



Exhibition «Gangs of the 80s. Cinema, press and the street»  
25/05/2009 - 06/11/2009

## Small urban myths

Some people even talk about the «Vaquilla generation», after the teenage gang leader of the same name. The gangs that emerged from the crisis of the 1980s are part of the story of the nascent Spanish democracy. As we already know, the transition coincided with an acute economic crisis which led to the famous Moncloa Pacts signed between the government and opposition parties to prevent further economic decline. While liberty was gaining ground in Spain in the midst of social conflict, in the peripheral neighbourhoods of the big cities, such as Barcelona, Madrid and Bilbao, the social marginalisation of young people, who had no work prospects or saw no chance of building any future projects on the horizon, became radicalised through the consumption of drugs. These were the «years of lead» for the heroin which ravaged an entire generation.

It was in this atmosphere that a number of bold young individuals, hell-bent on a life of crime in order to pay for their drug habit, became small urban myths who symbolised the gravity of a situation that posed a threat to social cohesion. As often happens in these cases, the media played a key role. The magnification of the crimes committed by these youngsters and the fact that they were perhaps over-represented in social terms, converted them into true urban myths which triggered a mixture of admiration and fear. They were, at any rate, the voices of the neighbourhoods where young people no longer identified with conventional forms of representation and viewed politics as something completely alien to them. The gangs continue to be a manifestation of *disenchantment*. The time some of their members spent in prison coincided with a short-lived movement that originated in France: the COPEL (Organization of Spanish Prisoners in Protest), a political organisation of prisoners who brought the problems of prison life to the attention of the press and took part in several riots, for instance, at the Model Prison in Barcelona. El Vaquilla and others took part in these movements.

Of course, the media which once sang their praises later crucified them. They were, in any event, ephemeral myths, lives condemned to a tragic end, destroyed by drugs and the dynamics of a growing marginalisation which their own actions led them to. Many of them died from heroin addiction or through violence in confrontations with the police. Others became the fodder of TV reality shows.

However, this is an episode in the life of a country in the throes of transition. A minor story which resulted in a cinematic genre associated with the adventures of these kids and bore witness to another face of the transition. The face that doesn't appear in the official history books. The reconstruction of this episode, based on some of its most idiosyncratic characters, enables us to retrieve the history of the urban peripheries, to analyse the media protocols used to construct the characters and trace the destinies of a group of youngsters who became key players without understanding why. Having fallen to the bottom of the well, they were unable to get out.

There is a touching image, whose inclusion in the exhibition may seem ironic while, at the same time, expressing empathy with a series of characters born of exceptional circumstances, who were unable to find their place in the world or in a society that failed to find them a role, except, that is, for



Prologues by Josep Ramoneda to the CCCB's catalogues

short-lived media glory, just before it sunk them forever. This image shows one of them, José Luis Manzano, in the role of John the Baptist, in a mural depicting the Last Supper, painted behind the altar in the church of Alhóndiga in Getafe. Stories of a crisis – the crisis of the 1980s – which we look back to at the time of another crisis. Taking a look at those events through contemporary eyes can help alter our perception, but bringing the gaze of that time to the current crisis can also help us see it from a different point of view.