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Interspecific Contact Scenes

Humans and Street Dogs in the Margins of the City

Jörg Dünne



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Jörg Dünne

Abstract

The main subject of this paper are two recent Latin American films (*La mujer de los perros* by Laura Citarella and Verónica Llinás, 2015, and *Los Reyes* by Bettina Perut and Iván Osnovikoff, 2018) that centre on street dogs in marginal urban zones of Buenos Aires and Santiago de Chile. It will be argued that in both films exemplary forms of encounter between humans and dogs outside domestic environments can be examined, exploring the alternative ways of conviviality against the backdrop of the multiple layers of shared history between two companion species. In addition to the detailed analysis of exemplary scenes in both films, the concept of the interspecific “contact scene” (as a variation of the “contact zone”, a concept coined by Mary Louise Pratt) is proposed as a possible tool for the analysis of convivial constellations in Latin America.

Keywords: street dogs | interspecies conviviality | Latin America | film studies

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Contents

1.	Introduction: Two Scenes of Encounter between Street Dogs and Humans	1
2.	Street Dogs and Interspecific Conviviality	2
2.1	Street Dogs, Global and Local	2
2.2	Beyond Domesticity: Interspecific Collectives and Biopolitics in the Margins	4
3.	Original – Contact – Scenes	8
3.1	Scenes	8
3.2	Contact Scenes	9
3.3	Original Contact Scenes	11
4.	Affect in the Margins: <i>La mujer de los perros</i>	15
4.1	Uncountable Quantities and Collectivity	15
4.2	Hunting Together	17
4.3	Proximity in the Affect Zone	18
4.4	(No) Catastrophe: The Final Scene	21
5.	Distanced Conviviality: <i>Los Reyes</i>	22
5.1	Setting the Scene: Ball Games	22
5.2	“ <i>Perro culiao</i> ”: Foregrounding and Sonic Environments	25
5.3	Zoography: Scales of the Living	27
5.4	Alternative Endings: Phantasmagoric Memories	29
6.	Conclusion	30
7.	References	32

1. Introduction: Two Scenes of Encounter between Street Dogs and Humans

The first scene shows a dog on a street in the foreground, with its tail at the left and its head near the right edge of the picture.¹ The skinny body, which occupies the entire lower half, is illuminated by the sun, while the dog looks down to the ground, seemingly impassive. In the background, standing in the shadow in a doorway, we see a girl in a white dress eating ice cream, looking in the opposite direction from the dog. What strikes at first sight in this image is the unusual foregrounding of the presence of an animal in relation to a human being: the dog ceases to be part of a social environment constituted predominantly by humans and becomes its central actor while humans are pushed into the background. Moreover, the image is structured by a series of oppositional relations: foreground vs background, sun vs shadow, view to the right vs. to the left – the street dog and the girl in this snapshot taken by the Chilean photographer Sergio Larraín in his collection *Valparaíso* (Larraín 1991 [1963])² are at first sight more separated than they seem to be connected, the street itself functions as the zone that mediates a distanced contact, not consciously perceived as such by either of the two protagonists. The relationship between the dog and the girl is established only through the camera and, conversely, by the spectators of the scene.

The second scene is the beginning of a *crónica* by another Chilean artist and writer, Pedro Lemebel, entitled “Memorias del quiltraje urbano”:

Y se llaman Bobby, Cholo, Terri, Duque, Rintintín, Campeón o Pichintún y al escuchar su nombre ladran, corren y saltan desaforados lengüeteando la mano cariñosa que les soba el lomo pulguiento de quiltros sin raza, de perros callejeros nacidos a pesar del frío y la escarcha que entume su guarida de trapos y cartón (Lemebel 1998: 162).³

In contrast to the (non-)encounter between the girl and the street dog in Larraín’s photo, this scene is about physical contact between human beings and street dogs that react to the slightest form of attention and lick the hand – *pars pro toto* for human presence – that turns to them. The contact between a human being and the street dogs is triggered

1 The chapters of this paper are composed of my presentation in the weekly Mecila colloquium (see mostly chapter 5) and several texts first presented in my research blog *Quiltro Chronicles* during my stay at Mecila in 2022. I would like to thank all the fellows, the staff, and the directors of Mecila for their support, their comments and most of all for their companionship during these months.

2 The image can be viewed online at <<https://content.magnumphotos.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/cortex/par21401-overlay.jpg>>; see also <<https://www.magnumphotos.com/arts-culture/society-arts-culture/sergio-larain-valparaiso/>> (last access 26.12.2022).

3 “And they are called Bobby, Cholo, Terri, Duque, Rintintín, Campeón or Pichintún and when they hear their name they bark, run and jump out of control, licking the affectionate hand that rubs their backs full of flees, of stray dogs born despite the cold and the frost that numbs their shelter made of rags and cardboard.” [All translations to English are by the author.]

by the invocation of the dogs' names, which, however, has less of an individualizing effect than it might seem at first glance because, with their typical names, they are representative of a larger, uncountable amount of street dogs (for which the term “*quiltros*” is used in Chilean Spanish) and their precarious conditions of life.

These two scenes, selected among a huge variety of encounters between humans and street dogs as depicted in aesthetic media in Chile and elsewhere in Latin America, are exemplary in showing highly different positions in the wide range of possible forms of interspecific conviviality, both in their medial manifestation as a photograph and as a narrative text, and with regard to the concrete form of the contact. These scenes have as a unifying element only the transitory coexistence of humans and dogs on the street which is the starting point for the following considerations. Before I examine the polarity of distance and proximity in more detail on the basis of two other examples of encounters between humans and street dogs, I would first like to clarify how the question of the relationship between both can be relevant at all with regard to the study of conviviality and inequality in Latin America, and also to make a few preliminary remarks about what I have introduced here as “scenes of contact”.

2. Street Dogs and Interspecific Conviviality

2.1 Street Dogs, Global and Local

Street dogs are omnipresent in many regions of the globe and also in Latin America. The massive existence of street dogs can be understood as a sign of zones of crisis and conflict all over the world, as can be seen, for instance, in a literary reportage by the French writer and journalist Jean Rolin. In *Un chien mort après lui* (Rolin 2010), he takes the relation between humans and dogs as a paradigm for a violent form of conviviality in places as diverse as Haiti, Palestine, and Rwanda, all beset by hunger, war, and even genocide – places where dogs gather in feral packs and, from time to time, feed as scavengers on human bodies. Focusing on street dogs makes appear hidden aspects of what could be called the darker side of globalization that might remain invisible otherwise.⁴

Of course, not all human interaction with street dogs is marked by violence from the outset – this would be missing the point of humans and dogs as “companion species” (Haraway 2003, 2008), the co-evolution of which would have been unthinkable without a “convivial configuration” (The Maria Sybilla Merian Centre Conviviality-Inequality in Latin America 2019) for the mutual benefit of each species – I will return to this

4 The allusion is to Walter D. Mignolo's key study of decolonial thought (Mignolo 2011).

companionship further on.⁵ And, as can be seen from the two introductory scenes in this paper, it would be reductive to tell the story of street dogs only from the standpoint of the history of globalization – the example of Chile that the two introductory scenes refer to is revealing as far as the interaction with dogs is always situated in a specific local context which is meaningful with respect to the material and also the symbolic conditions under which interspecific encounters may take place.⁶ In Chile, street dogs are commonly known as *quiltros*, a *chilenismo* coming from the *mapudungún* expression for a little, furry, indigenous dog (Latcham 1922: 60). The designation as *quiltros* confers not only a specific visibility to street dogs which is missing in other languages and equally in many other Spanish speaking countries, it also evokes colonial and pre-Columbian history which includes a specific connotation of marginality and in the present also of possible resistance when transferred to a human context.⁷ To this specific expression used in Chile corresponds the massive presence of street dogs in rural but also in urban spaces, be it in front of the presidential palace in Santiago de Chile (Castro 2009) or in the city of *quiltros par excellence*, Valparaíso, with its topography characterized by steep hills and by zones that might be described as wastelands (*terrains vagues* in French)⁸ – zones that attract “stray dogs” (Spanish *perros vagos*) that cannot be attached to a fixed abode and the observation of which demands a different way of attention than the one required for pet dogs. Giving visibility to the wandering, often nameless lives of street dogs is achieved through art and literature, like in the scenes presented by Sergio Larraín and Pedro Lemebel: These scenes may have contributed to setting the stage for an ever-increasing presence of street dogs in Chilean contemporary literature, and also for the appropriation of the figure of the *quiltro* by juvenile protest and counterculture in the new millennium.⁹ The most striking recent example of such a positive reappropriation in popular culture is maybe the figure of a street dog called Negro Matapacos, who accompanied the students’ protests in Santiago de Chile in 2011 and who, after his death in 2017, became an emblem of the protests in 2019 (Almásí Szabó 2020; Vivanco 2021).

5 On the more-than human dimension of conviviality and inequality in Latin America, see also the synthesis paper by Maya Manzi (Manzi 2020).

6 See also the Chilean episode in Rolin’s book about a street dog named “Popular” who is said to be the patron saint of drunkards on their way home at night (Rolin 2010: 198–202).

7 There is also a connotation of racial discourse in using the expression *quiltro* in the sense of mixed-breed dogs (equivalent to other Spanish or Portuguese expressions like *perros criollos* in Colombia, *perros sotos* in Cuba, *cães vira-latas* in Brazil etc.), with a clear connotation of inferiority reminiscent of colonial “*cuadros de casta*”. See on dogs and racial categories (mainly in the Caribbean) the inspiring study of Bénédicte Boisseron (Boisseron 2018).

8 On the poetics of “*terrain vagues*” in the context of French literature and culture, see Nitsch (2017).

9 An example is the Chilean writer Cristián Geisse Navarro and his street dog novel *Catechi* (Geisse Navarro 2018); on this topic, see also Dünne (forthcoming).

In the last years, the pitiful living conditions of street dogs have also been discussed from the perspective of animal rights movements. The public debate around the destiny of street dogs in Chile has led, in 2017, to the Ley de Tenencia Responsable de Mascotas y Animales de Compañía, better known as Ley Cholito (named after a street dog that had been beaten to death by a group of residents of a neighbourhood in Santiago de Chile). Among other regulations, the Ley Cholito introduces a new juridical category of dogs that are neither domestic nor abandoned but so-called *perros comunitarios* (community dogs), i.e. dogs that have no individual owner but are taken care of by a community of residents.¹⁰ Although the following considerations do not adopt an animal rights perspective for the sake of a more descriptive account of the role of street dogs in contemporary Latin American culture, the debate that has been conducted in Chile and elsewhere about the right of protection for street dogs and other animals is significant here because it shows how non-human lives are given visibility not only in aesthetic configurations, but also in other forms of social discourse and practice. This practice makes appear new forms of conviviality between humans and animals beyond the strictly domestic domain, as can be seen from the category of *perros comunitarios* that may live in the street but at the same time have a specific relation to certain human beings that, at least theoretically, includes a basic convivial configuration turning around existential questions like the provision of food or shelter. Which leads me to the more general question of what shall be understood here under the notion of “street dogs”, be they Chilean *quiltros* or not.

2.2 Beyond Domesticity: Interspecific Collectives and Biopolitics in the Margins

By street dogs, I understand not only unowned dogs but also owned dogs roaming freely in the streets, also including the above-mentioned “community dogs” that have no particular owner and are taken care of by a group of humans providing them with food or shelter. According to recent estimations, among the totality of dogs worldwide, which can be estimated to be close to one billion in the present, the number of unowned (or “stray”) dogs probably amounts to between one-fourth and one-third. Clearly, more than half of all dogs worldwide can be seen as free-ranging animals which may have an owner and a home but which still move freely without being confined to a stable domestic space (Belsare and Vanak 2020; Hughes and Macdonald 2013). Thus, in absolute numbers, the pet dog kept at home, which is often considered the normal way of life for dogs (at least in the Global North), is rather a minority compared to the

¹⁰ For the definition of a *perro comunitario*, see Biblioteca del Congreso Nacional de Chile 2017: tít. I, art. 2. The “Ley Cholito” has been criticized by animal rights organizations due to the lack of provision of the financial means that would be required to provide effective care to community dogs (see Pastenes and Hernando 2022).

majority of street dogs, which constitute a huge intermediate zone between domestic dogs and feral ones.

To describe this intermediate zone appropriately, it can be assumed that the conventional distinction between culture as a domesticating force that subordinates pet dogs to their human masters on the one hand, and nature as wildlife independent from human influence on the other hand does not apply.¹¹ Humans and dogs are certainly “companion species” in the sense of Donna Haraway (Haraway 2003, 2008), but the notion of interspecific kinship that Haraway uses to describe their mutual relation cannot be narrowed down exclusively to a domestic environment. That Haraway takes domestic space as the implicit framework for her considerations about companion species can be seen, for instance, in the description of her close affective relation to her famous dog named Ms Cayenne Pepper in a style that mocks the confession of sinful sodomy in an intimate domestic setting:

We have had forbidden conversation; we have had oral intercourse; we are bound in telling story upon story with nothing but the facts. We are training each other in acts of communication we barely understand. We are, constitutively, companion species. We make each other up, in the flesh. Significantly other to each other, in specific difference, we signify in the flesh a nasty developmental infection called love. This love is an historical aberration and a naturalcultural legacy (Haraway 2003: 2–3).

One would hardly think of having “oral intercourse” with a street dog (whether in a literal sense or understood as nonverbal storytelling, as suggested by Haraway), and yet this alternative form of practising “significant otherness” also deserves to be investigated in relation to the conviviality between humans and dogs beyond the domestic sphere.

What interests me in interspecific relations between humans and street dogs is the fact that the street – which, at least in contemporary urban environments, is certainly not a particularly convenient place to live in for dogs – is significant inasmuch it becomes the scene for a bundle of “loose” or distanced relations that cannot be contained by the tradition of animal domestication. Anthropologists such as Philippe Descola have critically examined the domestication narrative of Western modernity as containing an implicit teleology that obscures other possibilities of interspecific conviviality (Descola 2010).

In order to describe alternative forms of coexistence between the most diverse living (and even non-living) beings, Descola uses a concept taken from Bruno Latour’s sociology of knowledge, namely the “collective”, which for him is always already more

¹¹ For a general critique of the nature-culture divide and the alternative suggestion of entangled “naturecultures”, see Haraway (2008: 16, 32).

than a purely human assembly (Descola 2003: 610). The subordination of animals under human control by domestication is for Descola a manifestation of the so-called “naturalism” (Descola 2005: 302–350), to which he opposes other ontologies like “animism” (Descola 2005: 229–253), as practised in Amazonian indigenous communities¹² where humans and animals like dogs share certain spiritual qualities instead of a common bodily substrate, like in Western naturalism.¹³

Ontologies such as animism thus question the hierarchy between human and other forms of animal life that the naturalistic ontology in the Western world traditionally establishes. But is it useful or even possible to abandon naturalism altogether in order to describe alternative relations between humans and other species that are not governed by domestication and the subordination of animals to human mastery? Or can a closer look at how human and animal lives are treated within this framework equally help to understand the significance of animal life on the street, which means in places that were by no means planned for such a use but where the most diverse ecologies have been developing through spatial practice?¹⁴

The starting point for such a perspective on the *de facto* conviviality of human beings and animals in urban space may be modern “biopolitics”. At first sight, a biopolitical take on animals might seem to reinforce the nature-culture divide. Against such an assumption, one can consider with Giorgio Agamben (Agamben 2004 [2002]: 33–38) that the “bare life” of animals is nothing natural but a political act of dividing life into two seemingly separate spheres: social life (*bios*) on the one hand and the “bare” life (*zoé*) on the other that tends to be excluded from the social sphere. Whereas for Agamben, such a link to “bare” animal life serves as the hidden ground of the political in general, for Michel Foucault it is only in Western modernity that the body of living beings, be they human or not, becomes an object of political decisions consisting in making live or letting die (“*faire vivre ou [...] rejeter dans la mort*”, Foucault 1976: 181).

Even if Foucault himself, unlike Agamben, has never explicitly written about animals or about human-animal relations, turning to animals is, as Gabriel Giorgi puts it, inevitable if one wants to talk about biopolitics today since “*el animal empieza a funcionar de*

12 See Descola’s own fieldwork among the Achuar (Descola 2005: 23–32), but also his reference to the “Amerindian perspectivism” of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (Viveiros de Castro 2004). See also Manzi (2020: 21–25) for an overview of how indigenous ontologies open up new perspectives on human-non-human relations.

13 As historians of philosophy focusing on the status of animals have shown, naturalism traditionally does not grant animals any spiritual qualities at all (on this position held by René Descartes in his 1637 *Discours de la méthode* see Borgards et al. 2015: 53) or pretends they are “poor in world”, in contrast to the complex “world-making” capacities of the human psyche (see Heidegger 1983 [1929–1930]: 261–264).

14 On spatial practice as opposed to planned space, see Certeau (1990).

modos cada vez más explícitos como un signo político" (Giorgi 2014: 13)¹⁵. In this context, contemporary biopolitics is the key concept of Giorgi's reflections on alternative interspecific forms of coexistence. According to him, biopolitical regimes, contrary to what one might expect, do not necessarily contribute to reinforcing the hierarchical distinction between animals and human beings but rather draw boundaries that ultimately might lead to the deconstruction of the nature/culture distinction itself, thus making new alliances of humans and animals conceivable which, with regard to the classification of animals, lie beyond the opposition of cultural domestication on the one hand and natural wildness on the other:

[L]a oposición ontológica entre humano y animal, que fue una matriz de muchos sueños civilizatorios del humanismo, es reemplazada por la distribución y el juego biopolítico, es decir arbitrario e inestable, entre persona y no-persona, entre vidas reconocibles y legibles socialmente, y vidas opacas al orden jurídico de la comunidad (Giorgi 2014: 30).¹⁶

Street dogs, as described in literature and the arts in contemporary urban but also rural environments, may well be an exemplary case of those "opaque lives" that Giorgi refers to, but they share their existence as "non-persons" with certain humans, which makes the contemporary city the political space where such forms of existence are produced.¹⁷ In places where the existence of street dogs, as will be seen below, is often paralleled by the marginal existence of humans in the street or at least outside a stable domestic sphere, alternative forms of conviviality can emerge precisely in the margins of Western naturalism and its biopolitical regime.

In any case, be it in indigenous communities or in the margins of the city in Latin America, the multiple forms of encounter between street dogs and humans also refer to a wide range of possible constellations of conviviality in the history of these two companion species, since it can be assumed that both in the history of the evolution of dogs and also in the history of colonial encounter non-domestic forms of encounter are more frequent than domestic ones. Before I finally turn to these examples that take up,

¹⁵ "[T]he animal begins to function in more and more explicit ways as a political sign".

¹⁶ "The ontological opposition between human and animal, which was a matrix of many civilizing dreams of humanism, is replaced by the distribution and the biopolitical game, that is, arbitrary and unstable, between person and non-person, between socially recognizable and legible lives, and lives opaque to the juridical order of the community."

¹⁷ See Gabriel Giorgi, with reference to the artwork *Monólogo para um cachorro morto* (2008, 2010) by the Brazilian artist Nuno Ramos about the dead body of a street dog in São Paulo: "*Desde el límite del animal, su presencia espectral y fuera de lugar, sin espacio propio, se ilumina la ciudad como dispositivo de gestión de movimientos, y por lo tanto de relaciones entre cuerpos y entre modos de relación*" ["From the limit of the animal, its spectral presence out of place, without its own space, the city is illuminated as a device for the control of movements, and therefore of relations between bodies and between modes of relationship."] (Giorgi 2014: 236).

as in the introductory scenes, marginal zones of urban life in Latin American societies, it is necessary to take one last preliminary step, which leads me from the interspecific conviviality between street dogs and humans in general to the aesthetic qualities of the exemplary “scenes” of conviviality, where “non-persons” like street dogs can enter the stage.

3. Original – Contact – Scenes

As shown in the introductory remarks of this paper, my interest in interspecific encounters between humans and street dogs can be pinned down to specific moments of (non-)encounter that can be grasped in an exemplary manner in the photographic medium but also in narrative media or genres in film and literature. I would like to call these moments “scenes”, or, more specifically, “contact scenes”, while focusing on encounters between street dogs and inhabitants of cities and their periphery that have an exemplary function as far as the common history of dogs and humans at two different time scales is concerned – I will describe these as “original contact scenes”. With this three-step approach, leading from “scenes” to “contact scenes” and to “original contact scenes”, I intend to set up the conceptual framework for the analysis of convivial configurations in two specific films.

3.1 Scenes

In the context of these considerations about interspecific relations between human beings and street dogs, the notion of “scene” can be understood in two ways, one that is oriented towards the content of possible encounters between both species, especially what will be described below as “(original) contact scenes”, and another that is more oriented towards its media and forms of expression: It is this second notion of scene that I will begin with in what follows. Scenes are visual dispositives which are constituted by media – most obviously, but not exclusively, in theatre where the Greek expression *skene* designates a hut, a tent or another temporary structure at the back of the stage in the *theatron* (literally “a place for viewing”; see Ulrike Haß (Haß 2005) on the visual history of theatre). The visual constitution of the *theatron* is expanded and transformed in technical media like film, which has its own “theatricality” (see Roloff 2000; Knopf 2004). Independently from its concrete mediality, any scene requires a spatial setting constituted by a structure of (at least virtual) observation of something which can be looked at by spectators. To such a spatial and visual understanding of the “scene” has to be added the more abstract uses of the notion of “scene” in relation to the organization of narrative events.

In a narrative setting, the constitution of scenes is indissolubly linked to the structure that events may, especially as far as the encounter between actors is concerned (in theatre, a scene is generally constituted by a number of actors entering or leaving the stage; see Vogel and Wild 2014: 7–22). In narratology, a scene is generally understood as a narrative mode of “showing” (as opposed to “telling”; see Klauk and Köppe 2013) where temporal progression is suspended and where description is prevalent over the concatenation of successive events. Thus, scenic showing is often subordinated to plot-oriented telling, but at the same time, scenes can be much more than just functional for the narration of a series of events: scenes tend to be disruptive in relation to the chronological narration, more often than not they transcend the function of setting the stage for a coherent narrative and may refer to other temporalities beyond the “short duration” of a conventional plot measured against the established convention of the biography of human protagonists.¹⁸ Scenes, as presented in literature or in film, can thus refer to hidden “deeper” structures of meaningfulness beyond the narration of a single event. In spite of the expression with its Freudian connotations, I do not want to interpret these “other scenes” psychoanalytically as “primordial scenes” referring to the unconscious as a deep structure of psychic life, but in terms of temporalities of longer duration that can be referred to colonial and evolutionary history.¹⁹ In any case, scenes transcend the sphere of closed fictional worlds constituted within a single narrative inasmuch as they express a broader social imaginary that often cannot be grasped otherwise than through aesthetic configurations like literary and filmic accounts.

3.2 Contact Scenes

Literary or aesthetic scenes of encounter transcend closed fictional worlds towards specific types of encounters that are exemplary and, at the same time, highly relevant for describing meaningful practices of conviviality where the negotiation of cultural or social difference is at stake. I would like to describe such scenes as “contact scenes”, drawing upon a notion recently suggested by Lars Koch and Solvejg Nitzke (Koch and Nitzke 2022).²⁰ As Koch and Nitzke explain, their use of the concept is derived paronomastically from Mary Louise Pratt’s notion of the “contact zone”, as introduced in her seminal article from 1991 to describe “social spaces where cultures meet, clash,

18 On a notion of “scene of narration” that transcends the subordination of scenes to the narrative plot, see Kilian (2012: 41–68).

19 The notion alludes to Jacques Derrida’s reading of Freud’s “*anderer Schauplatz*” and the reinterpretations of this “other scene” as the “scene of writing” (Derrida 1967).

20 Koch and Nitzke introduce this concept to describe, in the vein of science studies, scientific communication in relation to non-academic environments as a way of problematizing standard accounts of knowledge transfer. I use the notion of “contact scenes” here not on the meta-level of science communication as a second-order observation but on the first-order level of physical contact between living actors.

and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (Pratt 1991: 34). Whereas Pratt mainly draws on the tension between orality and literacy to describe colonial asymmetries and tensions, there have also been attempts at adapting this concept to other scenes of asymmetric encounter, including for instance Londa Schiebinger’s notion of “biocontact zones” (Schiebinger 2007: 82–90), which is used to describe the “contact between European, Amerindian, and African naturalists in a context that highlights the exchange of plants and their cultural uses” (Schiebinger 2007: 83) in the West Indies in the 17th and 18th centuries. But whereas Schiebinger, like Koch and Nitzke, is primarily interested in analyzing ways of acquiring scientific knowledge about plants (or animals), the notion of “contact zone” and, by extension, “contact scene” might also be applied to the physical contact between humans and other living beings and the practices and techniques of interaction between them (see on this aspect of contact zones Haraway 2008: 216–220). This is what I would like to do in the following.²¹

An important implication of the notion of “scene” in comparison to the one of “zone” is that it takes into account not only the spatial but also the temporal dimension of contact (see Koch and Nitzke 2022: 414). Focusing on scenes of contact between different species thus highlights the interaction between the actors of interspecific encounters and their consequences in the *longue durée* (see Braudel 1958) of history without excluding the spatial setting, imagined as a location with its delimitation and its constitution as a scene that is constituted through being looked at by spectators. The temporal dimension implied in such a shift of attention from zone to scene implies the literary imagination of exemplary scenes of contact that transcend their immanent significance within a given situation. This leads me back to the aesthetic dimension of scenes, namely the complementarity of fiction and science as a relevant background also for any kind of research into the relation between street dogs and humans.

I would like to put forward the hypothesis that aesthetic figurations of contact scenes between humans and street dogs (maybe also with other animals or in other living conditions, but I will restrict my argument to street dogs here) are not just singular events but imaginatively re-enact hypothetical “original contact scenes” at other time scales, which leads me to my third point in these conceptual considerations. I claim that specific situations as shown in literary or filmic scenes establish a connection to other scenes that are paradigmatic for the history of humans and dogs as companion species throughout their common history over several thousand years. This will be further developed in the following paragraphs about “original contact scenes”.

21 Of course, inanimate objects also can be actors in the sense of the actor-network theory, but I would like to restrict the “contact” here to living beings and, more specifically, to animals (on such a notion of “biocontact zones”, see Andermann 2018a: 191).

3.3 Original Contact Scenes

The notion of an “original scene” of contact is used here to distinguish encounters between humans and animals on the long duration scale of history both from psychoanalytical “primal scenes” (Döring 2012) and from “first contact scenes” (see Scherpe 1998) in ethnography. What this kind of scenes shares with “primal scenes” of psychoanalysis and other scenes of origin (*Urszenen* in German)²², though, is that they cannot be observed as such, but they constitute an origin that has to be imagined after the fact – a procedure which necessarily implies literary procedures of imagination and fiction in a broad sense.

Applied to the question of encounters between humans and dogs in the Americas, “original scenes” of contact imply a complex, multi-layered temporality.²³ The first temporal scale is one of evolutionary history; it is “original” in a complex way, meaning not just the hypothetical encounter between humans and dogs but the moment from which a new species started to evolve as a result of such an encounter – which, of course, did not occur just once but needed to become a long-term *habitus* in order have consequences in terms of evolutionary history. The second scene, on a somewhat shorter time scale, concerns the (pre-)colonial history of the Americas and can be described as an interspecific “first-contact” scene in the Americas at the end of the 15th century when domesticated dogs from Europe that were specifically trained met people that were by no means prepared for such a situation.

To begin with the temporal scale that implies a larger duration, i.e. the origin of dogs as a species in evolutionary history, there has been (and still is) much debate about how wolves were domesticated or domesticated themselves in the interaction with human beings. There are basically two hypotheses, one about sharing food and the other one about cross-species adoption (see for an overview Serpell 2021). According to the first hypothesis (see especially Coppinger and Coppinger 2001), wolves feeding on human waste in the neighbourhood of human settlements started to reduce the distance to humans and thus established contact as commensals, which led to a kind of self-domestication as a prerequisite for the development of the species of *canis lupus familiaris* as a companion species for humans.²⁴ This assumption, however, presupposes certain structures of sedentary human life (which is why the defendants

22 On the specific aptitude of German language to deal with origins using the prefix “Ur-”, see Döring and Ott (2012: 11-19).

23 See on this topic also Haraway when she describes the relation with her own dog: “In layers of history, layers of biology, layers of naturecultures, complexity is the name of our game” (Haraway 2008: 16).

24 On commensalism and its transfer to literary studies, see Boisseron (2018: 90–95); on the difference between commensalism (etymologically: “sharing the same table”) and companionship (“sharing the same bread”), see Haraway (2008: 253f.).

of this hypothesis assume village waste places as a relatively late beginning of the evolution of dogs probably less than 10,000 years ago, after sedentary life forms and agriculture had appeared). The second hypothesis (as defended by Serpell 2021) places the evolution of dogs earlier in hunter-gatherer communities, going back in history by up to 50,000 years. It assumes that the contact between humans and wolves begins when humans care for young animals by suckling and raising them, whereby young animals, despite being tame playmates for humans, do not immediately become domestic animals in the narrow sense of the word, i.e. reproducing inside human households.

For the purpose of these considerations, it is not a matter of deciding between these two hypotheses – both will be treated here as possible original scenes of interspecific conviviality on an equal footing. What both have in common is that they cannot be but acted out imaginatively with reference to individual cases of encounter between humans and dogs as we know them today – in other words, they can be described as scenes that, starting from situations familiar to us today, refer to a paradigmatic possible origin of interspecific conviviality between humans and dogs. What further unites these scenes is the fact that both operate at a liminal stage of contact, neither governed by wilderness nor by a more or less fixed set of domestic habits. In such liminal interspecific “contact zones” that might take encounters with street dogs as its contemporary paradigm, a whole range of possible scenes of contact beyond domestic space arises.²⁵

How relations in the interspecific “contact zone” actually develop depends not only on the “deep” temporality of evolutionary history. The range of possible encounters and forms of conviviality has to take into account other temporalities, like (pre-)colonial history and the specific conditions under which the companionship of humans and dogs took shape in the Americas – and with this, I would like to return to the colonial implications borne by the notion of contact zones in the work of Mary Louise Pratt.

On the American continent, the history of dogs, according to recent studies, has a particular, twofold genealogy. When exactly the species of *canis familiaris* appeared in the Americas and which are its immediate precursors, is a matter of dispute among specialists (for an overview, see Schwartz 1997: 11–15), but what can be assumed is that in the places on the American continent where dogs were present as early as at least 8,000 BCE, there must have been a wide range of modes of conviviality beyond the existence of pet dogs in a modern way (see Schwartz 1997: 8). In some cultures, for instance, dogs were fattened in order to be eaten, mostly in ritual contexts; in others,

²⁵ This range includes also other possible scenes of interaction between humans and dogs, like naming/identifying or mourning/dealing with the dead. These scenes go beyond the scope of this paper and will be investigated in other parts of my project.

they were parts of myths and rites of passage to the underworlds (see Schwartz 1997: 66ff). What is common to these diverse material and symbolic alliances is that in all these forms of coexistence, the function of dogs seems to be not as strictly determined as in Europe.²⁶

Not only among humans but also on an interspecific level, the Columbian “encounter”, and especially the appearance of the sadly famous “dogs of the conquest”, has to be considered as an event which reorganized the whole field of human-animal relations in the Americas, including the reconfiguration of indigenous traditions of living together with animals that had been developing over several thousands of years (Varner and Varner 1983). Starting with the first “dogging scene”, i.e. the chasing of indigenous people by dogs which occurred during Columbus’ second voyage (see Varner and Varner 1983: 5), dogs, as well as horses, quickly became part of the military strategy of the *conquistadores* all over the continent (see Varner and Varner 1983: 14), as can be seen from the abundance of scenes represented in Spanish colonial historiography.²⁷ It is highly relevant that the dogs brought to the Caribbean by the first Spaniards in the Americas are described as purebred animals, a racial attribute that echoes the growing Spanish obsession with the issue of “*limpieza de sangre*” (“purity of blood”; see Varner and Varner 1983: 14). The analogy of Spanish dogs and Spanish conquerors has its counterpart in the relation between pre-Columbian dogs and indigenous people who are frequently described as animals that have to be tamed. At the same time, indigenous dogs are reduced by the Spanish perspective to a way of representation that depicts them, in analogy to their human counterparts, as small, submissive, mixed-breed dogs that are unable to bark.²⁸

Voiceless subalternity²⁹ and miscegenation are thus the common denominators of the frequent analogy between indigenous people and indigenous dogs, whereas heroic superiority is attributed to European soldiers and their purebred and well-trained soldier-dogs. This binary opposition based on an analogy between humans and their dogs reconfigures the symbolic field of the history of companionship between humans and dogs in the Americas before Columbus and leaves its traces also in later periods. In

26 See for dogs in aristocratic games in early modernity, as they appear in Spanish literature, Hiergeist (2019); for an overview of the history of animals used for hunting, see Krüger (2015).

27 On the famous case of the greyhound Becerrillo, who was owned by Juan Ponce de León according to the Spanish historiographer Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo in his *Historia General* (part I, book XVI, ch. 11), see Bueno Jiménez (2011); Orsanic (2017).

28 As Fernández de Oviedo reports (part I, book XII, ch. V): “*eran todos estos perros, aquí [i.e. in Española] en esta e las otras islas, mudos e aunque los apaleasen ni los matasen, no sabían ladrar; algunos gañen o gimen bajo cuando le hacen mal*” [“[A]ll these dogs, here in Española and the other islands, were mute, and even if they were beaten or killed, they did not know how to bark; some of them moan or groan or whine weakly when they are wronged.”] (Fernández de Oviedo 1851 [1535]: 390).

29 Which is reminiscent of Gayatri Spivak’s famous question: “Can the subaltern speak?” (Spivak 1988).

this vein, Chilean *quiltros* are for a long time described precisely in the colonial tradition as small, subaltern and possibly mixed breed dogs, before the recent transformation that this notion has undergone in the recent past.

This transformation might be suited to transcend the strictly analogous setting of colonial discourse which tends to identify dogs with the qualities of their masters, for the sake of a more open notion of interaction and companionship that can be developed in the aesthetic figuration of alternative scenes of contact and of conviviality. To make these alternatives visible, it is helpful to return to cultural imaginations of “original” first-contact scenes like sharing food or giving shelter, as described above. In contrast to the strongly regulated, habitualized forms of conviviality between humans and their domestic animals, the “street” (understood here as any place beyond a stable domestic environment) as a liminal contact *zone* seems to be especially apt for alternative re-enactments of original contact *scenes* – some of these might lead to the redistribution of close affective relations between humans and dogs, while others rather focus on distanced forms of conviviality.

In the two following chapters of this paper, I would like to put the concept of imagined “original contact scenes” between human beings and street dogs to the test through the exemplary analysis of two films about street dogs and the way they interact with humans. The audio-visual character of films allows for the observation not only of their media qualities but also for the observation of the interspecific dynamics in terms of individual scenes of contact.

Both films deal with (nearly) contemporary situations – *La mujer de los perros*, directed by Laura Citarella and Verónica Llinás, came out in 2015 (Citarella and Llinás 2015b); the prefilmic setting is located on the periphery of the Argentinian capital Buenos Aires, and even if the “street” used in this paper as *pars pro toto* for a zone of encounter beyond the domestic environment, does not appear as such in many scenes, the “nature” that is shown in this film is heavily influenced by one of the largest Latin American cities that extends its limits year after year with a strong connotation of social marginality. In contrast to *La mujer de los perros*, the situation of social marginality of the location where *Los Reyes*, a Chilean documentary from 2018 by Bettina Perut and Iván Osnovikoff (Perut and Osnovikoff 2018), was shot is not located in the fringe of the urban periphery of Santiago, but in a skate park surrounded by a poor neighbourhood in the north-western part of the city.

Both films, despite all their differences, have an affinity to a scenic mode of presentation as they do not tell a complete life story of their protagonists, both humans and dogs. Rather, they portray moments of their lives that can be described as “contact scenes”

in the way exposed above. While the contact in *La mujer de los perros* is determined by affective relations between a group of street dogs around a human being that remind the second introductory scene of this paper, taken from Pedro Lemebel's *crónica*, the distanced relation between the canine protagonists and the adolescent skaters in *Los Reyes* takes up the inversion of perspective in Sergio Larraín's photograph where the dogs, and not humans, constitute the central presence of the scene.

4. Affect in the Margins: *La mujer de los perros*

4.1 Uncountable Quantities and Collectivity

The trailer of Laura Citarella's and Verónica Llinás' *La mujer de los perros* is a sequence shot where a narrative unit unfolds in a single take from an unusual visual point of view. The scene is set by a static camera from a high-angle perspective on a landscape in the Argentine pampa with trees and the horizon in the background, while at least four-fifths of the image are occupied by grassland (see fig. 1). Birds can be heard while the image seems frozen. Only after twenty-five seconds, on the sandy pathway in the foreground, appears a dog entering the frame from the right-hand side, and immediately after him, two, three, four more dogs in the evening sun that project their shadows on the grass. In total, at least eight dogs appear on the screen – their exact number is almost impossible to count since they roam freely through the image from right to left, disappearing from time to time out of the frame, only to return a few seconds later. Here and also in the film itself, the dogs never cease to be an uncountable quantity without proper names whose elements constantly enter the frame or fall out of it.

Figure 1. From the trailer of *La mujer de los perros*



Source: Citarella and Llinás (2015a: 0:00:58)³⁰. Used with permission.

³⁰ All images in this paper are screenshots from digital copies of *La mujer de los perros* (kindly made available to me by the directors), its trailer (available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gtO75IQwMrk>) and the DVD edition of *Los Reyes*.

In contrast to the collective of dogs, the organizing human figure around which the dogs gravitate like unruly satellites in their own orbits can clearly be distinguished in the trailer, even if all the human and animal figures appear very small at the bottom of the image: From the apparently strong bond between the pack of dogs and the woman in the centre can be inferred that she is “*la mujer de los perros*”, so that the film title appearing at the end of the trailer can be taken as a confirmation of what the spectators have just witnessed in the slow development of the scene for more than two minutes. Nevertheless, the Spanish title leaves a certain ambivalence (Meiller 2019): Is she the woman “with” the dogs, i.e. with the animals belonging to her like an attribute of her personality – or is she “of” the dogs’, i.e. belonging to them as part of the pack and another element in their uncountable number?

Maybe not an answer, but rather a further elaboration of this constitutive ambivalence can be found in analyzing the way the film – and mostly its beginning and its ending – takes up this scene shown in the trailer. In relation to the actual film, the trailer can be understood as a kind of prologue, or rather as a prelude showing the arrival of the *mujer de los perros* at the site where the action of the film will take place. Her shopping trolley is heavily loaded with the personal belongings of an apparently homeless person.

Indeed, *La mujer de los perros* is a film about a woman living in extremely precarious conditions near La Reja, at the outermost edge of the urban zone, where the massive *conurbano* of Buenos Aires ends and opens onto the unsettled land. The margins of the city (*orillas* in Spanish) are, without the film having to state this explicitly, emblematic of Argentine literature and culture from the “peripheral modernity” of Buenos Aires in the first half of the 20th century (Sarlo 1988), where the *orillas* are mostly observed from the inside of the urban, to the neo-regionalist cinema at the beginning of the 21st century, where directors representing the New Argentine Cinema such as Lisandro Alonso start to shift the perspective to an observation of life outside the urban zone or on its margins (Andermann 2011). *La mujer de los perros* stands in this neo-regionalist tradition not only in choosing the perspective from outside but also in some of its thematic and aesthetic features (see the film critique by Lerer 2015).

The film accompanies the *mujer de los perros* for about a year, showing her precarious life with the dogs in different seasons, but also how she maintains a large degree of autonomy by recycling plastic and other waste for building a small hut in the forest and by providing most of the food for herself and the dogs through hunting, gathering plants and fruit, and also by occasional thefts from nearby houses.

4.2 Hunting Together

The first scene of the film shows the *mujer de los perros* in a setting that evokes one of those original scenes of contact with which the conviviality between humans and dogs might have begun in the *longue durée* of evolutionary history: hunting and gathering food. Visually, the film begins with a slow fading in that leads from darkness and images out of focus to the perception of movement through the woods with a handheld camera following the movements of the woman and her dogs while they are hunting for birds (the woman) and for small animals living beneath the earth (both the woman and the dogs). As Gabriel Giorgi has shown, the film's perspective is predominantly ground-oriented, in harsh contrast to the high-angle perspective of the trailer and, as will be analyzed below, to the film's end. This perspective "on the ground" evokes a sensory continuum between the human and the animal world. In the beginning, the woman seems indeed a member of the pack of dogs and thus far removed from the more familiar image in the history of domestic dogs of a human hunter on horseback who would use trained dogs to retrieve his prey. That we are dealing with a "low" or primitive form of hunting here becomes even clearer when the woman gets down on her knees to catch an animal hidden in the underbrush, just like her dogs do when they enter into the same low scrub (see fig. 2). The only tools she uses – a slingshot and a piece of cloth – are so basic that they seem to retell the history of the evolution of cultural techniques by human hunters and gatherers together with dogs as their companion species. In this respect, the film is not just about "becoming animal" (see Deleuze and Guattari 1980: 284–380); it also retells, in a certain sense, the history of the evolution of hunting techniques in a contemporary setting of social precarity and, notably, with a female protagonist.

Figure 2. Hunting



Source: Citarella and Llinás (2015b: 0:05:50). Used with permission.

To prevent misunderstandings, I intend by no means to suggest a dehistoricizing reading of *La mujer de los perros*; rather – and this is what makes the film's strength

– the film can be understood according to two scales of historicity, one level of the “history of the living” in the long duration, and another of social history in a shorter duration. The latter gives a glimpse of a situation in Argentina where the consequences of neoliberalism and various economic crises since 2001 have left their traces. But, as Gabriel Giorgi has already noticed, the social reality of a person living at the very margin of society is not all that the film is about. *La mujer de los perros* is also a search for alternative imaginaries of the communitarian (“*imaginarios de lo comunitario*”, Giorgi 2016: 54), a search based on a temporality which exceeds the frame of social eventfulness in the (near) present. Such an alternative temporality is present, for instance, in the “atmospheric time” which is evoked in the cyclicity of the seasons the filmic narrative is based upon (see Giorgi 2020: 79f). What I would like to add to Giorgi’s interpretation is that even this “more-than-human” time of the living has its historicity and its narratives, only that these operate in much larger time scales which can be re-enacted in primordial scenes of conviviality: Both scales, the social and the biological, are brought together in *La mujer de los perros*, allowing it not only to “unfound” modern narratives dealing with social time but maybe also to re-establish alternative modes of conviviality around certain scenes of conviviality between species based upon other possible stories between humans and dogs. In other words: The imagination of alternative social models of conviviality recurs to scenes of conviviality in the (imagined) history of the evolution of “companion species”.³¹

4.3 Proximity in the Affect Zone

La mujer de los perros shows several such scenes in great detail and in a style that presents a strongly documentary character of an otherwise fictional filmic plot. In order to make the dogs perform in front of the camera, they cannot be trained in a way human actors can. As Laura Citarella and Verónica Llinás (who owns most of the dogs in the extra-filmic reality) explain in an interview (Kozá 2015), the film scenes are the result of hours of patient observation of the performance of the dogs that “act” in the sense of presenting an “*acto de fe*”, an act of their trust into what their human companion does and makes them do in front of the camera (see Kozá 2015; Andermann 2018b). Acting together in a mutual relation of trust is the common ground for the basic scenes of conviviality in this film, creating an environment that becomes the condition of possibility for the scope of the filmic fiction.

Hunting together is one of the scenes that remind the common evolutionary history of humans and dogs as a companion species, but by far not the only one. *La mujer de los perros* is also about sharing food (see fig. 3) and giving shelter to each other while

31 On “unfounding narratives” in the Argentine context, see Dünne (2020).

sleeping inside the hut where there is no differentiation between a human and a dog's place, except the fact that, once more, the woman is shown in the centre surrounded by her dogs like a living blanket of protection (see fig. 4).

Figure 3. Sharing food



Source: Citarella and Llinás (2015b: 0:33:25). Used with permission.

Figure 4. Sleeping



Source: Citarella and Llinás (2015b: 0:52:42). Used with permission.

The narrative organization of these scenes, from hunting and gathering to settling down and to sharing food and the spaces of living, retells the long-term story of companionship between humans and dogs on a phylogenetic level, but without individualizing the members of the collective at any moment of the history in a traditional sense, e.g. by giving them a name and a prehistory of their present lives. Even the woman remains nameless throughout the whole film; she doesn't even speak – which has been noted often as the most salient feature of the whole film (see Andermann 2018a; Giorgi 2016, 2020); her dogs, as already mentioned, are always many and almost never one individual. There is only one exception in this approach to the dogs as a collective, which happens in a scene when another dog which is abandoned by his master near the place where the woman has settled down. This dog, which is too weak to be integrated into the pack of the others, dies and is accompanied in its last hours by the woman (see fig. 5). This is the only moment when one of the dogs appears as detached from the otherwise uncountable collective, achieving the right to

an individual accompaniment – and also to a reaction by the other dogs that can be imagined as jealousy.³²

Figure 5. Staying with the dying dog



Source: Citarella and Llinás (2015b: 0:50:18). Used with permission.

All these scenes of conviviality are characterized by strong affectivity and corporeal proximity (there is hardly a scene in the film where, when the woman and her dogs are at rest, there is no physical contact between them, be it through the woman's hands caressing the dogs or the dogs' tongues licking the woman's hands or face). To what extent *La mujer de los perros* is focused on such affective scenes of conviviality can be seen in comparing these scenes with the much more distanced scenes of conviviality in *Los Reyes* (see below), where the interaction between humans and dogs always remains indirect and where the dogs' perspective is foregrounded instead of the human one. Living out in the woods together with a pack of dogs is, in *La mujer de los perros*, by no means a scenario of regression into a "feral" state of evolution but, on the contrary, the possible starting point for a basic inventory of alternative scenes of interspecific conviviality where the opposition of owning dogs on the one hand and belonging to their collective on the other hand ultimately becomes, if not meaningless, at least secondary in relation to the ongoing process of differentiation of the relationship between the woman and the dogs.³³ This relation cannot only be described in terms of interaction between different species but also as an "intra-action" (Barad 2007) within one collective.

³² See Giorgi (2016: 55). See also the interview with Citarella and Llinás in Koza (2015) about the women's "love affair" with the dying dog (whereas her having sex with a gaucho some later in the film seems not to include any sentimental attachment).

³³ This affective bond between the woman and her dogs is also at the very opposite of Jean Rolin's imaginary of ferality, of dogs going wild, and ending up eating human bodies (Rolin 2010).

4.4 (No) Catastrophe: The Final Scene

The end of the film returns to the high-angle perspective already present in the trailer, but which is adopted here for the first time in the main film itself. And even if the trailer will probably not be known to most film viewers, there is something like a hidden dialogue with the trailer in the final scene so that both – the trailer and the final scene – constitute together some kind of aerial frame for the much more “ground-oriented” images of the rest of the film. Both show the same portion of grassland with trees in the background, only from a slightly different angle and at a different moment of the day (the final scene takes place shortly after sunset and not in the late afternoon, see fig. 6). Finally, also the movement in the image frame is complementary to the movement in the trailer (whereas it is from right to left in the trailer, it is from left to right in the final scene).

Figure 6: The final scene



Source: Citarella and Llinás (2015b: 1:31:04). Used with permission.

At the end of the film, the woman is once more surrounded by her dogs, but this time something unexpected happens: She collapses onto the ground, where she ceases to move. Only after more than two minutes – almost an eternity for a filmic representation of an event – she gets up and continues her way as if nothing had happened, as far this can be recognized at all from the distance of the camera position. The spectators know that the woman had been to a public health centre before and that the treating doctor had shown great concern for her health, but that the woman had aborted the process of her examination before her waiting time was over. For this reason, a reading of the final scene of the film focused on the life story of the woman has to assume a tragic event that might even set a sudden, catastrophic end to her life.

This concern for the woman's health and even for her life is somewhat questioned as the sudden event that disrupts the regularity and quasi-circularity of the rest of the film's plot is hardly recognizable due to the huge distance of the camera from a high-angle

perspective. All that can be observed from the camera perspective, while the nature sounds go on indiscriminately, is that the dogs gather around the woman, hiding her barely visible body in the grass and showing their preoccupation without being able to “help” in any way a human being would react at that moment. Here, the film spectator’s forced distance leads back, just as in the trailer, to the question of the collective and its conditions of assemblage and dissolution. The dogs can be seen as gathering around the woman, but the camera perspective prevents the spectator from any affective proximity (unlike, for instance, in the scene of the dying dog, the dogs’ proximity can only be inferred but not actually shared from what can be seen directly on the screen; see Giorgi 2016: 54f). Through such a distanced high angle perspective, the fall and possible death of the woman does not appear as the tragic end of a life story but as the moment where the uncountable collective might be gathering around her body for the last time. The affectivity of grieving on a personal level in the scene with the dying dog is opposed here to the meaning of death as an inherent part of the story of the living. Even if this possible ending is discarded shortly after when the woman gets up again from the ground, it leaves an impression of openness and non-closure, which I will return to in my analysis of *Los Reyes* in the following section.

5. Distanced Conviviality: *Los Reyes*

5.1 Setting the Scene: Ball Games

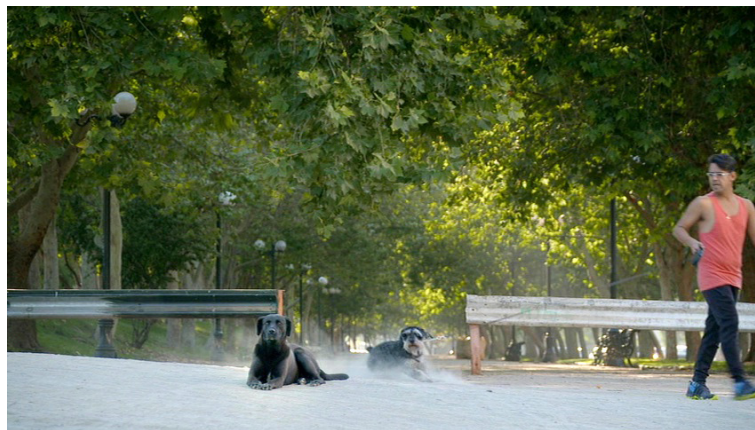
Los Reyes is the oldest skate park in the north-western part of Santiago de Chile, on the poorer side of the two halves of Santiago’s social profile (see Vicherat Mattar 2020: 40). It is a place where teenagers gather not only for skating but also for smoking joints and spending their time talking about their problems at home (one of the adolescents, as we learn from what he tells his friends, has just been thrown out by his family), on the street (corrupt police forces and trouble with drug dealers are recurrent subjects), about romantic relationships and sexuality (a girl talks about her pregnancy), and about plans for life (like opening a cannabis store after its legalization).

But while the skate park is a “heterotopia of crisis” (according to Foucault 1994: 756f) for adolescent humans, just as in many skater films, whether documentary or fictional, it is also the home of two street dogs living there, the younger one named Chola, and the older one, Football.³⁴ Both dogs are, according to the directors of the documentary film *Los Reyes*, Bettina Perut and Iván Osnovikoff, the actual “kings” of the skate park (see Gutiérrez 2019), which is an interesting alternative reading of the title of the film.

³⁴ These names only appear in the final credits of the film. We do not know anything about how the dogs received these names, nor if these names are the same ones for all humans that interact with them.

Without wanting to speculate too much about the anthropomorphic category of the “kings” – what is clear from the beginning, though, is the fact that Chola and Football occupy their own territory in quite a “sovereign” way: they may be street dogs, but they are by no means stray dogs, they are properly at home at Los Reyes, not only when a community of humans taking care of them sets up dog houses with the help of the park administration (which they do not always use for sleeping inside, as humans would expect them to).³⁵ That Los Reyes is presented as Chola’s and Football’s own territory, is also a crucial feature of the filmic *mise en scène* which establishes the two dogs right at the centre of the events in the first shots before the opening credits. In these opening scenes they appear as chasing any intruder big enough to challenge their position as “doorkeepers” on a gravel road which seems to give access to their territory (such intruders can be bikes or motorized vehicles, but also horses and donkeys), while they do not even deign to notice smaller animals like a pet dog lead on a leash by his master (see fig. 7, with Chola nearly in the centre of the frame while the other dog crossing the image from left to right remains just a transitory appearance in the dust behind her).

Figure 7: Chola and a pet dog in *Los Reyes*



Source: Perut and Osnovikoff (2018: 0:01:52). Used with permission.

Thus, during the first minutes of the film, the scene is set for the display of habitualised practices of interaction between humans, dogs and other animals in the park, but also, and even predominantly, for the interaction between the two dogs themselves – much of what follows in the film is a serialized variation of these scenes.

One of the moments of encounter with the young skaters, which does not come unexpectedly against the background “original contact scenes” in the evolutionary history of humans and dogs, is a scene of commensalism. This happens when a young skater shares his food with Chola over a certain distance and without any further

³⁵ Historically, the name of the park refers to the Spanish crown who donated it to Chile in order to commemorate the 500th anniversary of Columbus’s first voyage to the Americas and the Spanish *reyes católicos*.

expression of affection from either side, this distance being a characteristic feature throughout the film that becomes evident when compared to the scenes of sharing food in *La mujer de los perros*, where these scenes are all characterized by closer physical proximity.

Whereas sharing food is a crucial feature in the interaction between dogs and humans in *La mujer de los perros*, in *Los Reyes* the most salient contact scenes between humans and dogs are scenes of playing, mostly ball games (that refer rather to the alternative evolutionary hypothesis of adopting and playing with puppies, as described above). At the beginning of the film, such a game is played between humans and dogs with a football.³⁶ After this initial scene and after the football the dogs play with has run out of air, the game continues with different tennis balls.³⁷ In the game of the two dogs, the use of these tennis balls grows increasingly independent from human co-players, and the two dogs end up playing for themselves, appropriating human tools and human infrastructure for their own purpose. While Football invites her to do so by barking, Chola is the one who sets the balls in motion by pushing it down into the halfpipe with her nose (see fig. 8). From that moment on, the two dogs follow the ball's movement through the halfpipe as if the ball were animated by some autonomous force capable of bringing it back to them, like the skaters always come back to the upper and of the halfpipe. So the two dogs play a different game than the skaters do, but this alternative game seems to have no less strict rules, and both games coexist without merging into one common activity – this seems emblematic for the distant conviviality between dogs and humans in *Los Reyes*, a distance which is expressed as well in the cinematographic language of *Los Reyes* which I will now turn to.

36 This is the activity that seems to explain – or maybe even to motivate – Football's name.

37 As Iván Osnovikoff and Bettina Perut explained in a conversation I had with them in November 2022, these tennis balls that change from time to time were the incentives the directors used to make Chola and Football act in front of the camera. The balls thus served to make a certain "proto-fictionality" evolve within the pre-filmic setting (I will return to this aspect in my conclusion).

Figure 8: Playing with tennis balls

Source: Perut and Osnovikoff (2018: 0:15:29). Used with permission.

5.2 “*Perro culiao*”: Foregrounding and Sonic Environments

The impression that *Los Reyes* is, first and foremost, a film about dogs and their status as actors and not so much about humans in their interaction with dogs (like, for instance, *La mujer de los perros*) is not an accidental one. This impression is produced consciously by a consistent use of filmic devices by Bettina Perut, Iván Osnovikoff, and their team. To make this clear, it should be mentioned that the film was first meant to be about the skaters at Los Reyes, a project for which the directors had already acquired funding.³⁸ Only when the actual shooting started the directors felt that a skaters’ film would not be interesting enough, so when the two dogs appeared, they ended up changing the whole project, which implied, as they stated in an interview, a completely different filmic aesthetics based on the deliberate choice of a “dehumanizing” filmic gaze:

Con Los Reyes tuvimos además un camino culebreado porque iba a ser sobre skaters, se había ido mucho para un lado docureality, usábamos GoPro, y eso ensuciaba el registro. Cuando aparecieron los perros, la elección de ese objeto para la película influyó sobre todo el lenguaje, tuvimos que cambiar la forma de hacer la película. Usamos cámara fija porque deshumaniza el registro, el aparato técnico adquiere autonomía, eso nos gustó. Si hacemos un registro de los perros con cámara en mano, el potencial de acceder a la subjetividad animal se diluye porque se siente la intervención humana en el plano. La cámara fija

³⁸ This state of the project can still be seen in the “Original Project Teaser” in the bonus material of the film’s DVD.

tiene esa virtud, una independencia de la subjetividad humana. La película misma, en ese sentido, va tomando sus propias decisiones (Gutiérrez 2019).³⁹

One might object to this statement that it is not so easy to get rid of human subjectivity altogether: the act of framing the filmic image, of setting the stage for what will appear on the screen, is not neutral in the sense of a completely “dehumanized” view. But what undeniably changes when the two dogs become protagonists and when the spectators’ attention becomes detached from the skaters as human actors is the relation of figure and ground. Whereas traditionally, dogs and other animals in films form part of an environment from which the human figure stands out as an individual subject, the contrary is the case here where Chola and Football are the only protagonists with a clear agency while all the human actors remain name- and even faceless figures in the background. Whereas Chola and Football appear in all imaginable frame sizes in the filmic *mise en scène*, human figures are never directly shown in closeup; they only appear in long shots, often from a high angle perspective, as shadows (fig. 9a) or in a metonymic shift from the smoker of a joint to the face represented on a banknote used for preparing the smoke (fig. 9b; ironically, the face shown here on a 10,000 peso bill is the national war hero Arturo Prat).

Figures 9a/b: Indirect presence of human figures



Source: Perut and Osnovikoff (2018: 0:04:03/0:04:21). Used with permission.

The human actors are thus pushed to the background of the filmic scenes. The dissociation between the world of the two dogs and the humans at the skatepark appears even more clearly in the film’s acoustic dimension, which constitutes the environment of the filmic space of the two dogs in its visibility. While we observe Football and Chola in their habitualised practices of inhabiting the skate park, we hear the voices of the

³⁹ “The making of *Los Reyes* was complicated because it was going to be about skaters. It had gone a lot to the docureality side, we used GoPro, and that spoiled the shooting. When the dogs appeared, the choice of that object for the film influenced the whole filmic language, we had to change the way of making the film. We used a fixed camera because it dehumanizes the register, the technical apparatus acquires autonomy, and we liked that. If we shoot the dogs with a handheld camera, the potential of accessing the animal subjectivity is diluted because human intervention can be perceived in the shot. The fixed camera has the virtue of being independent from human subjectivity. The film itself, in that sense, makes its own decisions.”

skaters without seeing how and in which spatial setting their utterances are produced – the skaters’ voices are an “acousmatic” presence in the sense of Michel Chion (Chion 1993: 63–65). The effect of this ghostly acousmatic presence of human language is twofold: on the one hand, the voices we can hear serve, if we listen attentively, as a source of information about the young people’s lives, helping us to imagine their social sphere of marginality; on the other hand (especially when the people are too drunk or too stoned to articulate their thoughts clearly), their talk sometimes turns to a background noise that seems to constitute nothing more than the “soundscape” or the sonic environment for Chola’s and Football’s lives – an effect which invites the viewers to adopt the dogs’ perspective not so much on the level of visual focalization than on the level of auditory perception.

This foregrounding of the dogs’ world of perception against the sonic background of the skaters takes even a self-reflexive turn in a nocturnal scene where we see Chola and Football lying on the grass and a group of young skaters in the background while we hear one of them telling the story of how his grandmother threw him out of the house, insulting him as a “*perro culiao*”. This vulgar expression, which is repeated several times by the teenagers imagining the tragicomic scene of an older woman insulting her grandson in a register of speech normally reserved for young people contributes to shifting the attention back to the two real dogs who, unconcerned about the deprecatative use of animal metaphors, continue to occupy their home territory while their distant human companion in the background will have no place to return to that night.

5.3 Zoography: Scales of the Living

There is another, and maybe more puzzling, aspect about interspecific collectives, which is the relation between dogs and other, smaller animals, namely insects. Whereas interaction with humans and with other mammals, from dogs to horses and donkeys, remains on a scale that could also be observed by a distant human eye, the most clearly dehumanizing perspective of the film are the extreme closeup shots to the dogs’ bodies, like Chola’s paws or Football’s fur, with an increasing number of insects buzzing around the latter. Some isolated closeup shots on the dogs’ bodies or of insects appear early in the film, but they seem to be nothing more than decorative counterpoints to the dogs’ story and thus somewhat out of place in the plot of the film. Their real function becomes clear only as the film progresses.

Towards the end, with the increasing focus on insects, the film seems to return to a narrative progression in terms of biographical time that seems to have been suspended before in the already mentioned seriality of the ever-repeating dog rituals about playing

with tennis balls and defining and their own territoriality in the skate park. When narrative progression reappears, it can be understood less in an anthropomorphic way of a biography that would present an eventful change in the meaningful lives of the two heroes (which would be the standard model of a plot for a novel or a fiction film). The temporality appearing together with the insects is instead a temporality of *zoe*, of the biological life, a zoo-graphic (and not bio-graphic) process of material decay and death of one of the two dogs.⁴⁰

It is in the second half of the film is when we notice that the repeating scenes of playing have an index of temporality (which is deliberately arranged by the filmmakers): Football, the older dog, suffers the consequences from his days and nights out in the rain, where, in contrast to his younger companion Chola, he disdains the doghouse that compassionate people have provided for him – he is limping, he has more and more trouble getting up from the ground, etc.

This *zoography*, understood as the display of the biological and material dimension of life, goes along with a change of scale from *macro* to *micro*, from a perspective that corresponds to what a human observer is used to seeing on a film screen to a microscopic perspective which focusses the attention on the ageing and the decay of living bodies. The insects that gather around Football's mouth and on his ears announce his imminent death while using this decaying matter of the dog's body as the medium for their own procreation. The moment of Football's death itself seems to be told in a visual metonymy at the end of the film when in an extreme closeup, a drop of blood appears over Football's paw at the very place an insect had been sitting just a moment before (fig. 10a-b) and at the same moment when his breath, that we hear in an overly clear manner on the soundtrack, ceases.⁴¹ In this scene occurs a new and even more disturbing shift of the spectator's attention: now, it is no longer Football we see (the fragmented parts of his body do not constitute a figure that can be recognized as a dog any more), but his ceasing breath has now become part of the acoustic background for the life of the insects occupying the foreground of the image: While the first shift in the spectators' attention was from humans to non-human living beings like dogs, now the shift is from "higher" life forms of mammals to "lower" ones of insects and to micro-processes of life that feed precisely on the corpses of bigger animals, taking us all the way down on the *scala naturae*, until the film's dehumanization comes to a microscopic standstill.

40 I am basing myself here on the distinction of *bios* and *zoe* by Giorgio Agamben, already mentioned above. The neologism "zoography" has already been employed in a similar way by Stephan Herbrechter (Agamben 2004 [2002]; Herbrechter 2016).

41 As the directors explained in the personal conversation I had with them, this impression is a narrative effect and does not correspond to Football's actual death (the presence of the flies being a seasonal phenomenon which is not directly related to Football's decay).

Figure 10a/b: Football's paw

Source: Perut and Osnovikoff 2018: 1:05:00/1:05:38. Used with permission.

5.4 Alternative Endings: Phantasmagoric Memories

But these are not the last images of the film: Somewhat unexpectedly and as if this was an alternative ending, we see Football reappear in the last sequence of the film as if resurrecting just a moment before the final insert that dedicates the film to his memory.⁴²

In the conversation I had with Bettina Perut and Iván Osnovikoff in November 2022, they described this final scene as a “*reaparición fantasmagórica*” linked to grief and, moreover, to memory, as expressed in the final dedication. With this “spectral” last scene, which can indeed be described as the film’s second ending, and also with dedicating the film to Football, the two directors return to a human (and maybe even a humanist) perspective with their affective, even somewhat pathetic tribute that comes as a surprise after the cold, dehumanizing materialism of the observation of the dog’s physical decay and death in the scenes before.

So the apparently dehumanizing view of Football’s death by downscaling the spectator’s perception to the micro-level seems to be haunted by another imagery – the detailed view of the dying body, which takes up the long-standing tradition of a meditation on the sublime beauty of death, might ultimately not abandon the human perspective altogether.⁴³ the final return to an anthropocentric *bio-graphy* instead of a materialistic *zoo-graphy* might be necessary to make a dog’s life a “grievable life” (see Giorgi 2014: 197–236, who draws upon a concept by Judith Butler), a body that is not just pure matter decomposed by insects but whose memory can be inscribed into a process of cultural memory. Against the ultimate dehumanizing perspective which would reduce all forms of the living to nothing more than decomposed matter that can be transformed by other organisms into new organic life, as indicated by the “first ending”, appears a

⁴² The directors had indeed considered alternative endings before the actual death of Football occurred.

⁴³ One might think, for instance, in Charles Baudelaire’s poem “À une charogne” where the lyric voice sings the beauty of a street dog’s dead body (Baudelaire 1975: 31f).

return to a human perspective that seems even more anthropocentric than *La mujer de los perros* where at the end, the dogs gather around the seemingly lifeless body of the “dog lady”. But it is important to keep in mind that this second ending is, as the directors themselves put it, “phantasmagorical” and that it does not simply overwrite the material death of Football as the film’s first ending but rather introduce an unresolved tension into the film, which functions as a deconstruction of what the directors themselves present as a strictly “non-human” perspective. It is maybe no coincidence that the limits of a dehumanizing perspective appear precisely in a scene that might also be described as a constitutive “scene of contact” between humans and dogs, namely a scene of grief over a dead animal – which has its complement, as can be inferred from the ending of *La mujer de los perros*, in the grief of animals over dead human bodies.⁴⁴ That such scenes of grief appear precisely in the margins of social life makes them a place from which alternative practices of interspecific conviviality can take shape.

6. Conclusion

One of the main differences between *La mujer de los perros* and *Los Reyes* has been passed over in silence until now, namely the fact that the former is a fictional film while the latter is a documentary. But can dogs act “as if”? Can the interaction with dogs be fictitious at all?

In both films, the strictly binary opposition between documentary and fiction (which has questioned in many ways by recent research in literary and film studies; see e.g. Balke et al. 2022) is constantly being deconstructed towards both sides. In the documentary film *Los Reyes*, tennis balls make Football and Chola act “as if” they were performing a fictional game with its own specific rules – a game that ends up being even more interesting as a subject of a film than what the skaters do.⁴⁵ On the other hand, as mentioned above, the fictional setting of *La mujer de los perros* is, as Laura Citarella and Verónica Llinás explain in an interview (see Koza 2015), largely determined by a bond of trust between Verónica (as the human companion of the dogs) and her own dogs that would exclude the staging of situations too implausible to be carried out by her dogs.

What cuts across the binary distinction between fiction and the documentary is once more the notion of “scene”, not merely in the sense of its technical mediality and its theatrical looked-at-ness, but mostly in its reference to plausible “scenes of contact” between humans and street dogs. These scenes are not so much bound to what

44 It is probably no coincidence that Football’s name appears on the screen for the first time at the end of the film since (human) grief is linked to individualizing an animal by naming it.

45 On the affinities between playing and acts of fiction, see Iser (1991); on playing as a motor of co-evolution between companion species, see Haraway (2008).

filmmakers or scenarists imagine in their minds but to the habits of a lived relation of conviviality which transcends individual friendship or training towards a story that has taken centuries, even thousands of years, to shape a relation of conviviality where specific “scenes of contact” reappear in the open (one might say: the experimental) setting of the street or the field. Doing a film with dogs is a kind of fieldwork that allows for re-enacting specific scenes of encounter that have been present ever since wolves turned into dogs but that always take on different meanings in specific contexts, as can be seen here in the context of social marginality in Latin America.

It cannot be claimed that the exemplary scenes analyzed in this paper, like hunting, sharing food, playing, or mourning, constitute an exhaustive list of contact scenes between humans and dogs – another scene that has not been treated here but that is present in many literary scenes of conviviality between humans and dogs would certainly be the act of naming: including such an act (which is alluded to in one of the two initial scenes of this paper, namely in Pedro Lemebel’s *crónica*) would not only require the expansion of the corpus of texts and films, but would also have to lead to a more detailed distinction of more “human-centred” scenes of conviviality, like the discursive act of naming, from others that might be more animal-centred, like hunting, and a third type of scene, where discursive and non-discursive practices cross and overlap, like in playing or also in mourning.

But what this paper is about is not so much a typology of scenes of conviviality than what human-animal relations can contribute to the study of conviviality and inequality in Latin America. To do so, it would not be sufficient to remain on too high a level of abstraction that would take the relation between animals and street dogs merely as the expression of an “onto-story” (Bennett 2010), which comprises all forms of the living. Nevertheless, analyzing the scenes of encounter between humans and specific animals needs to take into account different scales of historicity that reach from modern biopolitics to (pre-)colonial encounters between species and to possible scenes of origin in evolutionary history that has contributed to transform humans and wolves/dogs alike. All these scales transcend the present condition of street dogs in America where they appear only as a problem of hygiene or security (which they certainly are, but not only). Rather, the stage of the street (or other non-domestic places), with its accumulated histories of changing asymmetrical power relations (as implied by the notion of “contact zone”) can help us imagine and implement alternative constellations of interspecific conviviality in social conflict zones in Latin America.

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