



LA VIDA LOCA **Synopsis**

The Salvadorian street gangs are, first and foremost, an image, a précis of contemporary history, a doctored picture of a locality in a world that's become global. It's a memory of the gang, the fundamental myth of organised crime.

Children of the Bloods and Crips, the gangs made famous by the Dennis Hopper film *Colors*, these gangs were born in the Hispanic ghetto of L.A. Now traditional enemies, they are engaged in an all-out suburban war that started in the streets of Los Angeles, spreading to numerous North American cities and prisons in which hundreds, and now thousands of gang members are incarcerated.

Serving long, if not life sentences for homicide, robbery with violence, drug trafficking and carrying arms, the gangs that "controlled" the ghettos took possession of the prisons. Coming from all over Central America, over a ten year period confused teenagers, economic and political immigrants, and, in particular, hundreds of thousands of children of Salvadorians fleeing the civil war, formed themselves into well-structured criminal organisations, killing their enemies both "inside" and "outside" the gangs.

The gangs are known as maras, after the marabuntas, the carnivorous ants of Central America that destroy all life in their path, thus giving rise to the Mara Salvatrucha (literally, "Salvadorian ant"), also known as the MS-13, after 13th Street in South Central Los Angeles. This organisation was soon followed by another mara, the formidable M-18, taking its name from 18th Street where it held sway.

The national maras of the southern States are sub-divided into pandillas (sets) at a regional level and cliquas (cliques), a kind of base unit for a neighbourhood or even a street. The gang members, tattooed from head to toe, are called pandilleros or homeboys. The tattoos not only serve as identifiers, but provide a visible sign of their voluntary exclusion from society. How can you get a job with the number 13 or 18 tattooed on your forehead and your cheeks adorned with teardrops, representing the number of enemies you've killed?

Writing a new chapter in the history of gang warfare in Los Angeles, the story could have remained concentrated in the United States of America. But that was without taking Washington into account...

In 1996, the American government simultaneously decreed the Illegal Immigration Reform and the Immigrant Responsibility Act, in other words the adoption of a ferocious "double penalty" legislation allowing the authorities to send more than 100,000 gang members detained in the United States straight back to Central America. With frightening consequences: this flood of delinquents corrupted the order, social stability

and economy of the countries of origin, Panama, Honduras, Salvador, Guatemala, Costa-Rica, and Nicaragua... And the relocation of the gangs triggered massive paranoia regarding security in the local states.

In one decade, the United States succeeded where it had previously failed, keeping the local dictators in power and financing civil wars and Coups d'Etat!

Social theatre

The story of the maras is also that of the megalopolis-towns, the world-suburbs, the mega-cities, the incredible makeshift modification of town and countryside, the perfect illustration of the latest best-seller by the social commentator, historian, political activist and urban theorist, Mike Davis, Planet of Slums.

The suburbs of San Salvador are clones of shanty-towns and social policy programmes on the edge of the "big nothing" that separates the capital from its volcanic range. A no-man's land, the ideal topography for blatant violence.

We are on the edge of the municipality of Soyapango. Two precipitous back-streets, la Campanera and San Ramon, form a dead end, a bus terminus at the bottom of a canyon. **A dead end for the hopes and dreams of its inhabitants, trapped in the desperate struggle for survival.**

For the young people, divided between two rival gangs, *the Mara Salvatrucha* and the *Mara 18*, the future holds either imprisonment or death or, as often as not, both. On the 6th January 2007, for example, a riot in one of the overcrowded prisons in the west of the country resulted in 21 dismembered and decapitated corpses when five hundred MI8 members confronted the other inmates.

Camera position

Filmed in close-up using a hand-held camera, this will be *La vida Loca*, the crazy life, as the pandilleros say. For a year, the camera will focus on daily life in a base cell of one of the gigantic maras, the la Campanera MS-18 clique, composed of fifty or so engaging adolescents and young adults with an average age of 16 - 18. This *dica* is run as a kind of egalitarian community, a sort of self-proclaimed brotherhood of outsiders, half street-kids, half child soldiers.

In the background, the film will faithfully chronicle the hopes and fears of the inhabitants of this new tropical suburb of Los Angeles, the periphery of San Salvador. Twenty years after a revolutionary war that devastated the nation, a new civil war, just as terrible, is pitting the poor against the poor. **A "perfect crime of globalisation", as the philosopher Jean Baudrillard would say.**

"A story without a plot", wrote the black Jamaican novelist and hero of the Harlem Renaissance Claude McKay in his cult book, *Banjo*. A novel that relates the fortunes and misfortunes of a gang of "Negro" musicians, sailors,

demobilised infantry men and dockers in Marseilles at the end of the 1920's. At the height of the Great Depression of 1929 and the attack on the Komintern. The Marseilles pandilla decided, despite everything, to enjoy this "bitch of a city" and make the most of it.

This concept of a story without a plot might well be applied to Christian Poveda's film, the self-fictionalised chronicle of a gang of adolescents who's only hope is to have a bit of fun before meeting an early death.

Heroes and cast

Our cast is made up of a handful of heroes and their companions in misfortune. They are hostages to the paradoxical adventures that lead some to evangelistic redemption, while others pass through the film like meteors to end up dead with a bullet in the head, laid out on the cold steel table in a forensic science laboratory. Or, for the lucky ones, in the furnace of the overcrowded prisons, living on the very ground in their hundreds, sleeping head-to-tail, like the prisoners in the holds of the slave ships.

If only for the gravity of the subject, Christian Poveda's work and commitment makes one think of Jean Rouch, filming at close quarters, capturing the hopes and the fears of the young city-dwellers of the post-independent megapoles of Abidjan and Accra of the 1950's. The violent and tender chronicles of "Moi un noir" and "Maîtres fous".

The boys as cast

"**El Banban**", named after the son in the Tv cartoon The Flintstones. At 26, he's one of the oldest members of the gang. He left school at 15 and is the tattoo artist for the clique, to which he's belonged for 12 years. He already has 5 years in prison for drugs trafficking behind him and three children (the youngest only 4 months old) by three different women. El Banban alternates between parole and custody awaiting trial. He is currently in prison.

"**El Duende**", The Goblin, is 25 years old. He joined the gang when he was 14. He never knew his father and ran away from his mother's house to live on the streets. Imprisoned four times for robbery with violence he says, "I have no future. I've got one foot in the grave." One of his daughters, now 4 years old, lives in prison with her mother.

"**El Bodoque**", The Wrecker, the practical joker has just celebrated his 21st birthday. He left school when he was 11 and joined the gang at 14 with the aim of "destroying" everything. He was detained for theft for 3 months in a Juvenile Detention Centre. He has been shot several times... Smiling broadly at the camera he says, "I don't know if I'm going to die today or tomorrow". A premonition: a few months after filming, on the 1st November 2006, he was blown away in broad day-light, shot ten times by murderers from the rival MS clique, despite the fact that the police were only a few hundred metres away from the scene of the crime...

"Little Scrappy", a hero from the cartoon series Scooby-Doo. 17 years old. Raised by his mother, who was abandoned by her husband when Scrappy was 6, he joined the gang at 15 to "have fun". "I love the 18." His future? "Death! No one gives you a helping hand here, what other future can you have than death?" On the 26th May 2006, he was brought down like a rabbit by two cops, who shot him in the back during a car-chase. He was armed. He leaves a wife and child, born after his death.

"Psycho", aged 19. Raised by his mother, he left school at 11 and hung around the streets. He joined the clique two years ago. What did the gang represent for him before he became a member? "Killing and smoking drugs!" Since joining he's "quietened down a lot", because he'd like God to allow him to see his daughter "grow up a bit" and, in particular, see that she doesn't end up in a gang. "I'll always stay in the gang because I'm tattooed. It would better to be killed because I was pissing everyone off rather than die by accident! I've been close to death but I didn't realise."

"El Nueve", Nine. 26 years old. He grew up with his grandmother and left school at the age of eleven. He joined his local cliqua 18 "to get some help". A street kid, he was being persecuted by the rival pandilleros from the Mara Salvatrucha. At 26, he's one of the rare few to have pulled through without ever going to prison. He has one aim: to survive at any cost, "to stay alive". He plays a large part in the film.

"El Raton", or "Moussi", Mouse. 28 years old. He left school at the age of 12 and joined the gang at 13, "to have a good time with the race! To be there and piss everyone off ". "The gang's in your heart, in life as in death. " He doesn't want his six year old kid ending up in the gang but to go to school and succeed in life.

"Sparky", hero of a TV series. 20 years old. He left school when he was 13 and was immediately jailed for 18 months for drugs trafficking. He's the father of a little girl. "My future? I can't see it any more. I don't know if I'll still be alive. That's why I live from day to day."

"Spider" or " El Frente", the Front. 17 years old. Joined the clique two years ago, "to have fun". Jailed for one month for carrying a weapon, he lives "from day to day", ready to "die for the Pandilla".

"Twister". 22 years old. Mistreated by his stepfather, he left his family and school when he was 14. A street kid, he joined the gang at 17. A fatalist: "God does what he wants with us!"

"El Verdugo" The Executioner. 28 years old. A college graduate. At the age of 12 he was living in the street, at 16 he was in a gang and also attending High School. "I liked having a good time, fighting and winning territory, initiating the new members, the women, the vice... We felt protected, that's what I liked about the 18." He was jailed for 5 years for theft and 3 for homicide. He has tried to work but been fired because of his tattoos. He has a 10 year old son in the USA and a little girl who died of Dengue Fever at the age of 3.

And all their buddies...

Secondary characters such as El Araña, The Spider. 17 years old. An American national, because he lived in the USA with his father, he was sent

back to El Salvador. He's been living with his mother since his father was jailed in the USA for theft.

"El Triste", Sad Boy, an accomplice of El Nueve. He's in hiding because there's a warrant out for his arrest for extortion.

Then there's "El Pablo" and "El Snarf", a cat, the hero of an American cartoon.

The girls as cast

There are many of them. A handful stand out. Their simple concerns with staying alive serve as a "earthly" reference point for the clique.

"La Chucky", the heroine of the eponymous horror film *Child's Play*. At 19 years of age she is the mother of two daughters. She has tattoos all over her body and proudly sports the number 18 on her forehead, which she hides under a bandanna when she "leaves" her street. A pretty girl with the eyes of a killer, she looks a lot like her alias. She attended school until the age of 11 and was brought up in a children's home, from which she ran away on numerous occasions, before finally being placed in a juvenile detention centre. She escaped with a girlfriend who was pandillera and M18 member. She joined her local clique at the age of 14, to have fun. Jailed for 18 months in an adult prison for premeditated murder, she passed herself off as 18 in order to be with her friend. Released on a technicality when the judge discovered she was a minor, she had her forehead tattooed out of love for the gang, "for the craziness" it brings her. Unmarried with two daughters, she says with regard to her youngest daughter: "I don't want her to suffer what I've suffered!"

"La Droopy", the hero of the Tex Avery cartoon. 20 years old. Born in Costa Rica, attended school until the age of 12, she was raised by her mother who was addicted to crack. She joined the clique at the age of 16. She has a four-year-old child whose father is in prison, serving an 84-year sentence for homicide. "I'm father and mother to my son". Her battle: to get her son back from the foster home the judge placed him in. Her hopes for the future? "To be seen as a human being".

"La Liro", an Hispanic alliteration of "The Little One". 19 years old. Taken to Houston, Texas when she was one year old by her mother, she returned home at the age of 13. Her whole face is tattooed, covered with a gigantic 18. This was done when she was 17, maybe as a punishment... With such scarification, her face condemns her to death if she leaves her street. If she goes into a public place, such as a fast food restaurant, the customers call the cops who immediately take her away and put her in custody. She has a 4-month old son. His father is BanBan, currently in custody awaiting trial. Her son? "I don't know if I'll be able to take him to school because I don't know what will have happened to me by then! If my son joins the Pandilla, that's his decision." As the wife of a gang leader, La Liro is under the protection of the members of the clique 24 hours a day. She never goes anywhere without her young assassin bodyguards.

"La Wizard", after the Marvel comics. 27 years old. Left school at 14, brought up by her mother and stepfather. Her father was killed when she was one year old. At the age of 15 she ran away from home, no longer able to bear the beatings handed out to her by her stepfather. She tried

and failed to commit suicide: "I messed it up". Her brother was in the Mara Salvatrucha. "I watched him taking drugs and doing stupid stuff". Her brother tried to protect her and stop her joining the gang. As a result, she joined the rival M18. Jailed as a minor, then as an adult for theft, carrying weapons and attempted murder, the last time for homicide, she's just come out of prison after a 9-month sentence..

At 17, she was with a "homeboy", a pandillero, when they were shot at. He was killed and she got a bullet in the hand and another in the leg. In 2004 she was living with "Psycho", who is now in jail. "I had to go and visit him", she says. Unfortunately, his prison was in "enemy territory": some MS killers tried to kill her as she left the compound. She was gunned down by two assassins, hit ten times in her body and stomach and once in the head. She had a miraculous escape because one bullet came out through her right eye! Left for dead, she woke up choking on her own blood. After several operations, she now has a false eye and is about to undergo more surgery to make her eyelid cover her glass eye properly. She is the mother of four children. The father of the first two is dead, killed with five bullets in the head.

Other characters appear on screen... Such as La Happy, who was gunned down by 4 murderers. She was riddled with bullets. After weeks in hospital being sewn back together and nursed back to health and barely able to get about, she returned home. Over the telephone, and on camera, she learns of the death of her boyfriend, El Sombre, who has just been killed.

Life, every day

The daily life of the Campanera, between police raids and wakes. It's a little Belfast used to be, punctuated by revenge attacks and terrorist raids. **The war is ever present.**

The "Mierdes Secos", for MS, are always lying in wait in the streets or on the other side of the hill. Death prowls, tirelessly. Turning daily life into a tropical Six Feet Under, the American TV series that takes place within the confines of a firm of undertakers. Violent deaths, all the time, at least one or two a month, cast a shadow over the whole community. When they go to collect the bodies from the forensic science laboratories, the officials hand the grief-stricken families the victims' bloody clothes in plastic shopping bags. The camera follows one family, wandering amongst a pile of coffins. The pandilla cover the costs of the funeral since the families don't have the means to pay. At the market they buy wreathes and bunches of multi-coloured flowers.

"Sooner or later, it's either the hospital, prison or a hole in the ground", says El Nueve at El Sombre's wake. It's a life without hope. The Campanera provides the unity of place for anticipated tragedy.

It's better not to have your face tattooed if you want to escape la Bartolina, 72 hours in police custody without food or drink. La Bartolina is the name given to a salad bowl and, by extension, custody. On every street corner, cops turn people to face the wall with their hands on their heads and order them to lift up their T-shirts so they can see their identifying tattoos.

These liberticidal measures came into force over the last few years, although the Mano Dura Law has now been abolished. Unfortunately, the police continue to enforce it...

Denounced as being an assault on human rights, this bullying is, however, a daily occurrence for these teenagers.

They live together as a collective. They see to the cleaning of the house and the meals they eat in front of the TV; the walls are papered with soft toys, with holy pictures and posters of football stars. Hidden up in the attic and in a corners of the courtyard there are 9mm pistol magazines. **It's a constant mixture of gentleness and extreme violence.**

Although we're in a world of ultra-hierarchical organised crime, an unconscious model of traditional family life brings the former street kids, the battered girls, the young delinquents and school dropouts together.

In each neighbourhood and street, a sort of brotherhood elects the leaders or relieves them if their duties if they're not up to their job or corrupt. It's a real teenage society, organised like the gangs of children in Medieval Europe who joined the crusades. Alongside this, the gang's rules are worked out with their laws, it's rules and regulations and its morals. You can kill a member of the rival clan, but the worst insult for a gang member is to be accused of having killed a "civilian"...

In this small country, violence causes the death of 19 victims a day! The age curve of the victims of violent death reaches its peak in the 16/24 group....

"La pandilla is real. If you have something and someone else has nothing, you have to share."

"If we survive the bullets, it's because we believe in God. Only God can save you."

"We've seen death close up. We pretended to be armed, but we were shitting our pants."

"I've got la pandilla in my heart. I'm in love with la pandilla, it's like a religion, like God."

"I have to ask God to get la pandilla out of my head otherwise I've had it."

Abandoned, these teenagers find a place, a feeling of security and a community within these gangs, which they don't find anywhere else. Standing out in contrast with destitution and the pervading insecurity, the pandilleros ask neither for pity, charity or aid: all they want is to gain the right to live with dignity and in security, in order to be able to exist quite simply, protected by the constitutional laws.

The song from the film : "La vida en la 18 es fatal"

"Que vaya con Dios!" This song is sung à cappella by the gang members after a minute of silence observed at midnight during a wake. The family, friends and uninitiated people were asked to leave the room beforehand. The gang shuts itself in with the body of the martyred pandillero and spends the night keeping watch. This song is also sung at funerals. Born in the Latino ghetto, this hit reggaeton song by Big Boy, a rapper from L.A, spoke about the terrible relationship between the gangs

and drugs. In the Salvadorian "Mara 18" version, drugs have been replaced by "la 18" ("la diesyoche")

This will be the main song in the film, which will be played over footage of a series of funerals and wakes

" Que vayas con dios "

" Y ahora escuchen lo que voy a decir
Y al cielo te llega mi voz, fuiste como un hermano
Y se que estas a lado de dios, y reso por ti y nosotros

(hook)

A veces siento que es duro si un amigo se va (con Dios)
Y su alma camina hacia la eternidad (land of mercy)
El se fue y ya no vendra, y para siempre se fue ya
Y su recuerdo se quedara, pero ya que descanse en paz

(coro)

Que vayas con Dios, whoa, whoa,whoa, whoa
Amigo del alma, te despido y jamas me voy a olvidar de nuestra linda amistad,eh
Ya no le lloren dejenlo partir, de que vale si ya esta muerto
Ya no lo pueden revivir, ya no le lloren dejenlo partir
De que vale si ya esta muerto, ya no lo pueden revivir

Sabes que mueres pero no sabes cuando mueres
La vida es una para todos los seres, hay que disfrutarla
Y lo sabes bien, porque va a llegar el dia en que se te apage la luz
Y como sufrimos tu seres queridos porque perdimos un gran amigo

Yo lo vi crecer, desde nino yo me crie junto a el
Su madre lo apunto al escuela, donde quizo su futuro escojer
Pero de nada ella le sirvio, y el mal camino escogio, el decidio de la 18
vivir
Y la muerte el pudo conseguir

Que vayas con Dios, mi amigo del alma, que vayas con Dios, mi amigo del alma
Por que fuiste para mi como un hermano en las buenas y malas
Siempre nos dimos la mano , por eso la 18 esta cancion te dedica
Sin cualquier tarima, mi voz te recita despido tu vuelo con una lagrima mas
Lo unico que quiero es que descanses en paz
Tu en el cielo, y yo en la tierra, pero siempre la amistad
Porque sincera y eterna, que salga el sol, y que cuando cumpla la manana
orare por ti
Todos los dia de la semana

Yo se que es muy triste , yo se que es muy triste
Pero la vida en la 18 es fatal
Yo se que es muy triste, yo se que es muy triste
Ya ves que a ti te fue mal

(coro)

La muerte a todos yo se que nos espera
Por eso la vida no la vivas tan lijera, cuando hagas las cosas, piensalas bien
Para que despues no te lamentes, busca a Dios pero que sea siempre
No nada mas cuando necesitas de el
Pon lo enfrente para caminar, y no te dejes manipular por el mal

(coro)

Cada noche cuando me voy a dormir, le pido siempre al Senor que cuide de mi
Y si me muero antes de que vuelva a amanecer le pido al Senor que me lleve con el. "