

Coda

Yesenia in China and the Arrival of Telenovelas in the Socialist World

The pattern of reception detailed in this book, while quite distinctive in its Soviet iteration, was limited to the Soviet Union neither in geography nor in historical periodization—and the film’s reach, however transformed, extends to the present day.

In 1976, as a result of *Yesenia*’s box office success in the Soviet Union, Chinese film authorities visited Mexico to arrange for screenings to form part of the first week of Mexican cinema and purchased “several dozen copies” of the film, as well as meeting with Jorge Lavat to discuss his visit to China.¹ The film was, indeed, screened in the open-air cinema in Shanghai’s Zhabei Park in July 1979, along with two films by Tito Davison: *Corazón salvaje* (1968) and the Mexico-Columbia coproduction *María* (1972), reportedly watched by more than ten thousand people.²

All three films were subsequently released commercially, and *Yesenia* was particularly popular with viewers, who were delighted by the film’s depiction of romance, which had been entirely absent from Chinese cinema of the Cultural Revolution. In keeping with its original history, upon the film’s release in China, a *lianhuanhua* (serialized photo-novel) of *Yesenia* was published—a big departure from the use of *lianhuanhua* for educational and political propaganda purposes that was typical of Chinese media just a few years prior. Overall, the popular reception of the film in China appears similarly framed by the discourse on “free love” and the feminization of women’s screen representations—seen as distinctly Western, with heroines depicted as exuberant, defiant, and sexually forward (evidently, “the Mexican gypsy’s” red dress was especially memorable in this respect).³



FIGURE 29. Advertisement for *Yesenia* as part of the week of Mexican cinema in Beijing, 1977. Personal collection.



FIGURE 30. A more recent cover for a pirated Chinese copy clearly foregrounds the eroticism of *Yesenia*.

Yesenia became even more of an icon after Jacqueline Andere visited the country in 1983 with her husband, Mexican author José María Fernández Unsáin, who was received by China PEN Center. During her much-publicized visit, Andere met the Chinese voice actor Li Zi, who dubbed *Yesenia* in Chinese. Li Zi contributed a great deal to her character’s iconic status and is responsible for her much-quoted



FIGURE 31. Poster art for *Yesenia*. Personal collection.

lines, perceived as particularly sexually risqué.⁴ Li was also known for her dubbing of Gina Lollobrigida's Esmeralda in *Notre-Dame de Paris* (Jean Delannoy, 1956), which was also released in China in the late 1970s, furthering associations between these movie “sex symbols” within postreform China's reconsiderations of gender and sexuality.

Yesenia continued to be popular in China throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, when the 1987 adaptation of the previous telenovela was broadcast on CCTV-8. In the 2000s, *Yesenia* was repeatedly evoked in official Chinese programming, now through the lens of nostalgia for the immediate postreform era: first in the 2001 CCTV-6 program *The Best*, a TV broadcast of the film that



FIGURE 32. Poster art for *Yesenia*. Personal collection.

included extended analysis by the host; again, in 2007, when CCTV-6's World Film Report released a special filmed in Mexico, "Looking for Yesenia," which included an interview with Andere; and again in 2014, when the Beijing TV Spring Festival Gala invited Andere as part of a "childhood memories" section of the event.⁵ As recently as 2021, CCTV-6's *The Best* screened *Yesenia* with an accompanying two-part discussion of the film and what it meant for the Chinese viewers.

We may speculate on the geopolitical motivations of the Chinese government-sponsored revivals of these instances of Chinese-Mexican affinities, or on the postreform moment of opening toward the world, but this was considerably different from Russian critics' continuing disdain over non-Western forms of entertainment (in the face of their government's anti-Western stance). It is evident that the specific cultural and political dynamics of the circulation and reception of Mexican melodramatic media differed considerably across the "socialist world," with each instance deserving a separate detailed examination. And *Yesenia* is not an isolated case, but a broader historical cinematic phenomenon, the significance of which extends beyond the contours of the 1970s Soviet Union. Tracing this pattern will reshape our understanding of the subsequent phase of media globalization flows in the 1980s and 1990s, providing indispensable clues to the gender dynamics of global postsocialism and its complex relationships with the world beyond Europe and North America.

The belated popularity of *Yesenia* and other popular Mexican films in China, which continued throughout the early 1980s, was in many ways responsible for Chinese TV executives' decision to purchase the rights to broadcast the Brazilian TV telenovela *The Slave Isaura* (*A Escrava Isaura*, Globo, 1976). Once shown on Chinese television in 1984, in the midst of an ongoing love affair between Chinese audiences and Mexican melodramas, the series was not only the first foreign program shown on national television, but remains one of the most beloved: three hundred thousand viewers purportedly voted to nominate its star, Lucélia Santos, for China's prestigious Golden Eagle Award, making Santos the first foreign actress to receive this honor. In subsequent years, *Isaura* conquered TV audiences in China, Albania, Poland, Hungary, and Cuba. Eventually sold to a total of 104 national markets, it turned out to be Globo's breakthrough international success and Brazil's biggest TV export.⁶

Isaura finally arrived on Soviet televisions in late 1988, where it held center stage in fierce cultural debates among critics and audiences, replaying and magnifying those triggered by *Yesenia* a decade earlier. Only this time, rather than being voiced by a handful of film critics, the concern over what *Isaura's* popularity meant for the state of Soviet culture and media reached the mainstream. A very cursory search for 1989–1990 reveals the mention of *Isaura* in over twenty articles in major Soviet newspapers such as *Pravda*, *Sovetskaia kul'tura*, and *Literaturnaia gazeta*, in addition to mentions in specialized publications such as *Iskusstvo kino*, *Sovetski ekran*, and *Televidenie i radioveshchanie*. These publications were inundated with letters from viewers, expressing their love for the show and asking for more information—much to the reviewers' and journalists' dismay.

Like the Mexican melodramas that came before it, *Isaura* was a historical romance. The series was adapted from Bernardo Guimarães's nineteenth-century abolitionist novel *A Escrava Isaura*, which was subsequently translated and published in both China and the Soviet Union. Thus, *Isaura* came complete with a politically progressive antislavery message and deeply conservative race and gender representational politics.⁷ In many ways, *Isaura's* global reception fits remarkably well within the cultural dynamics described in this book—albeit taking them to a truly global level. Its success was inseparable from its racial politics: nominally progressive and antiracist, yet not only stereotypical in its representations of Afro-Brazilian culture but highly problematic in its reliance on the figure of a “white” slave, paradoxically detaching slavery from race.⁸

And while *Yesenia* as a cultural and cinematic phenomenon remained largely unacknowledged by the Soviet cultural institutions at large, *Isaura* found its place at the center of some of the fiercest public cultural debates, especially because within two years its popularity was matched by new Latin American imports such as Mexican Televisa's *Los ricos también lloran*. It would become the most-watched program on TV, with an estimated two hundred million Russians and ex-Soviets tuning in to the series finale, quickly to be followed by *Simplemente María*, another



FIGURE 33. Poster art for *Yesenia*.
Personal collection.

Pimstein-produced telenovela, which attracted an average of 140 million viewers.⁹ From that point on, for at least two decades, post-Soviet television, whose domestic production lagged significantly behind, was dominated by Latin American telenovelas. But both *Isaura* and *Los ricos* marked a real turning point not only in the Soviet but in international media flows, establishing Latin American telenovelas' prominence beyond their original Latin American and US-diasporic media circuit. This development both foreshadowed and demonstrated the potential for a truly global circulation of serialized melodramatic media originating outside of the Global North—realized more recently by the worldwide commercial and popular successes of Turkish *dizi*, South Korean dramas, and Indian serialized TV.

In the post-Soviet space, the synergy of Latin American telenovela and popular music culminated in the creation of yet another global-popular icon, Natalia Oreiro. “Nasha Natasha”—“our Natasha,” as she is known thanks to the eponymous Netflix documentary—is an Uruguayan-Argentinian singer and telenovela star who enjoyed unparalleled on- and off-screen popularity in the former Soviet Union in the 2000s and continued touring the region so much that she was recently granted Russian citizenship.¹⁰ Oreiro’s acting and singing career had a powerful reboot triggered by the Netflix documentary: after decades of relative obscurity, at the moment of this book’s writing she is the star of several major Argentinian made-for-streaming media productions, playing none other than Eva Perón

in the recent popular serialized biopic (currently distributed through DisneyPlus). Oreiro's story in many ways takes us back to Lolita Torres, where this book began—and yet it also positions us firmly in the present, when cinema, television, and music industries are virtually inseparable from streaming platforms and digital piracy as modes of production, circulation, and consumption that shape new global media cultures. Both public debates and ardent fandom, too, take place largely in the virtual space of social media.

There is no doubt that a lot has changed—and these new global icons, as well as the geographies and infrastructures for their circulation, deserve a separate close study. This brief coda is therefore merely a teaser, an invitation to consider new questions arising from the history this book constructed. It is also a glimpse intended to demonstrate how despite these changes, many of the same dynamics become increasingly relevant to our new media landscape. And to critically engage with this new landscape, we need to go beyond some of the traditional binary thinking about national and global, North and South, East and West, socialism and capitalism, reactionary melodrama and progressive avant-garde. As such, the story of *Yesenia* can provide us a better understanding of one manifestation of the global-popular media and the way such cultural icons succeeded in addressing the changed affective regime of the post-1968 global landscape. Their popular transnational resonances foreground the various failures of cultural politics in both Mexico and the Soviet Union—failures that can be seen as paradigmatic of the inability of both state-led efforts and those of a cultural intelligentsia to engage the persistent importance of popular culture. This, in turn, speaks to their inability to face the actually existing historical conditions of “the people” they were meant to represent.

Beyond its ability to tap into unaddressed grievances and utopian imaginaries that resonated across the borders, *Yesenia* did not offer anything like a valid alternative for emancipatory politics of its time. A close reading of the various cultural resonances mobilized by the film's transnational reception points to both the persistence of older colonial and patriarchal epistemologies and the emergence of neoliberal and postfeminist frameworks of the subsequent decades. And yet neither of these two overlapping modalities could fully contain the cultural intimacies triggered by these global icons. And however problematic the populist imaginaries of alternative communities mobilized through these histories, and however flawed the strategies for their realization in everyday life, politically they are not reducible either to reified visions of state socialism or to consoling passions of capitalist consumption. In this very excess they may retain the potential for alternative modes of global solidarities that sidestep the seeming inevitability of global neoliberalism or the critical impasse of the Left. To mobilize them for new liberatory politics of popular culture would entail neither a full rejection of earlier models nor the savoring of sacred talismans of supposedly progressive moments of media histories, but a more attentive reckoning with the messiness of the past and the unanswered questions it still holds.