

Nonprofessional Acting in *El Perro*

When does a non-actor become an actor? The question has concerned many filmmakers and critics who have, throughout history, ventured a wide range of answers. More often than not, these concern issues of repetition and exposure. Reflecting on the use of nonprofessionals in post-war Italian cinema, André Bazin ([1948] 2005), for instance, suggests that as soon as an actor appears in more than one film it becomes significantly easier to recognise the on-screen behaviour as acting and the performer as an actor. Jacqueline Nacache terms this phenomenon the 'actor-effect' ([2003] 2006: 158) as, in this case, rather than any specific quality in the acting, it is the point of comparison brought about by a second performance that inevitably conditions how we perceive the actor. Vittorio De Sica was particularly concerned with preventing such an effect. For him, the anonymity of nonprofessionals was one of their greatest virtues and an important reason why he chose them over professionals.¹

Other filmmakers have foregrounded exposure when discussing the transition from non-actor to actor. Jean-Luc Godard, Renato Castellani and Adrián Caetano, for example, agree that as soon as someone is performing in front of the camera, they are already actors.² This might be because their behaviour and appearance are exhibited and, thus, offered as

interpretable, or because the performers are, from this initial contact with the filmmaking devices, modifying their behaviour and incorporating gestures and mannerisms. For these filmmakers it is the contact with the camera (the recording device) that inevitably changes the person's behaviour and their status as film performers.

Robert Bresson, who made the use of non-actors a distinctive feature of his filmmaking style, would disagree. For Bresson what radically altered the non-actor's behaviour and their status was not performing for the camera but watching their own on-screen performance. Bresson explains:

Do not use the same models in two films. [...] They would look at themselves in the first film as one looks at oneself in the mirror, would want people to see them as they wish to be seen, would impose a discipline on themselves, would grow disenchanted as they correct themselves. ([1975] 2016: 55)

For Bresson, it is the combination of (self)exposure and repetition that, as with Jacques Lacan's mirror stage ([1949] 2006), leads to a heightened level of self-consciousness and, inevitably, to more rigorous self-control. For both Bresson and Lacan, these reflexive experiences awaken the individuals' concern with their bodies as objects perceived and evaluated by others. This self-discovery is irreversible, as, once the non-actors go 'outside themselves, [they] will not be able to get in again' ([1975] 2016: 31). Bresson's cinematograph is an intrinsically perverse medium that, while capable of capturing the non-actor's behaviour in the cinematic pre-reflexive stage, also inevitably corrupts their alleged innocence. Because of this, Bresson and many others suggest, non-actors should only act in one film and their exposure to their on-screen image should be prevented as much as possible.

The Argentine director Carlos Sorin, who has worked with non-actors in most of his films and commercials, partly seems to share these beliefs. Sorin explains that, in his films, '[the non-actor who] plays the character is very similar to the character, almost the same [...]. The person standing in front of the camera [...] does not play somebody else. He/she constructs a character of him/herself' (2006).³ To further enhance the symbiosis between non-actor and character, Sorin rewrites his scripts once the non-actor has been cast (2006). The character

is also renamed after the non-actor, which makes it easier for the performer to identify with the role. On set, scripts are withheld from the non-actors, favouring instead the use of cues and verbal explanations. (This alleviates the performer's possible difficulties memorising lines.) Non-actors are also encouraged to adapt words and sentences to their natural way of speaking. Sorin also shoots in chronological order (Sorin in Ponce 2004), a technique facilitated by the use of a small production crew. The shooting ratio is very high, often above thirty to one, as scenes are not rehearsed; rather, all rehearsals are filmed.

These choices, popular among social realist filmmakers such as Ken Loach, help withhold fictional events from the performer so that actor and character discover them simultaneously.⁴ The emphasis is on preserving a quality of spontaneity in the performances to reinforce the impression that they are unrehearsed and recorded as lived. The idea is for the non-actor to ignore the practical business of filmmaking as much as possible and not worry about their acting. Free of worries regarding what is to come, the ideal non-actor (and character) wanders through the narrative like Alice through Wonderland, or, as Bazin put it, 'like laboratory rats being sent through a labyrinth' ([1952] 2005: 66), curious and expectant but ultimately unaware.

However, Sorin also uses directing techniques that depart significantly from this tradition of working with non-actors. Most notably, Sorin edits the film as he shoots it and, in contravention of Bresson's rule, regularly screens early cuts for the non-actors. He explains: 'I assemble and discover, alongside the actors, the path of the film and we modify both mise-en-scène and performance as we go along, while I also show them the filmed footage' (2012). Instead of delaying the non-actor / actor transition by preventing the performers from seeing themselves on film, Sorin involves them in the editing process, precipitating their discovery of their on-screen image. When considered alongside Sorin's more naturalistic techniques such as shooting in chronological order, his overall methodology seems geared towards eliciting the performer's self-consciousness to emerge progressively as the film develops, incorporating the non-actor's gradual self-recognition as part of the filmmaking process.

This essay examines how the transition between non-actor and actor is integrated in Sorin's *El Perro / Bombón: el Perro* (2004). Described as a 'rugged neo-realist fable' (Scott 2006), *El Perro* follows Juan 'Coco' Villegas (Juan Villegas) a humble and good-hearted knife artisan who struggles to make a living after being made redundant from his job as a service station attendant. Villegas drifts through the arid plains of Patagonia trying to sell his knives while looking for the odd job until an unexpected turn of events changes his luck. In exchange for altruistically aiding a stranded driver, Villegas receives a neglected though exceptional pedigree dog bred for exhibition. With his new companion, Villegas embarks on a journey in which he learns the tricks of dog exhibiting from illustrious dog trainer Walter Donado (Walter Donado)⁵, wins a prize at a local canine competition and ultimately changes his precarious situation, going from aimless drifter to professional dog exhibitor.

The first two parts of the essay offer sustained close analysis of Villegas' performance in key scenes from the film to demonstrate how the character's transformation in the fiction is informed by the performer's transformation from ingenue to relatively seasoned actor. As the non-actor becomes more conscious and in control of his acting so does the character become more aware of and comfortable in his newly found profession as dog exhibitor, which, notably, also involves public performance and self-presentation. The third part of the essay considers the reverse of the actor-character exchange and argues that the significant parallels the film draws between the character's and the non-actor's work allow for the plot to be read as reflecting on what's at stake in the transition between non-actor and actor. The film's reflexive project is to show how cinema is drawn to the very feature acting usually tries to dispel: the exhibition of self-consciousness.

Creating a character of oneself: self-consciousness and repetition

One common reason for filmmakers using unknown actors might be to foster a sense of authenticity by blurring the distinction between actor and character. Another might be to

showcase the discovery of new acting talent. Stanley Cavell has identified a further reason. He observes that some films:

require physiognomies for their subjects which not merely happen to be unknown but whose point, whose essence, is *that* they are unknown. Not just any unknown face will do; it must be one which, when screened, conveys unknownness; and this first of all means that it conveys privacy — an individual soul's aliveness or deadness to itself. A natural reason for a director's requirement of this quality is that his film is itself about unknownness, about the fact and causes of separateness or isolation or integrity or outlawry. ([1971] 1979: 181 emphasis in original)

Unknownness, integrity and isolation are important themes in *El Perro* and features that define the character of Juan Villegas. Cynthia Tompkins notes that 'Villegas is completely isolated: he hasn't seen his wife in twenty years. His daughter [...] yells at him for having turned up with a dog. While Villegas seems buried in contemporary anomie, he displays a traditional code of honor' (2013: 108). As Tompkins implies, Villegas' sense of integrity emerges as the tension between an adverse social milieu and a code of behaviour he seems incapable of letting go of. Several scenes in the first half of the film illustrate the protagonist's difficulties navigating his environment. For example, as soon as Villegas has acquired the dog, he is hired to guard a warehouse overnight. The owner specifically warns Villegas not to let Galván (Adrián Giampani), a recently fired employee, inside the warehouse. However, when Galván shows up, he dramatically pleads for Villegas to allow him in. Crying profusely and exaggeratedly, Galván nonetheless convinces Villegas, who ends up contravening his employer's request, letting Galván inside, and leaving the site without receiving payment.

Villegas' sense of integrity, though, is not only a consequence of a set of values. Rather, it appears to be primarily motivated by his acute self-consciousness. That is, Villegas inhabits a persistent state of concern over his behaviour that makes it impossible for him to convincingly sustain a front and pretend to be that which he is not. In his exchange with Galván, Villegas seems uncomfortable adopting the role of strict gatekeeper. Though he greets Galván with the dog barking violently, Villegas struggles controlling the animal. He

also hesitates and stutters as he explains that he has orders not to let Galván in. While he tries to stand tall alongside the mastiff, Villegas' body language betrays his performance. His posture is uncomfortably stiff rather than firm; his puppy eyes and insecure lips, not quite knowing what to say or do, make him appear self-doubting and weak despite the imposing barking dog. Galván seems to notice Villegas' insecurity as rather than leaving at once, he insistently pleads his case until he is allowed in. Villegas gives up rather quickly and although he appears to feel sympathy towards downcast Galván, he also seems relieved not having to pretend anymore.

Villegas' difficulties pretending can be seen across many scenes in the film. He has a hard time lying about his skills when asked by an agent at an employment office. 'Mechanic' Villegas answers initially. 'Light mechanic' he corrects himself. 'Are you a mechanic or not?' the agent enquires as he fills the form. 'Yes, yes, write "mechanic"' Villegas answers



unconvincingly. Though Villegas' self-consciousness manifests most vividly in scenes depicting awkward social encounters, it also permeates moments when he is alone. A noteworthy example is the scene in which Villegas drives home after picking up the dog. In a two shot with man and dog sitting side by side, Villegas throws suspicious glances at the animal. The unaffected and unreadable dog stares straight ahead. (See previous page) Peter Bradshaw notices 'something very funny about the sight of stately Bombón riding in the front passenger seat of Juan's car' (2005). Though Bradshaw is right in that the image is funny, I would argue that the comedy depends not so much on the dog's indifference, but on Villegas' self-conscious attitude. The doubtful and timid glances he gives the animal, coupled with his embarrassed frontal stares reveal Villegas' awareness of how absurd he probably looks while driving in the middle of the night with a strange dog as co-pilot (in the film) or displayed side by side with the animal for comedic purposes (on set).

Villegas has a particular way of performing integrity where his self-consciousness is refigured into a seemingly involuntary, and therefore sincere, display of honesty. His tendency to withhold effusive expression suggests insecurity and embarrassment but also a strong sense of manners or a concern with how his actions might affect others. His smiles are tenuous and hesitant; his serious expressions never emphatic enough to display anger. Villegas' preoccupation with himself and his actions is so pervasive that even in scenes that verge towards comedy his dignified expression prevents us from laughing at him without sympathy. Regardless of how out of place Villegas may look or how inappropriately he may approach a situation, he appears both aware of it but also proud of his efforts, confident that he has given it his best and that there was nothing wrong in his intentions.

The impression that a heightened state of self-consciousness is a trait of the character's personality, though, is most vividly articulated through the actor's minute and apparently unconscious gestures. Andrew Klevan has called attention to such details, noting that:

films create a living world, and responsive performers inhabit the world built for them. Consequently, any piece of their behaviour, no matter how slight, may arise out

of sympathy with the dramatic environment and contain significance. Yet this behaviour might appear as incorporated (in the fictional world) rather than presented (to the viewer), so noticing it feels like the discovery of a secret. (2012: 37).

In the following paragraphs I want to examine one such piece of behaviour which Villegas performs regularly throughout the film (a total of twenty-four times). The gesture, perhaps best described as a tic, consists of the quick running of the tongue across the lips. At first, it may prove hard or even inappropriate to attribute concrete meaning to this action. It only lasts a handful of frames and can, perhaps should, go unnoticed as a casual, inconsequential and unconscious body inflection. However, as I will try to demonstrate, detailed analysis of the gesture in relation to other performance and non-performance elements can illuminate how Villegas' self-consciousness is incorporated in the film's dramatic environment to aid in its narrative progression.

El Perro begins in the middle of a conversation, with Villegas trying to sell his handmade knives to a group of factory workers during their break. This is the first time Villegas licks his lips (see images). In this sequence, the lip-licking gesture appears unconscious and habitual. It does not serve a distinct communicative function; it is neither replacing spoken words nor triggering reactions from other characters. It does not appear to be directly linked to the dramatic action either. Rather, it feels like a casual piece of the performer's habitual behaviour has found its way into the film. Filmmakers seeking naturalistic performances often cherish such unrehearsed details as they lend scenes a sense of spontaneity. Sorin explains: 'Acting is also fiction [...]. I try to have a few moments of truth. If I have four or five such moments in a film I am pleased with the actors' (2012b).

Note, though, that Villegas is not alone in licking his lips; the worker in the yellow cap also performs the very same gesture at virtually the same time, precisely one frame before Villegas. The worker in the yellow cap has no lines in the scene; his performance is virtually reduced to this specific gesture. The way both Villegas and the worker lick their lips further stresses the habitual dimension of the gesture, encouraging its reading as an inflection of what Vivian



Sobchack and other phenomenologists refer to as an individual's pre-personal body. Sobchack defines the pre-personal body as 'culturally habituated [... yet] spontaneous beyond our will [... it] escapes conscious control in a variety of visible responses and movements that, nonetheless, serve to "define" us' (2012: 431-432).

How does this tic define Villegas (and the worker) for us? Firstly, we might regard the gesture as a reaction to the arid winds of Patagonia, the region in which the film is set. Secondly, licking one's lips is considered uncouth or vulgar in some social contexts. Enabled by the two-shot framing, the lip-licking gestures draws a parallel between Villegas and the worker. Both characters belong to the same social class. Villegas could be one of the workers.⁶ The fact that we can read the tic as an unconscious habit indicative of the characters' social or cultural background does not mean that it is a piece of the actors' everyday behaviour. It may be a reaction

to shooting the same scenes for many hours in windy and dry locations or it could have resulted from the pressure to perform in scenes without receiving clear instructions. What is important is that however slight, the repetition of such casual gestures not only helps establish the characters as thoroughly integrated within their social milieu. It also contributes significantly towards creating the very impression of a recognisable milieu with its codes, rules, areas, classes.

Though details such as the licking of the lips can convey information about the characters' background, they might also serve dramatic functions and carry narrative weight when incorporated in diegetic situations. If the performer's unconscious gestures help establish the fictional character's background, the fictional situations condition the meaning we attribute to the performer's gestures. In the case of *El Perro*, the action in the opening scene quickly reveals Villegas is not a professional knife seller. His speech sounds insecure and he often corrects himself. He explains that a piece of a knife is in fact 'A rhea's leg ... bone'. He also fails at highlighting the virtues of another part of the knife's hilt. He explains that a certain piece of walnut wood was sent to him from his relatives; yet it is a worker who points out how resilient the wood must be in what appears an attempt at helping Villegas sell the knife. To this, Villegas quickly answers, 'Oh yeah, yeah, very ... resilient ...'

Villegas seems uncomfortable as the centre of attention; he is daunted by the spotlight and the workers' questions. Even the matter of price is wrongly approached by the protagonist. He suggests the sum of 'A hundred pesos' which immediately feels overpriced. We sense that perhaps he is anticipating a bargaining situation, yet this never occurs: the workers are simply put off by the price; one of them says, 'If I had a hundred pesos I wouldn't be working here.' Laughter ensues; Villegas cannot find his words and stutters, with a smile on his face, insecure. Finally, with a sense of despair as he sees the chance wither, Villegas adds, 'Make an offer, make an offer, lads', a line that poorly imitates a street seller's chant. Coming from Villegas, it sounds flimsy, unconfident and pathetic, his wimpy way of seeking a final stroke of luck.

Villegas' lip-licking gesture, frequently performed in the opening sequence, becomes a detail representative of the

character's (and maybe the actor's) self-conscious mixture of integrity and insecurity. The gesture, akin to sucking one's thumb or biting one's tongue, is used by Villegas throughout the film in moments when he is not sure about what to say or do. In the opening sequence, the second time he licks his lips is after he is interrupted by one of the workers. There is frustration here, as though Villegas were putting a gag on himself. However, the gesture also conveys modesty and timidity. Villegas is not confident insisting, and, to a certain extent, he seems to sympathise with the workers. As the film will later confirm, he too thinks the knives are overpriced.

As the film progresses, the lip-licking gesture is used to convey Villegas' consistently insecure responses to a range of situations. We can see Villegas licking his lips as he drives off after stopping at a gas station to refuel and winning 'A litre of oil and a pair of sunglasses'. The service station attendant adds: 'Like the ones that appear in the film *Men in Black*'. In this scene, Villegas' licking of his lips frustrates his attempt at



showing attitude by stressing the fact that the pair of glasses look foreign on a face that cannot but emanate a sense of self-conscious embarrassment. It is as though Villegas was in full knowledge of his pretence and his body refused to play along. As was the case in previous examples, the scene's comedy is bittersweet. Villegas' dignified expression, and his capacity to keep on trying despite repeatedly failing, invite compassionate amusement rather than laughter of superiority.

The lip-licking gesture is also Villegas' reaction as he sees the dog for the first time. Here the gesture is emphasised by



and timed to a dolly-in that draws attention to the character's expression as he first sets eyes on the dog. In this case, Villegas probably waited for the camera to close in on his face and then performed the specific gesture. The gesture helps convey Villegas' uncertainty regarding whether or not to take the dog. Klevan writes that when a performer suspends an action he 'allows us to wonder at the different stories available to his character' (2005: 13). Brenda Austin-Smith adds that in such cases, 'Because of what the performer does, we believe in the freedom of the character to have done otherwise and to have decided on this rather than that course of action' (2012: 21). Here, Villegas' lip-licking gesture serves an important dramatic function as it creates anticipation by suspending the character's decision in one of the film's critical turning points.

Another relevant example of the gesture's use can be found in the scene that takes place in the banker's office. The banker briefly leaves the room at which point the dog urinates on the floor. Villegas glances across the table, making sure the banker is still busy and the coast is clear before gently moving a chair to cover the urine stain. Here the lip-licking gesture helps convey Villegas' insecurity as he is forced to perform improvised trickery to get out of a hairy situation. The gesture once again serves the film's comedy, yet now it is used by Villegas to reveal a state of nervousness to the audience, the very same nervousness he is trying to conceal from the banker. Unlike in the previous example of Villegas driving with the sunglasses on, where the comedy came from the impression of unintended embarrassment projected by the gesture, here the gag depends on Villegas using the gesture



to convey his nervousness as he executes a scripted action. In the first example the gesture appears like Villegas' natural reaction to a joke played on him. In the second one, it feels like a deliberate action deployed to enact a gag.

As these examples show, Villegas begins deploying the lip-licking gesture in specific dramatic contexts to achieve concrete effects as the film goes on. By repeating the gesture in a range of situations, the film keeps it alive as a pattern of the character's habitual behaviour while also investing it with diegetic functions and meaning. However, the last two examples, in contrast with those from the opening scene, appear non-improvised and calculated. They feel like conscious acting. Evoking Sorin's earlier words, Villegas appears to be gradually figuring out how to deploy his behaviour to create a character of himself.

Sorin also contributes, through his editing, to the professionalisation of Villegas' performance. A particularly significant example corresponds to the moment in which Villegas, among the audience at the canine competition, licks his lips as he nervously watches the judge evaluate the dogs. In this sequence, the gesture helps convey the character's anticipation as he awaits the decision his future hangs on. Sorin, seemingly aware of the dramatic potential the lip-licking gesture has acquired, uses the very same shot twice in the sequence, prolonging the audience's anticipation both on and off-screen. Villegas' 'moment of truth' is artificially duplicated, recycled for the sake of enhancing the film's suspense and increasing even further the character's sense of insecurity.

The journey's point of no return: self-consciousness and exposure

As Villegas (nonprofessional actor) reconfigures himself as Villegas (actor) so does Villegas (character) reconfigure himself from purposeless drifter to professional dog trainer. A critical milestone in Villegas' journey of transformation is undoubtedly the moment in which he is awarded the prize in the canine competition. This scene begins with the judge ordering the participants to perform a ceremonial run around the stage. The judge attentively examines the participants amongst whom we can see Villegas and his dog Bombón. There is something awkward and unpleasant about the sight of Villegas, a humble and reserved man, brought to parade himself in a stage filled with groomed poodles and decadent middle-class owners. The judge gives the first two cups to other competitors; Villegas receives the third prize. As he shyly walks to take the trophy, the music intensifies, muffling the speaker's voice and the clapping of the audience. The camera glides in on Villegas' face, his eyes quickly scanning the audience from right to left, his mouth open in a slowly receding smile that blends the pride of success with the embarrassment of the spotlight.



This moment marks an important turning point in the film's narrative. The success in the competition changes Villegas' fortune and introduces a glimmer of hope in his hitherto miserable situation. However, the event also appears to crystallise a transformation in the character's self-regard. This

is the first time in the film Villegas is praised or acknowledged rather than neglected or frowned upon and the applause and recognition of the audience seem to finally validate him in his own eyes. Rather than sheer jubilation and delight, his smile is optimistic but also confused. It is as though Villegas were happy with and satisfied by the acknowledgment but also unsure as to what exactly he has done to deserve the applause. Sorin explains how Villegas' vivid expression was achieved:

The moment in which the character Juan Villegas receives the third prize in the competition, the take where he lifts the cup and receives the applause of four hundred and six people. It is the same emotion the authentic Juan Villegas felt in front of the four hundred and six extras that clapped for him. He didn't know that they were going to clap. (2006b)

For Sorin, what makes Villegas' gesture captivating is that it appears genuine. The performer's uncertainty regarding how to perform – the set-up compels him to react, but he has not been told how – is refigured as the character's surprise when receiving the trophy. Sorin's words also reflect the feeling of compassion the scene evokes partly thanks to the impression that the actor is unable to restrain conflicting emotions. In this case, the sincerity of the actor's expression informs the character's state of vulnerability which the scene needs to achieve its pathos. In Villegas' smile we recognise a genuine, unwilling and spontaneous surge of feeling that is visibly different from an actor trying to project, in this case, pride plus blushing.

However, Sorin does not explain what precise emotion Villegas might be feeling. Like many of his gestures throughout the film, Villegas' smile in this sequence conveys embarrassment. Erving Goffman, who drew from theatre terminology to analyse social interaction, saw embarrassment as instances when the social actor is not in control of her / his performance. In such moments, the social actor is, according to Goffman, still involved in social interaction – that is, still available for others to engage with – yet not presently 'in play' (1956: 266). Goffman sees embarrassment as combining 'displeasure and discomfiture' (1956: 266) and, in turn suggesting qualities such as 'weakness and inferiority' (1956: 266). Goffman's views on embarrassment adequately describe the impression Villegas conveys. His arms are awkwardly bent

and overloaded with items (the cup, the leash) and the bright ribbon on his chest appears as miscalculated as his combination of blazer and cap. Alongside these elements, Villegas' puny smile reflects a genuine lack of comfort that encourages sympathy tinged with vicarious embarrassment.

However, Demetrios Matheou suggests that what is particularly striking about Villegas' gesture is not the impression of embarrassment it conveys but, rather, a much more optimistic sense of self-discovery:

Could it be that as Coco discovers his true *métier*, something that makes him almost inexplicably happy, the real-life Juan Villegas also discovered himself, in front of the camera? Actor, character, man, merged in their own Borgesian moment of self-discovery. (2010: 331)

Matheou's words imply that Villegas' performance collapses different kinds of discoveries. The character discovers a new vocation that gives him satisfaction and recognition. The performer, on the other hand yet at the same time, appears to be finally recognising and accepting himself in front of the camera. I think Matheou is right in that Villegas' smile is not just one of embarrassment or helplessness. Partly a smirk, it also projects a sense of confidence that Sorin does not mention and which Goffman's theory cannot account for. However, Matheou's words 'inexplicably happy' feel too strong and rather miscalculated as they overlook Villegas' cautious and embarrassed body language in this scene. Matheou's and Sorin's accounts show that it is hard to pinpoint exactly what makes Villegas' smile so compelling. Though they both provide important clues, in the process of emphasising certain qualities, they appear to reduce the very sense of internal conflict the gesture so successfully projects.

When watching Villegas' smile, I feel optimism (like Matheou) and compassion (like Sorin) but also a sense of bitterness. Though I am happy for the character's success I also have the impression that his apparent happiness is contingent on the fraudulent and degrading parading of his insecurity. Both in the film and in the diegesis, Villegas is presented and displayed like a curiosity for the audience to judge and respond to. More importantly though, Villegas' receding smile suggests to me that he himself is coming to terms with the fact that his success depends on his capacity to display

himself (and the dog) for the pleasure of others. Villegas does not appear simply perplexed by the applause. He does not respond to the ovation with the kind of baffled expression professional actors often use to show their characters' astonishment. Nor does he appear completely embarrassed, which he could have shown by fidgeting self-consciously, licking his lips, or making an attempt to remove himself from the frame. Furthermore, Villegas appears to be prudently abstaining from smiling jubilantly which suggests restraint and, therefore, control.

Rather than sheer happiness, Villegas' wary smirk and slightly squinty eyes show that he is aware of, though has also accepted, the demeaning applause. He appears like someone who is, to a certain extent, comfortable exposing his discomfort. Unlike in some of the scenes discussed earlier, Villegas' expression here is not that of a vulnerable victim troubled by his own image and the way it might be apprehended by others. Instead, Villegas appears to be learning to accept that performing involves exposing oneself for the amusement of others. Although Villegas' receding smile shows a sense of disappointment at this realisation, the fact that he continues smiling also suggests that this discovery is not enough to sour his moment. On the contrary, Villegas embraces his success well aware that it comes at the expense of losing his sense of integrity.

A bittersweet self-discovery: the end of the non-actor's journey

Like Vittorio De Sica and Vsevolod Pudovkin, Carlos Sorin is a filmmaker who has been criticised for having a rather tactless approach to his subjects. With regards to *El Perro*, Aguilar cites film critic Leonardo D'Espósito who writes: 'Professionally filmed, this "minor story" stretched to its limits utilises the landscape and music cloyingly, pointing out the emotions that the spectator should experience in each sequence' (Aguilar [2006] 2008: 20). D'Espósito's comment partly evokes Jacques Rivette's polemic essay, 'On Abjection' (1961), in which Rivette criticises what he perceives as a tasteless camera movement in Gillo Pontecorvo's *Kapò* (1960). In this essay, Rivette mentions both De Sica and

Pudovkin as examples of formalist directors who should be despised for similar misuses of the medium. Similarly, Joanna Page notes that in *El Perro* the use of hand-held camera in the opening scenes turns to steadicam and into a more polished style and argues that 'in this way techniques associated with independent filmmaking are redesigned and packaged for box-office success' (2009: 123). Like Rivette before them, Page and D'Espósito are partly right in noticing a sense of indecency or betrayal in the relationship between style and subject matter. For these critics, the devices these filmmakers use are inadequate with regards to the content of the film and, therefore disrespectful towards their subject matter as well as towards the audience, whose emotions are emphatically requested rather than allowed to develop through more measured approaches.

The formal features and impressions noted in these critiques are certainly relevant. However, I would argue that the film is well aware of the effects it is achieving and, more importantly, that these play a crucial role in the film's ironic project. The progressive finessing of the film's style mirrors the growing professionalisation of both character and actor, and enables the film to highlight and satirise, precisely, how our grotesque fascination with displaying and observing individuals in a state of vulnerability is what often brings these individuals to forgo their sense of integrity. In this regard, *El Perro* is not only a film about the hardships of life in post-crisis rural Argentina, it is also a film about the consequences of exhibition and the demands of social interaction.

While it begins as a social realist quasi-improvisational piece, once Villegas is given the canine golden ticket, he relocates and is forced to adapt to the grotesque environment of dog competitions and bourgeois breeders. As Villegas undergoes this journey, the style of the film changes to show the concessions Villegas needs to make in order to survive in this milieu. It is through the changes in filmmaking style and performance that Villegas is portrayed as a character who, in the process of becoming a successful professional, appears to lose the awkward but also honest self-consciousness responsible for safeguarding his integrity.

One of the main ways in which the film mourns Villegas' change of behaviour is through the consistent analogies it

draws between Villegas and the dog. In the early stages of the film, man and pet are presented as equals or as being in similar situations. Both are neglected outcasts whose virtues are not valued in their respective milieus. Yet soon both Villegas and the dog begin to receive the attention of other characters, such as the banker who examines the dog and comments, 'It is a very good specimen.' As he speaks this line, the camera, instead of showing the dog, remains pointed at Villegas. Both dog and non-actor are 'good specimens' removed from their 'natural' habitat for the purpose of display. In a later scene where Villegas is told how to prepare the dog for exhibition, he learns how to apply a white paint-like product that 'covers all the imperfections', disguising the animal to make it fit within a certain ideal and desired standard and, therefore, 'correcting' its idiosyncrasies. This scene, again, is analogous to the way in which Villegas adapts to new social environments by disguising his idiosyncrasies such as his lip-licking gesture, which he performs much less often in the second part of the film.

However, Villegas' self-consciousness or his preoccupation with regards to the way others see him, is a quality that the dog does not show. Charles Darwin (1872) was among the first to suggest that blushing and embarrassment are distinctly human expressions not available in quite the same way in animals. This observation remains generally accepted today by sociologists and psychologists studying what they refer to as 'self-conscious emotions', which besides embarrassment, also include shame and pride.⁷ I'm in no position to endorse or dispute Darwin's claim, but I am interested in the fact that the film appears to offer a similar proposition. Towards the end of the film, the analogy between dog and human is irreparably shattered. Villegas and his partner Donado want to earn money by mating the dog with another purebred, yet Bombón 'refuses' to perform when the moment arrives. Unlike Villegas, whose self-consciousness leads him to exhibit himself, alter his comportment and ultimately betray his integrity for the pleasure of others and his benefit, the dog remains oblivious to and unmoved by this external pressure and, therefore, preserves its integrity.

This relationship between dog and man recalls De Sica's *Umberto D.* (1952) and its ending where, ironically, the dog

reminds its owner of the value of his humanity. A similar scene occurs in *El Perro*. After losing the dog, the penultimate scene of the film shows how Villegas finds it in an abandoned site privately mating with a stray bitch, showing that it was indeed capable of performing, yet not for the benefit and pleasure of others. Sorin, with self-conscious and ironic tastelessness, accompanies the images of the dogs mating with the film's melodramatic music score. This grotesque moment partly parallels Villegas' self-discovery as he receives the trophy – a scene also accompanied with similarly sentimental music. In the scene where the dogs mate, though, Villegas, rather than being the centre of attention, has become another spectator whose pleasure, like ours the film seems to imply, depends on watching others exposing themselves. The scene in *El Perro*, though, is more ambiguous than *Umberto D.*'s when it comes to answering whether or not the human protagonist has learnt a lesson from his dog. Villegas' wide smiles of joy as he watches the dogs mating don't clarify whether he is happy because he has found the dog or excited to find out that the dog can mate and, therefore, he can make a profit from the animal.

The final scene in the film partly answers the question. The last we see of Villegas is him picking up a couple of hitchhikers on a motorway. One of them asks 'What do you do?' to which Villegas confidently answers, 'I'm a dog exhibitor. I display dogs and compete for prizes.' When the hitchhiker asks if Villegas has won many prizes, he answers, 'Yes, a few.' Villegas' first answer clarifies that he is ready to continue displaying the dog, which he sees mainly as his professional tool. Moreover, as we have seen in the film, Villegas has won just one prize, so the answer to the hitchhikers' second question is a lie. This confident display of dishonesty concludes Villegas' journey of self-discovery. It is not the moment when the character discovers his true vocation or when the non-actor discovers himself in front of the camera. Rather, it is the moment that shows Villegas has finally learnt to pretend convincingly.

However, before the final fade to black, Villegas cannot contain one last licking of his lips. The gesture could be an uncontrolled sign of embarrassment, the character's body betraying his dishonest front in an attempt to preserve a sense of integrity. This time, though, Villegas merges the licking

of the lips with a confident smile that recalls the moment he receives the trophy or his reaction to seeing the dogs mating. It feels as though Villegas is aware of his deceit yet this time he has tools to govern his behaviour and prevent his self-consciousness from giving him away. Villegas has learnt to act like a professional. He has learnt to present himself confidently in front of others at the expense of his integrity.

Conclusion

Rather than offering an answer to the question of when the non-actor becomes an actor, this essay has examined how the question and its implications are meaningfully mobilised in *El Perro*. Through the progressive professionalisation of Villegas' performance, his self-discovery as a performer, and the persistent analogies between nonprofessional actor and dog, *El Perro* appears to be meditating on Stanley Cavell's idea that:

our condition as actors is shown [...] by film itself [...]. It is not merely that we occupy certain roles in society, play certain parts or hold certain offices, but that we are set apart or singled out for sometimes incomprehensible reasons, for rewards or punishments out of all proportion to anything we recognise ourselves as doing or being, as though our lives are the enactments of some tale whose words continuously escape us. ([1971] 1979: 180)

In the case of Villegas, the lip-licking gesture could be one such incomprehensible detail defining him. However, *El Perro* takes an ambivalent stance with regards to what is at stake in film showing us, or Villegas in this case, our condition as actors. For Sorin, as for many other directors, cinema is an inherently artificial medium that cannot record without contriving the performer's behaviour. The more the performer is exposed to the camera and shown on screen, the more he loses his idiosyncrasies: precisely the reasons why he was originally selected. Ironically, however, it is by means of exposing and inducing this loss that cinema can also capture and show the performer's arresting idiosyncrasies.

Unlike Bresson and others, though, who sought to prevent the non-actor from seeing her / himself and, therefore, losing her / his pre-reflexive behaviour, Sorin invites the non-actor to reflect on his performance and fictionalises the resulting

transformation. Bresson seems interested in preventing the non-actor from acting at all, that is, from becoming an actor of any sort (professional or nonprofessional). For Sorin, who works in a period where most of us have inevitably seen recordings of ourselves at some point or another, the non-actor is already self-conscious, he / she is already a non-professional actor, even before he / she stands in front of the camera. Therefore, the film, rather than showing the non-actor in a pre-reflexive stage, can only show Villegas as he comes to terms with his own performance, a possibility unavailable to the dog who, unlike the human, appears incapable of feeling shame or embarrassment.

While for Bresson and many others before and after him, cinema corrupts the purity of the non-actor by making him self-conscious, for Sorin the non-actor is already self-conscious – he is already a (nonprofessional) actor – and, therefore, corrupted. What cinema can do is professionalise him and show him as he progressively overcomes his self-consciousness even if by doing so, he loses the very quality that makes him a unique specimen. This is not, as in Bresson, a pure non-reflexive comportment. It is no more and no less than the honest and idiosyncratic way in which each of us inhabits a condition of self-consciousness.

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1 De Sica recalls in many interviews that, after *Ladri di biciclette / Bicycle Thieves* (Vittorio De Sica, 1948), he made Lamberto Maggiorani (Antonio) promise he would not act again. See: Snyder and Curle (2000), for example. In his recently published memoirs, De Sica also explains that the nonprofessional's anonymity was an important concern when casting *Umberto D.* (Vittorio De Sica, 1951): 'The truth is that I wanted a professional's face, but a new, anonymous face, a man that had not lent his persona to any other character, only to my Umberto D' (2015: 124).

2 In a rather heated interview with Robert Bresson, Godard explains with regards to the non-actor that 'as soon as he has done something, as soon as he has filmed one twenty-fourth of a second, he is less virgin by that one twenty-fourth [...] there is something that he does not have but he is going to acquire it, as soon as he is plunged into cinema' (Godard & Delahaye [1966] 1967: 16). Castellani sardonically explains that 'When a young boy or a girl encounters cinema for the first time and are in front of the camera for ten minutes they are already professional actors: and then, with experience, they might become optimal elements' (Castellani cited in Pitassio 2008: 163). Caetano reflects on the subject in León and Martínez's documentary *Estrellas / Stars* (2007) where he explains that 'as soon as the non-actor stands in front of the camera and works, he is already a professional actor'.

3 All translations are by me unless specified.

4 For a discussion of Loach's methods see: Jacob Leigh (2002) and Louise Osmond's film *Versus: The Life and Films of Ken Loach* (2016).

5 Like Villegas, Walter Donado was played by a nonprofessional actor. However, Donado (the actor) was (and still is) a professional animal wrangler who works frequently in the film industry. In the case of Donado, a clear benefit of casting him is the possibility of controlling the dog during the actual takes, which tends to be an important challenge when working with animals. However, there also seems to be a further analogy between nonprofessional actor and character. The character's role in the fiction – he confidently navigates the world of dog breeding and exhibition though is not fully part of it (he works maintaining a race track) – partly resembles the actor's – he is a professional and seasoned film worker acting for the first time. Since acting in *El Perro*, Donado has played secondary roles in several Argentine films, including the successful *Relatos Salvajes / Wild Tales* (Damián Szifron, 2014), which was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film that year.

6 Besides the twenty-four times Villegas licks his lips, other actors / characters perform the gesture a further nineteen times throughout the film. The security guard outside of the factory where Villegas sells his knives licks his lips twice; so does a service station attendant and a digger Villegas meets towards the end of the film. Most of these characters are manual labourers who work in the open. Characters who do not lick their lips are the dog enthusiasts, a banker who introduces Villegas to

the world of canine exhibitions, a man who works at an unemployment office, and a Lebanese singer who Villegas meets in the final third of the film. All these characters work indoors and inhabit urban spaces such as the city of Bahia Blanca. This is not entirely consistent. Some characters who we understand as being working class, such as Villegas' daughter, do not lick their lips yet we barely see her outside her house.

7 See the work of Jessica L. Tracy in general and Tangney and Tracy (2012) in particular.