. Within the group of *destape* films was a large number of comedies, such as *Las colegialas se divierten* (Fernando Siro, 1986), about the escapades of a group of students faced with a new disciplinarian headmistress; *Las lobas* (Aníbal Di Salvo, 1986), which focused on two sisters forced to pay a huge debt left by their father by attracting one suitor after another; and *Camarero nocturno en Mar del Plata* (Gerardo Sofovich, 1986), chronicling the adventures of a waiter working in a luxury hotel. The emblematic *destape* movies, however, have the typical attributes of softcore pornography or sexploitation, that is, simulated sex acts and female nudity, quite often gratuitous.⁷⁹ They are dramas with flimsy plots, violence, and a tone of timely denunciation of social problems such as prostitution, drug trafficking, poverty, and crime. Some of the most representative films that flawlessly combine these components are

Atrapadas (Aníbal Di Salvo, 1984) and *Correccional de mujeres* (Emilio Vieyra, 1986), both focused on life in a women's prison; *Los gatos* (*Prostitución de alto nivel*) (Carlos Borcosque, 1985), about a prostitution ring; and *Sucedió en el internado* (Emilio Vieyra, 1985), which tells the story of a series of murders at an all-girls boarding school.

The end of censorship and the active promotion and economic support of national film productions by the new democratic government played a significant role in the making of these films. However, filmmakers could have wagered on other types of movies and taken different creative choices given the same financial assistance and freedom. Like the publishing houses, the movie industry chose to ride the wave of the destape because it was, in commercial terms, the wisest decision. Evidence of audience preferences is that between 1983 and 1987, destape movies figured prominently on the annual list of the ten top-grossing Argentine films. In fact, *Atrapadas* was the third most successful movie at the box office in 1984. These films did not introduce the sexploitation genre in Argentina—pioneered by Armando Bó—but took it to a different level in terms of both content and popularity. Entertainment magazine *Variety* maintained that *Atrapadas* included the most daring softcore sex scenes in the history of Argentine films, “helping it sell nearly 1,000,000 tickets its first weeks of general release.”⁸⁰ In 1985, *Sucedió en el internado* and *Los gatos* occupied the fourth and fifth place in the list of top-ten grossing films, respectively. That same year, the last six films on the top-ten list were destape movies, even though all were rated as only suitable for adults and most had received unenthusiastic or negative reviews in the press.⁸¹

Without censorship, Argentine audiences were also able to enjoy films long banned in the country, such as the controversial erotic dramas *Last Tango in Paris* (1972), directed by Bernardo Bertolucci, and Nagisa Oshima's *In the Realm of the Senses* (1976).⁸² Similarly, the increasing number of adult movie theaters—despite the municipal legal requirements about location, facilities, and operation that made them difficult to open and run—gave local spectators unrestricted access to foreign X-rated films, as the genre was not yet produced locally.⁸³ Furthermore, with the arrival of VHS technology, local audiences could easily and legally rent foreign pornography in neighborhood *videoclubes* (video rental stores) nationwide to watch at home. In 1985—when there were only 114 videoclubes in the country and almost half were located in Buenos Aires city—only 3 percent

of consumers rented porn; two years later, the market had expanded to 10 percent. As confirmation of the growing trend, the company that monopolized porn distribution in the country claimed that in 1987 there were 3,500 legal video cassettes of *Cicciolina Number One* (1986), starring the internationally renowned Italian porn star Cicciolina, and 3,300 tapes of *Top Gun* (1986), the hit military action drama with Tom Cruise.⁸⁴

With the return to democracy, television content also experienced the radical transformation of the destape. Audiences could now watch open discussions of sexual matters on talk shows and the news. For the first time, comedies such as *Matrimonios y algo más* (1982–89), *Sexcitante* (1984–85), *No toca botón* (1981–87), *Operación Ja-Já* (1981–84; 1987–91), *Monumental Moria* (1986–89), and *Las gatitas y los ratones de Porcel* (1987–90) were able to combine an unparalleled number of seminaked women with sexist and sexual humor. And, telenovelas such as *Amo y señor* (1984) defied all genre conventions to date by showing ardent bed scenes. Innovatively, shows such as *Polémica del amor* (1988) and *¿Qué sabe usted de sexo?* (1988) were exclusively devoted to discussing sexuality with experts and answering questions and taking “explicit sexual confessions” from the audience. A television critic praised *¿Qué sabe usted de sexo?* for the casualness with which the panelists addressed sexual matters, “as if they were discussing cooking recipes.”⁸⁵ This trend began when *Veinte mujeres* (1986), a show with a panel of twenty women from the audience and special guests debating different topics, made the popular sexologist María Luisa Lerer a regular. The same openness characterized radio programming, where previously taboo issues were discussed in clear language and sexologists occupied important segments in general interest shows and even had their own hit shows entirely on sex. For their part, advertising agents filled ads and commercials with suggestive scenes and a lot of women’s skin to sell everything from jeans to sodas to television sets. Fittingly, Hitachi returned to the screen the day of Alfonsín’s inauguration with a new version of the commercial the dictatorship had banned just a year earlier, this one more provocative and fixated on women’s backsides.⁸⁶

Similarly, the new freedom triggered great interest in classic erotic literature such as *Justine* and *Juliette* by the Marquis de Sade and a surge in the sales of Argentine works in the genre.⁸⁷ Erotic books were quite a heterogeneous mix. Poorly written second-rate novels with predictable plots, widely available on newspaper stands, boomed in these years—

such as *Taxi dormitorio* (1984), about the sexual escapades of a cabdriver, or *Boutique todo servicio* (1984), about sensual saleswomen in a male clothing store. Bookstore best sellers also flourished—such as Mempo Giardinelli's *Luna caliente* (1983), about a young man's obsession with a thirteen-year-old girl he rapes; *Los amores de Laurita* (1984), a novel by Ana María Shua about the sexual experiences of a young woman; and *Dueña y señora* (1983), a collection of short erotic tales by Susana Torres Molina. In fact, the return to democracy provided the background for the rise of a powerful erotic narrative by women, further exemplified by Tununa Mercado's *Canon de alcoba* (1988), Cristina Peri Rossi's *La nave de los locos* (1984), Griselda Gambaro's *Lo impenetrable* (1984), and Liliana Heer's *Bloyd* (1984), among others.⁸⁸ Meanwhile, sexology books thrived, in keeping with the unparalleled growth of the field in the country. Between 1986 and 1987, the four most popular Argentine sexologists published books that rapidly sold out—María Luisa Lerer's *Sexualidad femenina: Mitos, realidades y el sentido de ser mujer* (1986) was reprinted three times in two months—and important publishing houses such as Grijalbo and Horme launched sexology collections that featured iconic works in the discipline by William Masters and Virginia Johnson, Helen Kaplan, and Benjamin Karpman.⁸⁹

THE MEANINGS OF THE DESTAPE

The emblematic publishing house Perfil released iconic publications such as *Libre*, *Hombre*, *La Semana*, and *Mujer 10* in the return to democracy. In a 2016 interview, Perfil's owner Jorge Fontevecchia explained that censorship during the dictatorship had brought Argentine culture to a halt and submerged the country in a state of underdevelopment. Fontevecchia affirmed that it was as if the dictatorship had stopped time in 1976, impeding progress, and as a result, a foreigner visiting in 1984 actually encountered the Argentina of the mid-1970s. The destape, on the contrary, represented a jump forward toward the future.⁹⁰ Sergio Sinay, the chief editor of *Hombre*, summarized this idea well when he contended that the mission of his magazine was “a small contribution to the effort of moving the country into the twentieth century.”⁹¹ With the destape, supporters agreed, Argentina was belatedly joining in international cultural trends that had started in the previous decades. *Mujer 10* was thus inspired by the American *Cosmopolitan*, which revolutionized women's magazines in the

mid-1960s; *Hombre* by *Playboy*, created in the United States in the 1950s; and *Libre*, a mix of sensationalism, investigative reporting, and nude models, by Spanish *Interviú*, first published in 1976. Spain, in fact, which experienced its own destape after the end of Francisco Franco's dictatorship in 1975, offered the perfect blueprint. Many Argentine journalists and writers experienced the Spanish destape firsthand when they arrived in the country in the mid-1970s, fleeing the Argentine dictatorship; later, many of these exiles brought the destape lessons with them when they came back to Argentina after 1983.⁹²

Fontevicchia's statement about time standing still during the military dictatorship suggests an intrinsic relationship between the destape and the achievement of modernity, an idea that circulated widely in the return to democracy. In 1984, for example, a *Libre* editorial argued that the discussion around the destape was ultimately about the type of nation Argentines aspired to be. The editorial explained that France and the United States, which exemplified the most advanced Christian Western societies, were strong democracies with solid economies in which citizens had the freedom to enjoy what some groups in Argentina were labeling "obscene." In contrast, Iran and the Soviet Union, nations torn by broken economies and totalitarianism, revealed the equation of sexual censorship with social backwardness. Destape defenders contended that in essence, the discussion about explicit sexual content in mass culture was about defining a "way of life."⁹³ Those against the destape were, in fact, "damning Argentina to remain a dinky, undeveloped republic," while freedom to talk, show, or write openly about sex was a sign of the development and progress of "civilized" nations, an example the newly democratic Argentina was set to follow.⁹⁴

In this new Argentina, the destape delivered on the promise of freedom of expression with a vengeance because sex was associated with the secret, the private, and the primal, and in the context of the military dictatorship, it had also been the prohibited, the expurgated, and the unspoken. Furthermore, what made sex the perfect subject for epic liberation in the media was its potential to disrupt themes considered "sacred," such as family, childhood, and religion. Popular magazines *Sex Humor* and *Eroticón* represent two of the most extreme examples.⁹⁵ They both offered historically unmatched, irreverent, "profane" humor that depicted such things as women who, surrounded by unruly toddlers, regretted not having had an

abortion; pregnant nuns; and priests who participated in orgies. Similarly, the newly created adult comic magazines *Historietas Sex* and *Fierro*—the latter advertised as “the comic strip that was not possible in the past”—published sexually explicit cartoons with never-before-seen close-ups; detailed images of sexual organs; and rape, oral sex, and group sex scenes. These images and humor represented a cry of emancipation after years of state-imposed prudishness and crushed freedoms of the press and of speech even when some considered them to be gross, raw, and brutal.⁹⁶

In fact, even progressive artists, journalists, and thinkers who endorsed the destape began discussing issues of taste, limits, and discernment. This was a conversation about the uses of freedom, the acceptance of excesses and risks, and the search for balance. In this discussion, the difference between pornography and eroticism was central but remained largely unresolved as there was no universal, ahistorical, and objective definition of obscenity people could agree on.⁹⁷ “Who says that a naked breast is erotic and a pubis is pornographic?” asked journalist Daniel Pliner, director of the weekly *El Observador*. Pliner maintained that questions like this had no objective answers and that they could dangerously reintroduce the issue of censorship.⁹⁸ This possibility made progressive sectors extremely uncomfortable. Therefore, they ultimately justified the “excesses” of the destape—on which there was no agreement—in the name of freedom and using the Spanish destape as an example, explained those excesses as the “natural” and temporary reaction to past repression. Many foretold that audiences would start experiencing a “destape fatigue” that would make them more discerning about content. As a consequence, the crudest components of the destape would vanish and only its fine expressions would remain.⁹⁹ Others, such as pioneering pediatrician and sex educator Florencio Escardó, held that the new freedom was entirely positive and that the destape should not be reduced to merely its excesses because this was “as absurd as protesting against sugar because a child got an upset stomach from eating candy.”¹⁰⁰

For their part, general audiences embraced the different manifestations of the destape, making it a huge commercial success. According to a poll published in *La Semana*, only 10 percent of the respondents believed that censorship should be introduced to restrain the unwanted aspects of the destape.¹⁰¹ Like writers, comic artists, and journalists who were free to create without constraints, audiences reveled in the freedom to choose

what to consume. Throughout his campaign, Alfonsín had emphasized the importance of this right for true democracy, arguing that “censorship represents a direct attack on freedom and an affront to the spectator. The existence of censorship suggests that as audiences, we are incapable of distinguishing between good and bad and of choosing accordingly.”¹⁰² In fact, the government explained that past censorship agencies represented “an elite group that takes it upon itself to think so that the rest of the population does not have to.”¹⁰³ With the end of a paternalistic view of audiences that highlighted their lack of standards, taste, morals, and education, the public regained its right to choose—even if what they chose caused dismay among some movie, theater, and literature critics and members of the intellectual elite.¹⁰⁴

This freedom of choice proposed by the *destape* implied recovering the self. Censorship and self-censorship prompted by anxiety and violence had annulled the capacity of individuals to decide for themselves, crushing the feelings of autonomy that are essential for the creation of personhood. After the return to democracy, “I decide” meant “I exist,” a strong sentiment that given the violence of the dictatorship many people might have easily reformulated as “I survived.” The content of the *destape* added another layer of complexity to the repossession of the self because sex involved issues of conscience, intimacy, and private responsibility that reinforced feelings of self-determination. At the most basic level, then, the *destape* provided Argentines the opportunity to overcome the “culture of fear” that had made violence, torture, and death “the gods” that determined behavior.¹⁰⁵ Now audiences could conquer the fear of exploring and accepting subjects that censors had previously demonized, the fear of personal responsibility, the fear of facing the “excesses” of freedom, and the fear of accepting who they were and what they liked. Indeed, the right to read an erotic magazine or watch a pornographic movie was more than an expression of sexual freedom—it was an assertion of sexual identity. In those acts, subjects defined themselves as free consumers and readers but also expressed themselves as sexual beings.¹⁰⁶

Because of these effects, the *destape* powerfully symbolized the age of adulthood. In a 1979 essay published in the newspaper *Clarín*, writer and poet María Elena Walsh bravely denounced how censorship infantilized audiences by calling Argentina “a kindergarten country” inhabited by “children” with “a broken pencil and an enormous eraser already encrusted

in their brains” that prevented them from thinking or articulating their thoughts. Censors, Walsh suggested, claimed to preserve purity but were actually producing backwardness. The writer pointed out that in democratic regimes around the world, free choice did not destroy families, pervert youth, or disintegrate the community. Frustrated, she called for the end of censorship by urging military authorities to “let us grow up.” Yet Walsh’s plea was ignored because as political scientist Guillermo O’Donnell has affirmed, turning citizens into “obedient infants” was central to the military’s plan of subjugation.¹⁰⁷

“Adulthood,” understood as the freedom to decide what to read, watch, and listen to, would only be attained after 1983, making the *destape* the ultimate metaphor of a national coming of age. Openness about sexual matters, the traditional realm of mature individuals, confirmed Argentines in their new grown-up status. The magazine *Adultos* put this symbolic association to work when laying out its goals in its first issue: “To discuss what we’ve never discussed before. To allow ourselves what we’ve never allowed ourselves before. To stop believing that sex is something ugly and understand, once and for all, that it is something beautiful. To hear the world’s foremost experts on the subject. . . . To cease to be what María Elena Walsh referred to as a ‘kindergarten country,’ especially in terms of sex. Today, we launch *Adultos*. We hope to be *Adultos* [adults] together.”¹⁰⁸

Celebration of adulthood notwithstanding, some intellectual sectors criticized the *destape* for its commercial nature. These commentators disagreed with the sexualization of culture as just “good business” and maintained that sexual freedom and sexual well-being were different from the commodification of sex for profit. These critics believed that money-making tainted the enterprise when it interfered with or distracted from higher goals such as sexual liberation or sex education. Yet writer Marcos Aguinis argued that disapproving of the economic motivations behind the *destape* was different from defending censorship, which he vehemently opposed. Aguinis asserted that “sex is something too valuable and worthy for it to be handled by neurotic dictators or for it to be exploited by slaves to money.”¹⁰⁹

The most extreme remark on the commercial nature of the *destape* came from Minister of Interior Antonio Tróccoli, who suggested it was a spurious business by using the word “mafia”—a comment that he soon dismissed due to the negative reaction in the media and its rapid appropri-

ation by conservative and ultra-Catholic sectors. Journalists and editors were the first to reject these types of criticisms by arguing that profit was the motivation and condition of survival for all types of businesses operating in a market economy, and publishing houses functioned under the same terms. “Should the government pass a law to ban publishers for making money?” some asked with sarcasm. The destape industry was no different from the textile or food industries; they all manufactured and sold products for profit. Erotic magazines or erotic movies were unique merchandise but consumer goods nonetheless. Most importantly, advocates agreed, the destape industry was simply responding to an insatiable demand.¹¹⁰

This demand might explain why of all the taboo media topics that were unleashed after the fall of the dictatorship, sex was the first, the rawest, and the most ubiquitous. It might also clarify its pioneering role in suggesting and facilitating public discussions about other previously prohibited and painful subjects such as political violence and the desaparecidos. Early on, indeed, several voices argued that the sexual destape should only be the beginning of a larger process of openness. Ultimately, the destape was “talking about everything, writing about everything, filming everything, painting everything”—an “everything” that unquestionably included the crimes committed by the military.¹¹¹ Yet once this started happening, the treatment of sensitive topics such as clandestine detention centers, kidnapped babies, and death flights¹¹² took on a sinister, distasteful, and macabre tone. The hyperrealistic news that proliferated about human rights violations was labeled “the horror show.” Even more so than in the case of the sexual destape, critics condemned the profit-making nature of “corpse trafficking”—as one journalist summarized the morbid reports that crudely commodified human suffering.¹¹³

In this context, sex did not fall into the background but instead became a bizarre complement prompting critical commentators to denounce a “race” between the sexual destape and the “destape of tombs.”¹¹⁴ The press was plagued by an uneasy mix of images of provocative nude women and unidentified dead bodies, articles about orgasm and explicit sex shows followed by exposés on torture in illegal prisons, and comics about sex positions next to editorials about unmarked graves. *Libre*, the magazine that best exemplified this trend, was the third best-selling weekly in the country, showing that there was an eager audience for this formula.¹¹⁵

Many progressive sectors of the media, which otherwise oscillated between supporting and tolerating the destape, criticized the grotesque pairing “of the tiniest bikini and the biggest crime” because it had transformed serious and disturbing news into something frivolous, vulgar, and puerile.¹¹⁶ Furthermore, critics warned that this offensive pairing would desensitize the public toward sex and, most importantly, toward death and suffering.¹¹⁷

While also being critical, others saw a deep-set, significant connection between the two realms. Florencio Escardó affirmed that both sex and crimes against humanity shared a common past as invisible subjects. Argentines had developed a gigantic scotoma, a blind spot, to avoid seeing what they did not want to see, when in most cases, it was in plain sight. It is no coincidence that the dictatorship turned its victims into desaparecidos, rendering them “invisible” to their families and to the nation as a whole. Escardó explained that in the midst of the destape, the obsession with sex and the morbid exposure of the military’s violent crimes were a collective strategy of acceptance. Argentines had consciously rejected both subjects because they were too chaotic, complicated, dangerous, and painful to acknowledge, but now they were coming to terms with past denial. Like the destape of state violence, the sexual destape was a reaffirmation of the right and the ability to see, and, consequently, to know and to accept. The sexual destape also represented an empowering, voluptuous recovery of all senses. Escardó maintained that as a symbol of pleasure and amusement, the destape provided a profound “sense of relief” from the suffering and death people had witnessed, suspected, experienced, or denied, and that now, increasingly disclosed in the press and socially acknowledged, all had to cope with.¹¹⁸

Along these lines, writer Susana Torres Molina explained the success of her best-selling book of erotic tales by asserting that eroticism connects us to uninhibited pleasure and in so doing teaches us to deal with guilt. In a society plagued by remorse about the recent past, the destape as a celebration of exuberant sensuality may have served as a soothing tonic to process the grim previous years and the uncertainty about the future and to help contend with personal responsibilities. Yet the destape was more than a cheap thrill cobbled together by opportunistic movie directors, magazine editors, and writers. Griselda Gambaro argued that in the new democratic context, books like her erotic novel *Lo impenetrable* (1984)

were “a place where imagination, nonchalance, and irreverence are but small contributions to a more playful, permissive society.”¹¹⁹ It was French philosopher Georges Bataille who equated eroticism with an experience of life in all its intensity and exuberance, the embracement of existence in its richest manifestation. Gambaro was, in effect, drawing attention to the urgent need of Argentines to recover the joy of being and the role of a light-hearted, bright, healthy eroticism in doing so.¹²⁰ This type of eroticism was the opposite of the eroticized violence of the military that, according to Frank Graziano, derived pleasure from another’s pain. Furthermore, the military, Diana Taylor has suggested, relocated “the masculinist desire for domination onto the feminized population,” which was rhetorically and literally violated with impunity.¹²¹ In Argentina, after years of the rule of death and terror, the destape was a celebration of eroticism that represented, even in its most unrefined and profit-driven versions, an unrepentant collective enactment of self-indulgence as well as the right of life enjoyed to the fullest.¹²²

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, ULTRA-CATHOLICS, AND THE CONTRADESTAPE

The Catholic Church became a vocal enemy of the destape, especially the Conferencia Episcopal Argentina (CEA; Argentine Episcopal Conference)—the official assembly of all bishops in the country—and its Comisión Episcopal para los Medios de Comunicación (Episcopal Media Commission), which filed lawsuits and actively protested against media content. For their part, figures such as Rosario archbishop Jorge Manuel López, priest Julio Triviño, and San Juan archbishop Italo Di Stéfano became nationally known for their vociferous positions. Most importantly, ultra-Catholic sectors joined a myriad of local and national institutions, both long-lived and newly founded, that worked in a coordinated and very visible fashion against the destape, such as the Liga de Madres de Familia, the Liga de Padres de Familia, the Liga por la Decencia, Acción Católica, the Movimiento de Afirmación de los Valores Morales, the Federación de Entidades para la Defensa de la Dignidad Humana, the Liga de Amas de Casa, the Movimiento Familiar Cristiano, the Asociación de Abogados Católicos, Fuerza Moral, and the Coordinadora Nacional de Defensa de la Familia (CONADEFA).

Among these, the Liga por la Decencia, created in Rosario in 1963 under the motto “For a more decent society for our children,” was one of the strongest and most reactionary, prompting a journalist to equate it to “the destape of Rosario’s far right.”¹²³ The Liga was also a fundamental planner and organizer of concerted nationwide efforts that earned it a reputation across Argentina. Presided over by Pedro García and with a board of directors almost entirely composed of men, the Liga enthusiastically supported the dictatorship. As early as July 1976, four months after the coup, the Liga welcomed key new national and local military authorities in its anniversary celebrations while foreseeing a shared future working for the same goals, morality being the most coveted. García affirmed that “we are hopeful and optimistic, but also convinced that unless we achieve the moral recovery of our people, all economic, political and other efforts we make will have been built on sand.”¹²⁴

When the dictatorship was unofficially over after the Malvinas War and the call for elections, conservative, ultra-Catholic sectors profoundly lamented and protested the increasing sexualization of culture. But when the destape actually began, it represented for them the coming of apocalyptic times. It was considered a constant, all-encompassing, and violent perversion that overran culture and everyday life, threatening to destroy Christian values, innocent children, and the family. Ultra-Catholic associations compared the destape to “uncovering garbage” (*el destape de basura*), and thus an open, smelly trash can became a common graffiti on city walls. For the CEA, the destape was a form of obscene exhibitionism that produced an incapacity to feel, depriving individuals of their emotions. The media—labeled the “*medios de corrupción social*” (mediums of social corruption)—was causing an “alienating extroversion” that profoundly degraded culture. The destape rendered society insensitive; the sexualization of culture hardened the heart.¹²⁵

The CEA equated the destape with pornography, understood as “expressions that undermine modesty and good manners, distorting sexuality and extolling sexual impulse in an uncontrolled manner.”¹²⁶ While journalists and scholars were debating the difference between eroticism and pornography with no definite resolution, ultra-Catholic associations condemned all sexual content for threatening *pudor* (modesty) and used the term “pornographic” liberally. With no tolerance for even the most innocuous manifestations of the new openness toward sexual matters, no

challenge to morality was too small for these “stoic modesty soldiers,” as an article in *Sex Humor* sarcastically nicknamed the Liga por la Decencia.¹²⁷ For the league, pornography included hardcore porn movies and arthouse films featuring bed scenes, sexually provocative frontal nudity and short shorts, naughty dialogues brimming with double entendres on theater stages, and the most infantile versions of off-color humor on television shows. A warning in the newsletter published by the Liga por la Decencia against the increasingly popular use of the term *pareja* (couple) because of its associations with *aparearse* (to mate)—“like animals do”—is an illustrative example.¹²⁸ Similarly, they denounced the “sexually aggressive” dialogues on television shows, such as a scene on the popular adult show *No toca botón* where a male character tells his love interest on the phone: “I’d like you to come over and pose naked for me tonight. . . . What do you mean, you’re not a professional model?! . . . That doesn’t matter . . . I’m not a painter, either.”¹²⁹

Ultra-Catholics pointed to democracy as the enabling factor for the new culture of sexual frankness and thus criticized its freedoms. In 1984, the Comisión Episcopal para los Medios de Comunicación declared that all aspects of life had to be subordinated to morality and that this was the only possible path to true freedom. The bishop of Jujuy Raúl Casado summarized this view by arguing that “morality should inform politics and economics, professional and domestic life, the world of culture and work, the sphere of the family and school, artistic expressions and social communications. Morality is the exercise of freedom.”¹³⁰ With these arguments, ultra-Catholic sectors walked a thin line between attacking the sexualization of culture and contesting the new democratic order that allowed it. By questioning the value of voting for causing “moral degradation,” emphasizing how easily freedom became licentiousness, affirming that happiness could never result from a type of liberty that involved obscenity and attacks on family and religion, and insisting that permissiveness endangered political stability, the Catholic Church eroded confidence in democracy among its congregation. The process reached its boiling point when in October 1984, during a mass for military officers, Father Julio Triviño coined the infamous term “pornographic democracy,” which severely vilified the new political order.¹³¹

Many different voices strongly condemned this position, openly rejected the equation between the destape and pornography, defended

freedom of expression, and attacked priests for being “falsely moralistic” and “sexually repressed.”¹³² Florencio Escardó criticized the “scandalized hypocrites” who “believe they’ve got the monopoly on morality and judge everyone else” for using the destape as an excuse to send the dreadful message that democracy was corrupt. Escardó further asserted that the true sources of corruption were the denial, hypocrisy, and concealment that had prevailed during the dictatorship and that the *contradestape* was zealously advocating now.¹³³ For his part, Buenos Aires Secretary of Culture Mario O’Donnell, who was otherwise inclined to place limits on the destape, such as ordering that erotic magazines should be displayed in black plastic covers, argued that Argentines, the church included, had to treat democracy as if it were a “fragile crystal.” Pampered minorities, O’Donnell declared, should refrain from endangering the new political order with demands and accusations only they believed to be important, as most citizens were focused on coping with the nefarious legacies of the dictatorship. O’Donnell insisted, “We cannot risk our democracy over trifling matters. We are immersed in very basic situations such as hunger, trying to figure out whether our country can continue as a nation, and whether we’ll be asphyxiated by the rope of our foreign debt. So quit whining about porno films, a topic that only interests a very small sector of the middle class and is of no interest to the average Joe, who can barely make it from paycheck to paycheck.”¹³⁴

While ultra-Catholics relativized democracy and highlighted the limits of freedom, they used both concepts to defend their position when attacked. Bishops, for example, differentiated between the “false freedom” of the destape and the “true freedom” and the “common good” resulting from limiting freedom of expression. Santa Fe Archbishop Eduardo Storni explained that the battle of the church against the destape was not motivated by censorship but by the need to protect Catholics from damaging influences. In a democracy, Storni affirmed, the rights of Catholics should be respected.¹³⁵ The CEA even compared the Catholics’ affliction to the infringement of human rights by arguing that in a context in which there was “extreme sensitivity” in relation to this issue, it was important to understand that the destape was, in fact, a violation of body and spirit. In this way, ultra-Catholics conveniently alternated religious discourses that defined the destape as “sins against culture” and “the devil’s market” with a political language of rights.¹³⁶

These sectors drew on this language to defend themselves from a cultural trend they experienced as compulsory and inescapable. During their campaign “For freedom, against imposed pornography,” CONADEFA argued that “we are not asking for censorship but we are asking for respect for our right to choose, without any imposition, what we want to watch and what we want our children to watch. We appeal to your responsibility as the government so that in each of your respective departments, you take the measures necessary to defend family and ensure that the laws are upheld.”¹³⁷ Rather than turning off the TV and freely choosing the movies they wanted to watch and the books and magazines they wanted to read, ultra-Catholic sectors proposed to eliminate or censor those movies, television shows, books, and magazines they disapproved of, curtailing the right of choice and the freedom of expression of the rest of society in the process. Ultimately, in the name of morality, the freedoms of others should be restricted.

Also in the name of morality, where others saw modernity and liberation, ultra-Catholics viewed corruption, underdevelopment, and slavery. According to this view, the *destape* was synonymous not with emancipation but with oppression, turning audiences into slaves to their most basic instincts. Furthermore, an editorial in the Catholic magazine *Criterio* contested claims that the *destape* was a sign of national maturity and independence by charging that Argentines had made hedonism their tyrannical master and were “a community of spoiled children incapable of looking beyond pleasure.”¹³⁸ With regard to the “so-called modernization” propelled by the *destape*, the Catholic magazine *Esquiú* declared that in reality, it was a “form of plagiarism” that entailed the reproduction of undesirable foreign models in Argentine media and culture.¹³⁹ Similarly, the episcopate affirmed that the *destape* was a shift in national culture, in the values and the lifestyle that represented the true Argentine identity, “a foreign cultural invasion.”¹⁴⁰ Interestingly, international influences notwithstanding, the *destape* was predominantly composed of cultural products—from magazines and movies to television shows and sexology books—created in Argentina by Argentines.

Ultra-Catholics lamented that by naturalizing sex content in culture, “we gradually learn to live with evil, to tolerate it.” Like in the case of illegal drugs, they argued, “the social body grows accustomed and then requires increasingly higher and frequent doses.”¹⁴¹ This “addiction” had

devastating consequences. Ultra-Catholics denounced the destape for the “perversion of sexuality” evident in “immoral practices” such as premarital sex, same-sex relations, and autoerotism, all of which they believed to be on the rise. In an otherwise uneasy alliance, ultra-Catholics cited American radical feminist Robin Morgan’s famous quote “Pornography is the theory, and rape is the practice” to support claims that the destape was the main cause of sexual violence against women and children. Yet the destructive effects of the destape were not limited to sexuality. The Catholic Church considered that Argentines were facing a doomsday scenario and that the destape was the cause of all evils, including the dissolution of the family, crime, drug addiction, declining patriotism, and, ultimately, the collapse of the nation.¹⁴² Comparing the current situation in which “the leprosy of pornography spreads slowly” to the depravity that caused the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah by divine judgment, ultra-Catholics warned of the consequences of the destape in ominous terms: “If we examine the national context, we can see that sentence has been passed and our punishment is now being imposed: hyperinflation, the worst that any country in the world is suffering; unemployment; scarcity; hatred among brothers; violence. . . . Punishment for a people who have turned their back on God worshipping the false idols of pleasure and decadence, a country that continues down the wrong path towards the wrong objective.”¹⁴³

The Catholic Church identified the culprits clearly. It blamed the media—“the merchants of sexual degradation”—for its lack of morals and thirst for profits, the people for their weakness, and the government for its permissiveness.¹⁴⁴ In fact, the church profoundly resented the national government for relaxing the control of agencies such as the COMFER and, most importantly, for eliminating infamous censorship bodies such as the ECC, an agency they had controlled tightly. These acts represented a terrible blow: “the triumph of *pornocracia*” enabled by a government that was viewed as a “patron of obscenity.”¹⁴⁵ As a response, ultra-Catholics forcefully pushed for stringent censorship, which the bishopric of Posadas, Misiones, likened to an umbrella against the rain or a muzzle that prevented a dog from biting.¹⁴⁶ In this view, censorship was inevitable because pornography was as violent as “armed terrorism.” The state, endowed with the duty to preserve public morality and social order, was thus expected to effectively use “police force to safeguard the physical and moral integrity of the nation’s inhabitants.”¹⁴⁷

To transform a reality they despised and feared, and to counteract an “indolent” federal government they accused of imposing “moral liberalism,” ultra-Catholic organizations and individuals acted with resolve and persistence, particularly at the municipal and provincial levels. Here, even in the midst of the destape and in the face of the democratically elected government working hard to deliver on its electoral promise of freedom of expression and the right of choice, they found some trusted allies in judges, prosecutors, mayors, governors, and councilmen. An extreme illustration of this collaboration for its political and symbolic meanings is the Eucharistic Congress in San Juan province in 1984, when several mayors participated in the mass celebrated by Archbishop Di Stéfano by carrying up the offerings. The gifts rendered at the altar were approved municipal ordinances and decrees against the destape and aimed at monitoring, prohibiting, closing down, and fining publications, establishments, forms of entertainment, and individuals who were considered threats to morality.¹⁴⁸

In order to reach their goals, ultra-Catholic sectors printed and broadly circulated newsletters and bulletins; met with government authorities and representatives of television channels, film industry figures, editors, publishers, advertising agents, and newspaper and magazine distributors to discuss their demands; and organized popular petitions, hunger strikes, demonstrations, protests, talks, and conferences all over the country. They denounced movie theaters for the film posters on display; filed complaints against different intercity coach companies for the movies they showed on their buses; and even monitored the *Boletín Oficial de Marcas*, where brand names were registered, to hunt down sex-related products and lascivious labels.¹⁴⁹ Ultra-Catholics also intensely employed the court system by filing criminal complaints against movies, magazines, and television shows. In fact, when Minister of Interior Antonio Tróccoli dismissed the creation of censorship government agencies and argued that “justice will be entrusted with handling the excesses,” ultra-Catholics took note.¹⁵⁰ In 1985, an editorial in *Sex Humor* expressed frustration and contempt over the manner in which the judiciary was being used against the media, maintaining that “the same old guys have now assumed the censor’s role, those who continue to believe that sex should be silenced because it is ugly: the clergy, different leagues, sanctimonious oddballs who go running off to court when they spot a *derrière*.”¹⁵¹

Article 128 of the Penal Code against obscenity became an effective tool invoked in legal actions. This strategy rapidly brought different sectors of the film industry, the media, and congressmen together to work toward reforming the law because in the hands of sympathetic judges, its application represented seizures, closures, and prison for magazine editors in chief and newsstand and movie theater owners and managers, the most common targets.¹⁵² Yet, in other cases, ultra-Catholics favored dialogue. *Fuerza Moral*, for example, suggested taking advantage of personal relations whenever possible. Residents of big cities only had recourse to the law, but those who lived in a small town were advised to gather a group of neighbors “and amicably convince the theater owner that what he is doing is bad for the community and its future.”¹⁵³

It is difficult to assess the popular support for these ultra-Catholic sectors and to what extent Argentines either publicly or privately shared or sympathized with their position and criticisms, regardless of the commercial success of the destape. However, reporting on demonstrations, marches, and petitions by the *Liga por la Decencia* reveals its scarce convening power. In 1984, in Rosario, a city of 800,000 inhabitants, only 14,600 citizens (less than 2 percent of the city population) signed a petition against the destape, and a year later, only 2,000 *rosarinos* attended a demonstration in front of the cathedral. That same year, 3,000 people assembled in a demonstration against the destape in Mendoza, a city of 120,000. Suddenly, a Catholic nation that had accepted sex censorship and sexual conservatism imposed by the military dictatorship ignored or flat-out rejected the ultra-Catholic contradestape and actively consumed the products of the destape.¹⁵⁴

An explanation for this apparent contradiction must take into consideration the increasing discredit of the Catholic Church—whose complicity with the military regime was becoming apparent—and the clashes between the bishops and the Alfonsín administration due to its liberal policies on education, human rights, and divorce.¹⁵⁵ Most importantly, accepting and celebrating the destape, and contesting the contradestape, may have reaffirmed the identity of many Argentines as true opponents of the dictatorship. In a now classic study, political scientist Guillermo O'Donnell showed an almost “instantaneous conversion” among individuals who were acquiescent, acritical, and even supporters of the regime when interviewed during the dictatorship but who, after the return to

democracy, denied they had espoused those previous positions, claimed they had been completely unaware of the repression in the previous years, and now energetically condemned the military. Similarly, in the late 2000s, historian Sebastián Carassai's interviewees changed the register of their stories from the personal "I" to the impersonal "one" or "it" ("one thought" or "it was said") when answering his questions about state terrorism during the dictatorship. Carassai explains this as a mechanism to dilute personal responsibility for the past by attributing blame to an "anonymous being." Thus, despite the reasons for and the genuineness of the change-over, embracing or tolerating the *destape* and rejecting or ignoring the *contradestape* might have been one more way to pledge commitment to democracy and repudiate the recent past.¹⁵⁶

Although most Argentines refrained from participating in ultra-Catholic events and continued enjoying *destape* trends that made them modern, liberated, and democratic subjects, the mobilization of ultra-Catholic sectors resulted in key achievements. Ultra-Catholics successfully blocked the opening of adult cinemas, forced the COMFER to more strictly control television content and to prohibit the airing of films unsuitable for viewers under eighteen, achieved city ordinances for the creation of municipal boards of film rating and "moral committees" to supervise publications and entertainment and impose fines, closed down movie theaters and erotic shows, and impounded films and magazines. Just a few weeks after Alfonsín's victory, the city of Buenos Aires mandated that magazines such as *Shock*, *Destape*, and *Viva* could not be sold at the traditional sidewalk newsstands—where magazines were hung or displayed for the passersby to see and leaf through—but only in stores where they could not be openly displayed.¹⁵⁷ Alluding to the regulation, comic magazine *Sex* announced in its ads that "though you may not see it, *Sex* is always there." Later, these types of publications had to be sold in a black plastic bag, prompting *Adultos*'s editor in chief to wonder if the prohibition of the magazine for readers under eighteen was not enough protection for youth in a free country.¹⁵⁸

The local victories of ultra-Catholics produced a very uneven national cultural map where the same or comparable films or magazines were available in some cities and prohibited in others. In 1984, for example, a judge in Rosario rejected a claim against *Last Tango in Paris* (1972), ruling



Figure 1.3. The progressive press criticized the attempts of the Catholic Church to control sexual practices and discourses. "What Is the Church Doing in My Bed?" *El Porteño*, August 1986.

in favor of its screening because he considered that the sex scenes were not obscene, while two years later, in San Juan, a judge impounded and prohibited the screening of *Emmanuelle* (1974) and sentenced the owner of the movie theater to prison based on charges of obscenity. In the verdict, the judge explained that “obscene is anything which tends to stimulate vulgar instincts and basic sexual desires, offending public modesty and good manners.”¹⁵⁹ Likewise, early in 1985, Oskar Blotta, chief editor of *Eroticón* and *Satiricón*, was prosecuted in Buenos Aires for obscenity, and several issues of the magazines were seized and banned, even though they were being sold freely in the rest of the country. *Destape*, *Libre*, and *Shock*, for their part, were often confiscated in the city of San Juan.¹⁶⁰ The managing editor of *Sex Humor*, which was banned in some cities, confirmed that some regional distributors refused to deliver publications, drawing attention to the fact that the church had collaborators beyond the courtrooms. Indeed, contradestape demonstrations and signed petitions may not have attracted much support, but the church found adherents outside ultra-Catholic organizations. In November 1985, for example, the subway company in Buenos Aires and the newspaper vendors inside most of the stations boycotted some publications in a campaign against “imposed pornography.”¹⁶¹

Progressive sectors condemned the church harshly for its defense of censorship, its denunciation of the government’s commitment to freedom, and its attacks on the new cultural and political order, highlighting the obscurantism and totalitarianism of the ultra-Catholic sectors. The church, for its part, minimized criticism by arguing that the media characterization of Catholics as “pious,” “moralistic,” and “old-fashioned” was merely an unsuccessful attempt to ridicule an urgent and noble cause.¹⁶² Yet animadversion was more complex and serious than the church wanted to accept. As information about the horror of life and death in clandestine detention centers and the church’s complicity with the dictatorship became public, detractors equated censorship with a form of torture inflicted on the intellectual abilities of society, a dangerous and painful remnant of the preceding times. They also posed an important question: “What is more corrupt, a movie or 30,000 disappeared?”¹⁶³ Similarly, an editorial in *Sex Humor* pointed to the contradiction between the church’s crusade against the destape in the name of decency and “the seven years of murders and tortures we went through without a single episcopal document

on the matter.”¹⁶⁴ *Sex Humor* was echoing critics who drew attention to how the church condemned the destape as immoral and evil, even calling it a violation of human rights, but had remained silent about the obscene violence that the military perpetrated against the people during the dictatorship.¹⁶⁵

As the triumph of “spectator sex,” the destape made sexuality a valid entertainment choice for audiences long deprived of erotic content in the arts and media. As such, it revolutionized visual culture, transformed social scripts about sex, and pushed the limits of taste and tolerance to unprecedented levels. It also repositioned sex on-scene, in the public sphere, open to discussion and to view. From being banned and obscured in the dictatorship, sex became the star of the democratic stage. Rather than asking whether the destape was an opportunistic commercial trend imposed on the audiences by the media or a media response to the authentic demands of eager consumers—a question that leads to circular reasoning more than to a stimulating inquiry and helpful conclusions—this chapter examines why the destape was such a spectacular commercial success and the most explosive cultural trend after the fall of the dictatorship. The answer lies in its social meanings and its social function: the destape was at the same time a cause and an effect of the democratization process. If democracy allowed for the liberalization and commodification of sex, the new culture of sexual frankness rendered democracy a lived experience as much as practices such as voting and protest marches did.

The commodification of sex propelled by the destape was in itself a concrete example of democratization that moved sex away from the sole control of governmental and religious forces and placed it in the market for massive consumption. This shift in influence left the traditional arbiters of sexuality feeling vulnerable and aggravated, and thus for some ultra-Catholic, conservative sectors, the destape represented the rise of a “pornographic democracy.” However, for most social sectors, the destape was associated with the recuperation of the rights and liberties lost during the dictatorship and, perhaps, was even a means to reaffirm loyalty to democracy. As a sphere for practicing choice, becoming modern, experiencing adulthood as an individual and as a nation, feeling pleasure, and enjoying life, the destape became a fundamental component of democratic life for both creators and audiences. For many Argentines, the destape was an

everyday reminder that living in a democracy was quietly but effectively present in the act of buying a sex manual or watching an erotic movie. And, in these acts, individuals simultaneously reaffirmed their allegiance to the new democratic order. The destape also disclosed the role of sex, and more specifically, the role of talking about, reading, watching, writing about, filming, and showing sex, as a powerful metaphor for personal and social liberation, and consequently, as a sphere for the rise of discerning and fearless subjects and a modern and forward-thinking society.