

Street-Level Xenomorphs: Mara Salvatrucha Audiovisual Representation in *The World's Most Dangerous Gang and Sin nombre*

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I. From the Inside?: Misrepresentation, Fear, and the Making of a Monster in the National Geographic Channel's *The World's Most Dangerous Gang*

With the 1979 release of the movie *Alien*, director Ridley Scott introduced one of the most terrifying creatures in cinematic history. The Xenomorph, more casually referred to as “the Alien,” was the perfect killing machine. It had acid for blood and an impenetrable chitin exoskeleton, making it nearly unstoppable. The Xenomorph could survive the vacuum of space, unfettered by the lack of oxygen or the frigid temperatures. It was a master of stealth, able to attack from the shadows without detection. Even more fearsome, the Xenomorph did not eat its victims. And so, there was no discernible reasoning behind its massacres. True, it relied on organic hosts as incubators for its young, but these vessels needed to be alive for the reproductive process to succeed. In other words, the Xenomorph murdered not for food or procreation, but only for the sake of destruction; its slaughters had no logic other than fulfilling some primordial need to kill. It was evil in the most literal sense of the term.

The Xenomorph's victims, the crew of the *Nostramo*, were returning to Earth after a long mining mission. Futuristic blue-collar workers in outer space, this community of seven miners spent years on their ship, traveling from planet to planet while excavating extraterrestrial ore for their livelihood. The spacecraft served as their mini-city, complete with dining facilities, housing units, and entertainment programming. The Xenomorph, brought onboard the *Nostramo* from a foreign world, kills the crew methodically, without giving even the slightest hint as to why. What

is more, the monster has no origin, no real beginning. Of course, from a biological perspective, the crew learns how it reproduces, where it comes from in a scientific sense. But in terms of psychology, there is no way of learning the creature's intentions, its driving desires. The Alien just appears on the ship, with no history, no antecedents, no previous point of reference, and exterminates the crew one by one, an agent of chaos and destruction.

Before 1979, and certainly in the years since, there have been many examples of this kind of movie monster. *John Carpenter's The Thing* (John Carpenter, 1982), *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975), and *Cloverfield* (Matt Reeves, 2008) have creatures that fall into the same category as the Xenomorph. All that is known is that they have come from a faraway place in order to upheave the established social order through fear and violence. The audience never really understands, sequels notwithstanding, the origins of these monsters. They do not know exactly where they came from, or what made them evil. The viewers only see the damage that they cause, the blood that they spill, and the fear that they engender. The degree and nature of engagement with these types of creatures differs from that of other famous cinematic monsters. If there is something in a monster's past that may have necessitated violence, then sympathy could make their violent actions at the very least understandable, if not justifiable. For example, King Kong was kidnapped, drugged and made to perform in a circus-like atmosphere. Frankenstein was a jigsaw puzzle of corpses, an aberration created from one man's scientific obsession. In many cases, then, if the main antagonist is given a background story, an origin, then the reasoning behind their rampages becomes more salient. On the other hand, the Xenomorph just kills. Nothing more is known. And this lack of understanding leads to very little sympathy, as the Alien is seen as an agent of evil. Sympathy breeds compassion, and compassion softens the sinister depiction.

Concealing the origin of the creatures from *Alien* would tend to curb any sympathy that the viewer might feel for them.

In 2006, The National Geographic introduced such a monster, not in a cinematic medium, but in the form of a cable documentary. In *The World's Most Dangerous Gang*, this monster is described as a “cancer,” a spreading “virus” leaving its “bloody mark” all over the globe. The narrator questions its origins, asserting that it is truly unknown where the monster came from, as its unprecedented and unexplainable level of violence “somehow spreads” to neighborhoods that had never dealt with such a menace in the past. Of course, the monster is Mara Salvatrucha, and this documentary provides a perfect example of the sensationalized nature of out-group depictions of the gang within an imaginary of violence. The documentary is, on the surface, meant to teach its audience about this hermetic community of maras. And yet, despite this assumed didactic mission, after watching *The World's Most Dangerous Gang*, one has to wonder about the intended and perhaps unintended consequences of the documentary. Does it attempt to teach the viewer about Mara Salvatrucha? Or does it serve another more sensationalistic purpose? Does it try to educate the out-group on the history, customs, and spread of Mara Salvatrucha? Or is this production meant to perpetuate fear and misunderstanding? Is this documentary a valid study of the gang? Or are its aims shrouded in a more nefarious perpetuation of the inaccurate characterizations that serve only to further marginalize the gang's members?

Such inaccurate representations of marginalized, urban denizens serve as foundational in the construction of a view regarding the crime that plagues modern cities. Jesus Martín Barbero discusses the importance of the media in creating an image of violence that pulls people from the streets and pushes them into their own homes. He theorizes that “television constructs serve, to a

great extent, to reinforce imaginaries of fear” because “the prevailing images...have been incapable of going beyond the sensationalism and gruesomeness of murders, of assaults, and armed robberies” (27). Going beyond the sensationalism would involve addressing the causes of these criminal acts, and by extension those who execute them. What causes the violence? Why would someone opt for a criminal lifestyle? Failure to ask and answer these sorts of questions results in the Xenomorph-like depiction of the “other” as a monster, one without an origin or a reason—a monster whose only purpose is to scare and murder the “innocent” out-group. Susana Rotker believes that “en la crisis del significado que produce la violencia... entran a la vez la prensa y los medios de comunicación con su tendencia de magnificar o distorsionar la aprensión de lo real” (9). This characterization thrives on distortion and magnification, as well as the mediatic entities that diffuse and perpetuate them. This is the distortion and magnification that overpowers the presumed educational agenda of *The World’s Most Dangerous Gang*. Although referring to Mara Salvatrucha as a cancer or virus could hold some accuracy considering the various criminal activities that they have participated in, it is entirely untrue that they “somehow” spread across the Americas, in an unspecified and vague way. There are concretely defined, specific reasons behind Mara Salvatrucha’s creation and expansion, and one must question the reasoning behind ignoring the mechanism that produced this expansion.

Rossana Reguillo refers to this kind of representation as the imaginary of violence because it seldom seeks to actually understand the rationale behind criminal activity and illicit behavior, and in the case of MS-13 (another name for Mara Salvatrucha), the impulse that would force children to join the gang in the first place (“Teens at the border” 14-15, 17-18). Instead, the imaginary concerns itself with and is fueled by glimpses of dead bodies mowed down by gang violence—nameless, brown-skinned bodies face-down in pools of their own blood. These are the

images offered by the media, and they are shocking, impressive, but seldom provide the entire story. The same holds true in Los Angeles, the birthplace of Mara Salvatrucha, where “the prevailing images of such places as South Central paint only a picture of violence, crime, and despair” (Soja 54). It is an imaginary because it avoids origin, shies from the causes that would bring forth this violence, therefore ignoring the procedures that may alleviate the violence, or at the very least help to understand it. Reguillo continues: “La ciudad... está poblada de fantasmas y de monstruos,” where “los medios de comunicación, con su discurso ‘extranjerizante’ incitan a la violencia” (“Imaginario global, miedos locales” 11). And like the filmic depictions of the movie monsters mentioned above, the media represents these villains as violent for the sake of violence, devoid of any real, underlying causes. In the imaginary of violence the stripping of origin results in the near elimination of sympathy. The elimination of sympathy, then, creates a filmic villain, one who has no desire other than to scare, kill, and destroy. This villain has no real background or psychology. He or she is only interested in hurting others. In other words, by removing the possibility of sympathy, the imaginary of violence creates a truly evil persona. And this evil character, without real motives or origin, deserves eradication for the sake of social wellbeing. As Luis J. Rodríguez asks in his testimonio *La vida loca*, “¿qué hacer con aquellos que no puede acomodar la sociedad? Hacerlos criminales. Proscribir sus acciones y sus creaciones. Declararlos enemigos, luego hacerles guerra” (271). In the imaginary, social construction of mediatic violence, few groups are considered more wicked than Mara Salvatrucha. Because of this, *The World’s Most Dangerous Gang* works to support this declaration of war, presenting a foreign monster that has no justifiable reasoning or explanation for its acts.

I chose the National Geographic documentary as my entry point in the examination of filmic depictions of Mara Salvatrucha because it is the most well-known representation of the gang, outside of newspaper articles and news reports. Over the course of the last six years, this documentary is the one most often mentioned during question and answer sessions following presentations I have given, or in conversations after panel discussions have ended. Along with the movie *Sin nombre*, professors and graduate students alike invariably ask about *The World's Most Dangerous Gang*. Typically they want to know whether the information presented is “true.” On other occasions, I have been asked about my research and its legitimacy from those whose perspective is grounded in the villainous representation of the gang in this documentary. Why would I interest myself in this band of “savages?” The former was an actual question posed by someone who took the documentary as truth. This acceptance of the documentary as an accurate depiction of Mara Salvatrucha reflected, to me, a success on the part of the imaginary of violence. In these academic settings, people who have made a living questioning culture and the means by which culture manifests ignore their own training by affirming that the documentary presents an unshakeable reality. But a close reading of the program proves that rather than educating, the documentary perpetuates a sense of hatred towards the gang, a hatred forged in sensationalization, distortion, and mediatic manipulation.

Entering into the content of the documentary, questions concerning the intent of the diffused message become even more pronounced. Is this an educational film? Or does the program merely serve the purpose of entertainment? Is the *World's Most Dangerous Gang* a genuine, journalistic examination of Mara Salvatrucha? Or is it meant to scare the viewer through the introduction of an evil, irredeemable “bad guy?” To varying degrees, all four of these questions are addressed, but specifically the induction of fear and the desire to determine a

specific villain take a primary position in the production. The introduction, featuring reporter Lisa Ling giving a brief overview of the forthcoming footage, speaks directly to the audience. “It’s the most violent gang in the Americas... It’s a name *you* might have heard and *you* need to remember.” Ling uses the second person, and not the customary third person used other kinds of documentary exposés. The narrator is speaking directly to her audience, stressing the importance that the viewer remembers Mara Salvatrucha because the gang “may already be in a neighborhood near *you*.” The program appeals in a personal way to those watching. The use of the second person closes the rift that may be caused by a third person narrative. Instead of constructing a distance between a third person depiction and the audience at home, the second person use of the word “you” engages the viewer, it incorporates them into the documentary. The narrator is talking to them, warning them of the fear that they *should* feel as they watch the images that unfold on the screen. Their life, their very safety, is at risk, and they need to fear Mara Salvatrucha because they may already be in their own backyard. This second person approach sustains Jesús Martín Barbero’s aforementioned assertion that television constructs serve to perpetuate fear, and further supports Rossana Reguillo’s claim that many mediatic representations of urban violence affirm that “la ciudad es... esencialmente peligro” (Barbero 27; “Imaginarios globales, miedos locales” 10). And so, under the guise of warning, or even protection from future violence, the documentary’s narration enters a relationship with the viewer, where the seemingly authoritative information presented serves to prepare the watcher for impending criminal activity. Viewers need to remember the name Mara Salvatrucha because they need to fear them. As Reguillo tells us, you hate what you fear, and hatred often precludes sympathy, identification, and above all, humanization of the subject that is hated.

The relationship between the viewer and the documentary, that is to say the imaginary of violence, goes beyond the initial use of the second person. Aside from serving as a kind of protector, warning the audience of a looming danger that they may not yet have heard of, the documentary looks to confront this danger head-on, sacrificing itself for the sake of gaining knowledge for the watchers, so that these same viewers do not have to take on the danger directly, themselves. *The World's Most Dangerous Gang* promises “answers from the inside,” entering gang infested neighborhoods, interviewing current gang members, and even risking life and limb in a Salvadoran prison which assumedly holds only Mara Salvatrucha members. In other words, the documentary undertakes a dangerous voyage into the evil monster’s lair, so that it can better inform the at-home viewer of the perils that the viewer should fear. In this situation, the documentary becomes an entity, an investigative force that bravely engages the enemy on their own turf, piecing together valuable information that may help to protect the viewer. The documentary itself becomes a character within the imaginary of violence, a protagonist that informs, protects, and sacrifices itself for the safety of the in-group. The audience cannot and should not go into these areas to learn about this secretive, lurid underworld, so the documentary, in its role as the faithful and dependable voice on Mara Salvatrucha, takes the burden on for them.

The most marked example of this relationship with the audience arises when the documentary crew first attempts to interview inmates at a Mara Salvatrucha controlled prison in El Salvador. Before we see the footage of them approaching the prison, there is a montage of supposed MS-13 violence within these kinds of prisons. The collage of images shows guards battling inmates, in full riot gear, prisoners running through the open areas of the prisons, loose and unruly, and ultimately, to end the montage, dead, tattooed, and bloodied bodies lying face

down on the concrete, assumedly in the aftermath of the riot. Aside from depicting the prison violence, this footage, presented immediately before glimpses from the inside of a car on its way to a similar prison, demonstrates, in vivid and shocking fashion, the danger that the documentary crew faces as they try to bring the audience an inside perspective on Mara Salvatrucha activity within the prison. Lisa Ling could end up as one of these bloody bodies. And as if this insinuation is not enough to foment a feeling of both dread and sacrifice on the part of the film crew, Ling receives a phone call as they drive to the facility. The voice on the other end warns her about impending danger. The caller has informed her that there is a scheme in place. Lisa Ling tells the viewer that “the inmates are planning to kidnap us.” The crew decides to avoid the prison for now, but soon thereafter, they are given the green light to return to the prison, because there are assurances in place that guarantee their safety. At once, this entire scene provokes a number of questions to an expert on Mara Salvatrucha who has spent time in the field. Who was planning the kidnapping? Who tipped the inmates to the arrival of the documentary crew? Who was on the other end of the phone, warning the crew of the possible kidnapping? And most importantly, what changed? Who made these assurances of safety, and how was this safety negotiated? The average home viewer has little knowledge of these inner workings, however. They do not think to ask these kinds of questions because the only information that they have is the knowledge presented by the documentary itself. Therefore, the audience does not consider that this entire scene may have been fabricated, or at the very least exaggerated in order to exacerbate the events that transpired on the way to the prison. Because the audience does not question this chain of events, they take it as truth. And because they take this fearful situation as truth, they appreciate the work of the film crew as one grounded in the sacrifice of life for the sake of awareness and insight.

Notwithstanding, it is important to re-iterate that there is a reason, in some communities, to fear Mara Salvatrucha. Their criminal activities have been well documented over the course of the last decade. They are violent, and they are involved in the drug trade, prostitution, arms-dealing, and human trafficking. And yet there are very specific socio-economic and political reasons why these youngsters engage in these kinds of illicit activities. Rossana Reguillo contends that “youths feel cornered by daily evidence of lack of possibilities and the enormous difficulty posed by integration, or in other words to fit in and be included... Within this landscape, the culture is ripe for illegality,” an illegality that “becomes a viable option for excluded youths” (“Teens at the Border” 14-15). Fomenting fear by speaking directly at the audience as a sort of expert on the issues of Mara Salvatrucha, as *The World’s Most Dangerous Gang* does, bypasses an understanding of the landscape that Reguillo examines. It evades the question of origin, because the main goal of the documentary is to create a sensationalized account of the evil monster, and not to generate a real dialogue that fleshes out the more complex issues that define the gang from a social standpoint. It becomes obvious, then, that the primary objective of this documentary is not to inform, but more to sensationalize the gang, make them scapegoats by manipulating the truth, under the assumption that the information presented derives from an expert authority on the subject of Mara Salvatrucha.

I use the term “manipulating the truth” because the documentary does not necessarily lie about everything related to MS-13. *The World’s Most Dangerous Gang* does present some valid information. The birthplace of the gang is identified as Los Angeles. The audience sees some examples of authentic Mara Salvatrucha tattoos and graffiti. The documentary mentions the *Mano dura* strategy used by Central American police agencies to combat growing gang activity. There are interviews with supposed gang members and gang specialists from various police

organizations, which lend a distinct authority to the images that the documentary presents. Yet, there are a number of scenes that are incongruous with any intention of presenting the truth. For example, as the documentary presents a series of images of Mara Salvatrucha graffiti, one picture clearly shows an 18, and not a 13, meaning that the tag belongs not to Mara Salvatrucha, but to the 18th Street Gang, MS-13's greatest rival. In an early segment, the documentary intends to confirm the spread of Mara Salvatrucha activity by flashing newspaper headlines from specific cities all over the country, each overlaid on a map of the United States. It mentions a particularly gruesome crime that takes place in Houston, Texas, but the heading is from a newspaper in the Rio Grande valley, hundreds of miles away. And although this last point may seem almost insignificant, it begs the question as to why they were not able to find a headline from the *Houston Chronicle*. After all, if this newspaper article is proof positive of crimes committed in Southwest Texas, one wonders why they were not able to find a corresponding scarehead directly from the United States' fourth largest city.

These slight inaccuracies bring into question the authenticity of the rest of the documentary. But the prime example of the manipulation and misrepresentation of Mara Salvatrucha returns to the avoidance of origin that has served as a constant unifying thread in this close reading of *The World's Most Dangerous Gang*. As was said, the documentary correctly names Los Angeles as the gang's birthplace, and identifies deportation to Central American countries, and specifically prisons in the area, as the source for the spread of Mara Salvatrucha. However, any documentary promising "answers from the inside" should engage the gang's inception in a more developed manner. The gang's roots in social injustice, war, and discrimination explain, in large part, their current violent existence. Yet, the feature only briefly touches upon the Salvadoran civil war. In fact, the phrase "civil war" is only used twice in the

entire feature, and both times in a very general sense. It mentions that many Mara Salvatrucha members are products of a 1979 pattern of immigration arising from the need “to escape *a* civil war.” The stress on the indefinite article “a” is mine, underscoring the generalization of not specifically identifying *which* civil war. The country name, El Salvador, does not precede or follow the phrase “civil war.” The social and political current underlying the Salvadoran civil war correspond to very specific Salvadoran issues. Ignoring this specificity homogenizes all the countries in Central America that fought, at different times and for different reasons, civil wars during the seventies, eighties, and nineties. For the viewer, there is no separation between the Salvadoran civil war, and the one fought in Guatemala, for example. And so, to the at-home viewer Mara Salvatrucha suddenly appeared as a result of some typically savage, Third World war in a far off land. Perhaps the documentary ignores the specificity of the Salvadoran situation in order to avoid addressing the military and financial aid provided by the United States to the same Salvadoran government that committed severe human rights violations and acts of mass murder in the name of quelling rebellion. These violations drove many of the first, future MS-13 members out of their country and to Los Angeles. Whatever the reason behind not including this information, the Salvadoran civil war was a key component in the birth and eventual growth of Mara Salvatrucha. The San Salvador children who stepped over the dead bodies of their classmates on the way to school became the traumatized and battle-ready teenagers who looked to defend themselves from racial violence in 1980s Los Angeles. Ignoring this critical part of Mara Salvatrucha history severely brings into question the educational intention of the documentary. This MS-13 history is incomplete, inadequate, and not truly geared towards understanding “where it came from and where it’s going” or “what led them from being a bunch of kids to the most violent gang in the world.”

The viewer has to wait almost 25 minutes, in a 51-minute documentary, before these roots are discussed in any definitive way. The film mentions “a civil war” twice, and in a cursory manner throws around words like “alienation” and “discrimination,” leading towards a superficial mention of how Los Angeles immigrants “banded together to protect” themselves from other groups in their new neighborhoods. This information, which otherwise proves essential to understanding Mara Salvatrucha, flashes on the television screen for less than fifteen seconds. Therefore, the viewer does not see the narration of a gang beginning that includes the specific Salvadoran civil war, the hardships associated with living in the Pico/Union neighborhood of Los Angeles, or the agonizing poverty that these original MS-13 members lived under, conditions that forced them to group together in order to survive, both physically and economically.

This incomplete and inaccurate origin incites different responses from the viewing audience. The brushed-aside, even overlooked beginning, stemming from war and misery, has the possibility to arouse a sense of pity, even sympathy, from the audience if otherwise included. That is not to say that the component of fear does not persist, but this fear is mitigated by the idea that, at least upon its initiation, the gang had few options but to group together. Additionally, making reference to the United States’ involvement in the Salvadoran conflict could beget the idea that these children of war are a product of an American intervention that facilitated the murders of hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians, forcing hundreds of thousands more to flee to South Central Los Angeles. In other words, including this United States participation could lead to the revelation that the Mara Salvatrucha problem is, in part, the United States’ fault. On the other hand, establishing that the MS-13 members have always looked towards extreme behavior promotes the idea that they have always been dangerous, that

they only ever cared about hurting those not in their gang. In other words, in this documentary, Mara Salvatrucha crime is inherent and innate, and not a response to marginalized and traumatic antecedents.

This, of course, sets up the Mara Salvatrucha member as one of the villains within the imaginary of violence, a monster like the Xenomorph, who just appeared one day from a faraway land with the sole purpose of fomenting social unrest via random and impossible-to-qualify violence. And so, while *The World's Most Dangerous Gang* does, in fact, present some truth to the MS-13 phenomenon, its greater purpose is to create a hateable antagonist that can take the blame for a fear that is, in large part, perpetuated by its own representation, as an agent of the imaginary of violence. The documentary tells the viewer whom they must fear, why they must fear them, and then gives this villain an easily recognizable face, so that the audience has someone specific to indict as the guilty party of their own feelings of terror and angst.

The alternative approach, one that, in an objective and honest way, portrays Mara Salvatrucha as a criminal organization, but one that shows lives forced into violence and crime, humanizes the maras. This approach shifts the blame from MS-13 onto the structures that caused this deviant behavior in the first place. That is not to say that Mara Salvatrucha lacks agency. The gang is responsible for its own actions as its members ultimately decide whether they want to commit crimes and act out with violence. Yet, the causes behind why they choose illegality and belligerence are complex, and certainly not as simple as *The World's Most Dangerous Gang* asserts. The National Geographic Channel's program attempts to remove this complexity through sensationalization and the manipulation of truth. And as a representative of the media and an organization that has, for decades, promoted education, there is a strong chance that the audience

takes the words of the documentary as authentic, conclusive evidence of the monstrous nature of the gang.

II. Mara Salvatrucha “por siempre?” But why?: *Sin nombre* and the Further Over-Stylization and Sensationalization of MS-13

Released in 2009, *Sin nombre* attempts, on the surface, a much different tone in its portrayal of Mara Salvatrucha, especially in regards to *The World’s Most Dangerous Gang*. Most importantly, whereas the latter claims to take the form of documentary film, *Sin nombre* is a feature film. The characters are not real people. The plot is fictionalized, though based on a combination of possible true-to-life stories pulled from current headlines (Mara Salvatrucha activity, human smuggling, illegal immigration). Whereas *The World’s Most Dangerous Gang* purports “reality,” *Sin nombre* is a dramatization. Notwithstanding, the two programs share a number of qualities. Both consist of out-group portrayals of the gang. Despite *Sin nombre*’s insider approach to Mara Salvatrucha culture, specifically with its development of the main characters El Casper and L’il Mago, the film was produced and directed by individuals who live outside of the MS-13 culture. And as with *The World’s Most Dangerous Gang*, this out-group influence begs questions within the context of the imaginary of violence. What is the film’s intention? How does its filmic portrayal differ from the effort put forth by the National Geographic Channel? How are the two similar?

Cary Joji Fukunaga’s words provide a bit of perspective on the aim of the movie, especially in terms of his desired “realistic” tone. In order to achieve his ambitions, Fukunaga spent months interviewing Mara Salvatrucha members in prisons, some still affiliated and others, like the protagonist Casper, who were looking for a way out of the gang. After speaking to these inmates, he was able to secure a number of street-level contacts who provided details about MS-

13 culture that Fukunaga later incorporated into his movie. According to a conversation with Interview magazine, Fukunaga “wanted everything to be as authentic as possible” (Franco 1). In this way, *Sin nombre* parallels other movies (*La vendedora de rosas* (Victor Gaviria, 1998), *De la calle* (Gerardo Tort, 2001), *Cidade de Deus* (Fernando Meirelles, 2002)) that have tried to create gritty, “realistic” cinematic experiences that engage the subject of gang and youth violence in urban settings. Fukunaga wanted to separate himself from journalists and documentarians who interviewed people in the Mara Salvatrucha community to later “write a sensational piece about how powerful the gang is” (*Complex 2*).

To a certain extent, Fukunaga succeeds in his endeavor. As with *The World’s Most Dangerous Gang*, the depiction of the gang in *Sin nombre* does provide access to some aspects of Mara Salvatrucha culture. The spoken language and terminology in the film is correct, as the characters talk in MS-13 slang appropriately. The MS-13 tattoos are faithful to the traditional ink work seen on maras on the streets. Maras salute and communicate with each other through valid hand-sign stacking, the process of combining numerous gang signs together into one communication. The graffiti is nearly perfect, with its devil hands and gothic lettering. The gang nicknames, L’il Mago, Casper, Smiley, El Sol, and others replicate the renaming of maras once they become legitimate members of the gang. The viewer sees the mandatory jump-in of a new recruit, the tradition where a number of current members beat on neophytes for thirteen seconds. Even Casper’s trip into the Destroyer, his clique’s neighborhood safe house, reflects the reality in many neighborhoods across the Americas—a well-guarded location where Mara Salvatrucha members congregate and spend time together. As Casper walks the clique’s youngest recruit, Smiley, through the halls of the Destroyer, we see many of the activities correctly associated with Mara Salvatrucha culture, activities confirmed through my own interviews with gang

members. There are teenagers smoking weed. Others are just “chilling,” or relaxing and talking. In another room, a mara tattoos his gang brother. In short, similar to the National Geographic documentary and perhaps even more so, certain authentic details are in place, details that demonstrate that, despite Fukunaga’s outsider status, the director was able to construct a moderately accurate depiction of the more superficial aspects of Mara Salvatrucha culture.

However, a more detailed examination of the gang’s filmic representation casts doubt on Fukunaga’s ostensible intention to produce an authentic characterization of the gang, one that breaks from the sensationalized articles that he seems determined to demystify, according to his interview in *Complex*. On the contrary, *Sin nombre* renders a negative image of the gang, one that parallels *The World’s Most Dangerous Gang* in terms of creating a societal monster that must be feared and avoided, one whose actions are unexplainable and unjustifiable within the context of the urban existence. As is the case with *The World’s Most Dangerous Gang*, ignoring vital aspects of the community transfigures the gang into an evil presence, one without origin that is easily hated without criticizing the social structures that led to its development.

This representation of Mara Salvatrucha is problematic when considering the film’s apparent attempt at a realistic depiction of the gang. It ignores the complex underpinnings involved with the mara’s need for community. In various interviews, Fukunaga claims that distorted and broken families serve as one of his primary artistic motivators, when screenwriting for a movie (*Complex*, Franco, et al.). Of course, Mara Salvatrucha members do look to the gang to provide a family structure that they may not have in their own lives, outside of the gang. Beyond this need for family, however, the compulsion to join Mara Salvatrucha stems from a young, poor urban resident and his or her ability to rely on certain services and conveniences within the gang that they otherwise could not receive outside of the gang. This recalls cognitive

and social scientist Patrick Colm Hogan's discussion of functionality in how individuals construct a sense of identity based on the social groups that they belong to. Functionality refers to a community's "bearing on access to opportunities, services and goods" (77). Hogan explains that "functionality is the degree to which a particular category affects one's freedom of action or choice," adding that "the more functional a category, the more likely it is to be high in the hierarchy of one's self-concept" (60). Before joining the gang and as citizens of a traditional national model, future Mara Salvatrucha members have little access to opportunity, scarce money to access most services and goods (health care, housing, food), and their freedom of action or choice is severely limited by their position as marginal entities in an urban space. Therefore, traditional national and community categories do not prove functional in the lives of would be Mara Salvatrucha members. They are discriminated against, marginalized before ever joining the gang, harassed by police agencies and ethnically different rival gangs. The impoverished neighborhoods that many of these future Mara Salvatrucha members live in impede any kind of economic progress, and the lack of legitimate jobs in these regions assure that, unless they find a more functional social category, they will play out a life of hunger and want. Future MS-13 members cannot rely on police or state protection. During the course of my interviews with Mara Salvatrucha members, when the conversation led to them revealing why they joined the gang in the first place, they invariably cited protection as a main justification. One mara specifically told me that he was tired of getting beat up, "jumped" as he put it, on his way to school when he was twelve. Telling his parents, and their subsequent calls to the police, did nothing to secure his personal safety. Joining MS-13 was the only way that he really felt safe in his McArthur Park, Los Angeles neighborhood, as they protected him and even sought out those who had been abusing him. This story mirrors some of the reasons why the original Mara

Salvatrucha banded together in order to battle rival gangs that were threatening their lives and livelihood, threats that were ignored, in large part, by an ineffectual and altogether absent Los Angeles Police Department.

And so, customary social categories give no sense of functionality to future Mara Salvatrucha members. They join MS-13 because this community allows them a functionality that they did not have when they were non-affiliated. They have a consistent source of income, as they perform jobs for the gang. They feel protected by the gang, as any attack on individual MS-13 members represents an attack on the entire gang. In short, as Mara Salvatrucha members, they can access many of the goods and services that they could not before, as marginalized members of the quotidian social category. Therefore, the Mara Salvatrucha community is not only about substituting a family. MS-13 is not merely a replacement for a lost family, and certainly not just a source of kinship and companionship. The community provides a specific series of beneficial interactions that bolster sources of revenue and reinforce survival.

However, while considering the importance of functionality and a sense of identity within a social group proves critical in the examination of why youngsters join Mara Salvatrucha in the first place, neither of these key concepts comes into play in Fukunaga's movie. *Sin nombre* ignores both components in its characterization of the gang. As such, the viewer questions if there is any real advantage to becoming a mara. This leaves a one-dimensional representation of the gang, one that further confirms that there is no origin, no real justification for gang affiliation. And so, the Mara Salvatrucha members presented in the movie take on a villainous form, one not focused on either functionality or identity, but instead on savagery, violence and death. For Fukunaga, Mara Salvatrucha is a cinematic monster akin to the Xenomorph—the evil force which keeps the immigrants in the movie from safely reaching the United States.

Fukunaga's portrayal of MS-13 does not promote the gang as functional. Rather, the gang seems to interfere with and even hinder the goods and services that its members may have access to in a variety of differing ways. Even before Casper murders L'il Mago, the viewer never sees any specific activity that would motivate a youngster to join Mara Salvatrucha to begin with. Casper is never shown making money for the gang or, in turn, himself. We do not see Casper protecting anyone of his "brothers," or any of them protecting him. Instead, in almost every early scene in the movie, Casper's fellow gang members execute vicious and violent acts against one of their own, putting into question the notion that Mara Salvatrucha will always be there for its members. The gang's rules, in the movie, are totalitarian, and the punishments for breaking these rules are severe. Of course, "check courting" is a common disciplinary practice in the gang, a process in which several maras beat a fellow gang member in cases where important rules are broken. Casper's punishment, however, results from a simple white lie that had nothing at all to do with gang activity. He was not in enemy territory or ratting the gang out. He was simply visiting his girlfriend. The beating, however, is brutal, and leaves a scar over his eye. Furthermore, as Casper sits with his girlfriend in the train yard, El Sol, the clique's second-in-command, indirectly threatens his life, advising him to watch himself because one never knows what kind of person is waiting to attack him. Instead of security, this kind of interaction breeds fear and contempt, feelings which both serve to derail the functionality that Mara Salvatrucha supposedly provides for its members.

The ultimate act of betrayal occurs when Casper's girlfriend comes and visits him during a clique meeting in a cemetery. She is there against his wishes, and immediately Casper jumps up to escort her away from the meeting. L'il Mago, the gang boss, interferes, and offers to walk her out instead. Knowing that he cannot go against the demands of the clique leader, Casper tells

L'il Mago that he needs to walk her out, and nothing else. This veiled warning proves that Casper does not trust his leader, and that, in turn, he does not trust his gang. True to Casper's suspicions, L'il Mago attempts to rape the girl, ripping her jeans and panties off, as he bends her over a gravestone, ready to penetrate her from behind. In the ensuing skirmish, she falls and hits her head on the cement, killing her instantly. My fieldwork revealed that in real Mara Salvatrucha circles, where loyalty and respect for your brothers takes precedence above everything else, raping a brother's girlfriend would result in a check court, that is to say a disciplinary action. In this most extreme case, murdering the girl could result in the death of the offender, regardless of his rank. In the filmic portrayal, however, L'il Mago's position in the gang is enough to absolve him and free him from punishment. What is more, rather than apologizing to Casper or offering a familial, father-figure method of consolation, L'il Mago brushes the incident aside, telling Casper that he'll find another just like her. This attempted rape and murder would be a serious trespass in real-world Mara Salvatrucha communities. For MS-13, an important emphasis is placed on others not taking what they believe belongs to them—money, territory, their lives. This is especially underscored when it comes to maras taking from their brothers. Stealing from a fellow mara, or forcefully snatching another gang member's belongings, results in some of the more brutal punishments dealt by the gang. They believe that the world outside of the gang tries to take everything that they deserve, and so taking from a fellow brother is perceived as the ultimate trespass. Yet in *Sin nombre*, this action is viewed as commonplace, as if it is a typical occurrence that Casper must deal with because that is the way that life goes in Mara Salvatrucha.

And so Casper does not make money for himself, despite recruiting new members and assumedly undertaking various tasks for them. He distrusts his fellow gang members. Instead of

protection he hears threats. And ultimately his ability to access “the freedom of action and choice,” the key mechanism behind functionality, becomes completely compromised by the most influential member of the gang. In short, functionality as an MS-13 member is not cultivated in this movie. Casper is no freer in MS-13 than he would be in the outside world. The breakdown of the functionality parameter leads to another problematic within the film’s representation of Mara Salvatrucha. How can Casper feel any kind of affectivity towards a group of people that threaten him, that stifle his ability to advance, even within the confines of the gang, and who murder the people that he loves? In other words, with the images presented on the screen, what in the behavior and actions of Mara Salvatrucha would reveal any kind of affection to the gang? What would keep Casper in the gang? Why did he join in the first place? Casper must leave the gang because there is no affectivity for it. To him, the phrase “mara por vida” rings empty and untrue. With the elimination of Casper’s affectivity, the viewer has no real indicator as to why joining Mara Salvatrucha is an attractive option for its members. This representation of the gang portrays a group of savages, animals who are just as willing to hurt their own members as they are to kill rival gang members. The audience does not see the complex situations that lead a youngster to enter this violent life, because the audience is not made aware of the various benefits that the gang provides, benefits that are not available to the youngsters as members of other social groups. With the functionality of the gang erased, along with the associated affectivity that derives from the love for the community, we are left with another violent group of kids and nothing more. The viewer wonders what scenes in the film illustrate that Mara Salvatrucha is a community worth living and dying for. Why is Mara Salvatrucha “por vida?” What is more, the audience questions if there are any benefits at all associated with MS-13 membership, and therefore fails to understand the driving force behind the gang’s expansion and its importance in

the lives of marginalized children all over the Americas. They do not join Mara Salvatrucha in order to steal, rape, and murder. They join the gang in an attempt to overcome their almost nonexistent capacity to function as a regular member of society.

Sin nombre further compounds an absolute rejection from the viewer through its over-stylization of both Mara Salvatrucha and its members. The tattoos are bold; a deep dark black that appears as if the ink has been painted on with a sharpie pen. In *Sin nombre*, the maras have clear lines, all of which are filled in completely, with no gaps or breaks in the color. This ruptures the reality that many of the gang members receive their tattoos from amateur artists living within the gang. These laymen receive little or no formal training, and their tools are rudimentary, many times pieced together from spare parts and left over scraps. The inked image, therefore, suffers in quality. In the film, the tattoos appear on sculpted, toned bodies, obviously developed after hours of working out. These are beautiful people with beautiful tattoos. They are clearly actors with make-up ink work who look very different from the street children used in movies such as *De la calle*, *Cidade de Deus*, and *La vendedora de rosas*. This stylized characterization does not promote authenticity. Instead it turns the MS-13 members into cinematic caricatures, over-refined counterfeits who do not serve to represent real people. Rather, the Mara Salvatrucha members become nothing more than stereotypes that fill the role of villain in a movie about immigration.

This over-stylization becomes more apparent when comparing two of the main characters in the movie, Li'l Mago and Casper. Li'l Mago, the original leader of Casper's Mara Salvatrucha clique, has bold, filled-in facial tattoos, which stand in stark contrast to his gleaming white set of professionally cleaned teeth. He is tall, muscular, beautiful, and menacing, thereby giving the viewer an imposing and hard-to-ignore antagonist that they can root against. Beyond Li'l Mago's

physical presentation, his personality is portrayed as sadistic and perverted. He smiles as Casper's juvenile recruit, El Smiley, undergoes the brutal "jumping-in" ceremony, circling the violence like a vulture, slowly counting off the thirteen seconds, enjoying every tick of the clock. He relishes in watching the youngster suffer as the gang kicks and beats him. At the same time, L'il Mago enjoys rape. On two occasions, we see him sexually assault a woman, never under the auspice of Mara Salvatrucha business. Of course, both rapes take place during or after MS-13 activities, but the violations occur outside of the gang's desires. First he rapes Casper's girlfriend Martha after a gang meeting, and then a second girl during an attempted robbery onboard a train. These are his rapes, not the gang's, yet the viewer, seeing the close relationship between Mara Salvatrucha and L'il Mago, may think that this kind of assault assumes a typical role in MS-13 culture. L'il Mago is also a murderer. And although many Mara Salvatrucha members are, in fact, murderers, the clique's leader does not kill Casper's girlfriend in the name of MS-13 business. Martha dies defending herself from the same kind of random act of violence that the viewer is led to expect from Mara Salvatrucha, even though, in reality, such a murder would constitute grounds for punishment within the gang community.

L'il Mago's portrayal as a cruel, sadistic, murdering rapist paints him and, by extension, Mara Salvatrucha as monsters. He and his gang are the main antagonists of the movie in the same way that Mara Salvatrucha is the evil presence in *The World's Most Dangerous Gang*. There is no attempt at representing an authentic, non-sensational version of the gang. Mara Salvatrucha in *Sin nombre* serves as the chaotic force that disrupts and attacks the lives of those who are non-affiliated. This becomes even more evident when contrasting L'il Mago with the character El Casper. Unlike L'il Mago, Casper does not have highly visible tattoos on his face. The one mark on his face, a single teardrop tattoo, looks like a simple mole under his eye. He is

seldom seen with his shirt off, brazenly displaying his tattoos in the same manner that L'il Mago does. In other words, he is easier to accept because he has not mutilated his body in the name of the evil gang to the degree that his brothers have. He looks more human.

The plot reinforces Casper's humanity throughout the movie, as we see him with his girlfriend behaving like any typical teenager would—making out with her, whispering pillow talk, and taking pictures with Martha. The audience also sees Casper's humanity in his facial reactions to the violence that surrounds him. Whereas L'il Mago smiles sadistically during Smiley's initiation beating, Casper looks concerned. L'il Mago's cold, distant face when telling Casper about Martha's death stands in direct contrast to Casper's own hurt, tearful reaction. Casper looks disgusted as L'il Mago attempts to rape Sayra on the roof of the train, and his attack on L'il Mago is a physical reaction to this feeling of disgust. He machetes L'il Mago in the side of the neck, and, unlike most of L'il Mago's violent acts, Casper's assault is justified in the protection of a defenseless girl. This killing, the attack on L'il Mago, is the only time the audience sees Casper commit an act of homicide in the movie, despite a train rider's later claim that Casper "es un asesino." In fact, according to what the viewer sees on the screen, Casper is anything but a murderer. He is a protector, only resorting to the machete when the situation escalates to the point of rape. Clearly, L'il Mago's murder of Martha still lays fresh in Casper's memory, but this need to protect Sayra eventually catalyzes action.

Thus, the movie establishes a polarity for the viewer. On one end of the spectrum they see L'il Mago: twisted, insane, and brutal; his tattooed face a salient indicator of his place outside of the norms of society. On the other end, the viewer comes to know Casper, a kind-hearted, concerned, and honorable youngster, willing to sacrifice his own life and the standing in his gang in order to protect a stranger. This polarity, then, translates into the oldest binary

recognized in stories of any genre, whether cinematic, literary, or anecdotal. *Sin nombre* narrates a battle between good and evil. As Casper separates himself, further and further, from the gang, he becomes less a monster and more like a human being. In short, as he slowly detaches from Mara Salvatrucha, Casper assumes the role of the good guy. His transformation from mara to redeemed hero relies on vital key moments, so that the viewer can see the metamorphosis clearly and without question. Of course, Martha's rape is the initial impetus for his decision to leave the gang. This is his primary motivation. From there, slicing through L'il Mago's neck assumes the role of the foundational moment when he breaks from the gang, officially. His transformation, however, is not complete, as he must shed all of his connections, both psychological and physical, to Mara Salvatrucha. In the next step in the process, Casper reads a text on his cell phone telling him that his death has been green-lit, or approved, by the gang. Instead of responding, he drops the phone onto the train tracks below him. At this point, he no longer has any line of direct communication with the gang. Soon after, he sheds his gang nickname, affirming that his name is no longer Casper, but Willy. He has now shed the gang nomenclature, the most obvious way in which MS-13 gives its members an identity outside of normal society. In his final act of morphing, Willy looks at his teardrop tattoo in a rearview mirror and peels it off. Using his fingernails, he cuts underneath the ink and pries it from below his eye, leaving only a bloody mark. Now, he is completely disassociated from his feelings of belonging to the gang. No longer able to communicate or take orders via text, rejecting his gang name, and ultimately removing any trace of MS-13 ink, Willy has made the change from mara to human.

This change endears the viewer as they see a young man looking for freedom from an oppressive and murderous community and culture. Willy is not Casper, not anymore, and this move from one identity to the other affirms the audience's feelings of compassion and instills a

sense of redemption in the Willy character. Because Willy can break from Casper, and by extension Mara Salvatrucha, he becomes the good guy, the hero of the movie, saving Sayra from L'il Mago, and ultimately providing for her the means by which to enter the United States and unite with her family in New Jersey. Conversely, the constant threat, violence, and antisocial behavior demonstrated by MS-13 sets them up as the antagonist. L'il Mago, reminiscent of other Hollywood bad guys, serves as the primary villain in the movie, as his actions are the most grotesque, the most unexplainably vicious. He sits upon a throne made up of headstones during the Mara Salvatrucha meeting that ultimately leads to Martha's death, a king to these vandals. And from his throne he leads this force of evil, this Mara Salvatrucha, as they attack the vulnerable—the children, the poor immigrants, the physically weaker women. Willy is more familiar to the audience in appearance and demeanor. He is not as violent as the rest of his homies. His assaults are justified. He looks more like the typical audience member, without facial tattoos. And as he separates himself from Mara Salvatrucha, he comes closer and closer to the group that watches his actions on film. This dynamic, in turn, sets MS-13 as the other, as the enemy. Therefore, as with *The World's Most Dangerous Gang*, *Sin nombre* confirms the need to fear Mara Salvatrucha and its members. As portrayed in the movie, these criminals could lash out at any random urbanite, killing them, raping them, taking everything from them. This characterization does not take into consideration the functionality of the group, the inner workings, agreements, and exchanges between members that allow the youngsters access to certain goods and services otherwise unavailable to them. Instead, the film creates a simplistic dichotomy that attempts to represent a complex social and cultural structure. Willy is good. He is good because of his desire to leave the gang, and as he transitions towards this break, his actions reinforce the idea that he is a hero. On the opposite side of the binary, L'il Mago, and by

extension Mara Salvatrucha, represent the bad guys within the imaginary of violence. Such simplification annuls Fukunaga's purported objective of steering away from sensationalism and towards authenticity. Rather, *Sin nombre* confirms the viewer's fear by misrepresenting Mara Salvatrucha in such a way that reinforces hatred within the imaginary of violence. And yet again, the imaginary of violence presents a definitive face to scapegoat, and a group of characters easily recognized as the monsters of society—Xenomorphs who simply appeared one day with the main goal of terrifying society at large.

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