

The Power of Creative Freedom through Filmmaking



Fabrizio Prada Rojas © Prada Films

INTERVIEW WITH THE MEXICAN FILM DIRECTOR **FABRIZIO PRADA ROJAS**

By **LAURA LĂZĂRESCU-THOIS, PhD**

Fabrizio Prada Rojas is a Mexican film director, screenwriter, producer, photographer, and actor. He graduated from the International School of Film and Television of San Antonio de los Baños in Cuba between 1993 and 1995, specializing in directing and having, among others, Gabriel García Márquez as a teacher. Since 1991, he has directed various short films, documentaries, and feature films, mostly independent productions. His films have been screened and awarded at various international film festivals.

In 2002, Fabrizio Prada directed his debut feature, *Tiempo real*, an 86-minute-long film made in a single shot without editing. The film combines 15 locations, is an independent production, and was shot in 10 days after 8 months of rehearsals. *Tiempo real* is registered in the Guinness Book of World Records as the first one-take film without cuts in film history, shot with a digital camera.

In 2010, he released the feature film *Escrito con sangre*, inspired by a real case that occurred in New York, the story of the murder of a girl in the middle of the street, before the eyes of 38 witnesses who did nothing to prevent this crime. *Escrito con sangre* was also my first feature film as a sound designer, and I was both thrilled and honored to accept the challenge. I was recommended to Fabrizio by Cristian Mungiu during his visit to Romania in 2008-2009. After this experience, I worked with Fabrizio on two one-minute short films as a video editor – *Car Horn* (2010) and *Lunch Box* (2010). In 2017, he directed the modern western feature *El Ocaso del Cazador*, also inspired by a real case reported in the press, about a man from Ciudad Victoria, Tamaulipas, who refuses to give his ranch to the organized crime that is threatening him but to defend himself alone.

Among other films he directed, he also worked as a photographer and published the book *Feminine Minds & Sensitivities* (2015), which consists of 110 images of actresses from different countries. He is preparing his second photobook, *The Naked Majas*. Fabrizio Prada Rojas is also the organizer and director of the Festival Mundial de Cine de Veracruz, dedicated to “more-than-independent” films, already in its twelfth edition.

Laura Lăzărescu-Thois: *How and when did you decide to become a film director?*

Fabrizio Prada Rojas: I was around 8 or 9 years old when I took part in a literary creation workshop. My professor at the workshop was Octavio Reyes, who studied film. I’ve always liked films, ever since I was very young. I joined that workshop because Octavio Reyes had told my dad that at some point we would make some sort of film. Indeed, during the workshop, we made a feature film out

of photos, drawings, and mockups that told a story about a child living on Venus. And I was the actor in that story as well. After that, I started writing a script at that age, but I never finished it.

After several years, when I had to choose a profession, I thought about cinema again, but I saw it as something unattainable. There was no way to enter the cinema, I thought.

But when I was 19 years old, I traveled with my dad to Cuba. And there, I met some friends of his who were filmmakers. I had already seen their films and admired them. I also met another young man who was studying at the International School of Film and Television in Cuba. I understood that it could become something possible. So that was the moment when I thought that I could study cinema, and I decided to do it. Besides working as a filmmaker, I also have an M.A. in orthodox theology; I studied for a university degree in psychology during the pandemic, and then I specialized in positive psychology. I was also distinguished with the title Doctor Honoris Causa of excellence in the art of cinema.

L.L.T.: *You have written scripts yourself, but you also worked with other people. How do you find the themes for your films? When do you know that it is a topic that interests you and that you want to make a film about?*

F.P.R.: There are two ways. For example, I have made six feature films. Three have reached the cinema, and those three are violent. They are from that Mexican cinema of crime, of violence. And those types of scripts, when they are realistic, I have to write them with someone else because I can't write a realistic story alone. When I write, my scripts are comical and absurd, like Ionesco, like Kafka. So, if I write alone, it's this kind of genre. But when it comes to writing on realistic topics, I always need co-writers.

In the film *El Ocaso del Cazador*, I was inspired by what I read one day in the Mexican newspaper called *Milenio* about a man who was 77 years old. Drug dealers went to ask for his property, a ranch. And they told him that he had 72 hours to leave it because they were going to take possession of that ranch. He was a hunter; he took out all his rifles, placed them in the windows of his cabin, and received the drug dealers with bullets. He shot almost all of them. I made the film as if it were a western. Contemporary, but with the laws of the West.

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more love than tragedies.”***

L.L.T.: *So, you mean that you sometimes want to be absurd and comical. And sometimes you want to make films inspired by reality. But is it a balance between the two, or do you prefer one more than the other?*

F.P.R.: Well, now I feel more attracted to the comical because I feel that I already did the hard cinema. I think cinema needs more comedy, more laughter, more love than tragedies. It was a tribute or a trilogy of films to the crudeness and violence of Mexico, Latin America, or the world. Because it happens everywhere. But now I prefer to go more towards comedy.

L.L.T.: *When we were students, our teachers told us that comedy is the most difficult genre. Isn't it difficult to write good comedy without being ridiculous, without the spectators getting bored?*

F.P.R.: I think everything in comedy is difficult - characters, situations, dialogues, and even actors who tend to exaggerate. Sometimes ideas for comedy come to me very easily. And sometimes I do suffer in finding that dialogues and situations can also be repetitive; they can fall into something that has been seen many times. Or in a very simple sense of humor, like "gringo" humor. And sometimes we come up with those ideas. Then we must rethink them. And a comedy script takes more drafts than a realistic one. You have to write it again and again. But I think it depends a lot on one's temperament. For example, if you are a positive, smiling person, I think that making a comedy would be easier for you than making a tragic film. In every comedy, I think there is something tragic, and in every tragic story, there is also something funny. Like the tragicomedy of Ancient Greece. It can be combined. Three of my films were about violence and were shown in theatres, and the other three were comedies and went straight to television. These latter ones had the largest number of viewers out of everything that I have done, although they have not been distributed theatrically. One of them, *Chiles Jalapeños*, had around 30 million viewers, and the others had hundreds of thousands of viewers. So, I think people prefer to watch comedies more.

L.L.T.: *How many of your films are inspired by real events? And why are you interested in an adaptation of the truth, of the authentic?*

F.P.R.: I don't know why. The stories caught my attention a lot. In the case of *Escrito con Sangre*, the interesting thing was that the script was inspired by a story from New York, where a girl was attacked, and almost 40 witnesses didn't do anything to prevent this; they did not interfere nor defend her but preferred to

watch from their windows or simply ignore what was happening. But the story was adapted to happen in a small Latin American city. So that caught my attention as a premise. At the time we did the film, Mexico was not so violent. And then it came to be. Now it has passed a little. But Mexico used to be very violent.

And then *El Ocaso del Cazador* was like a story that had to be told because it was about a hero. A human person who defended himself without counting on others because the authorities are so corrupt that you can't trust the police or the army. So, it was someone who made the law by himself, like in the old West.

And then there was another story. I wanted to write the script but I stopped. For the same reason that I told you I wanted to do comedies. I saw the story of a 13-year-old teenage boy. He was already in the guerrillas, working to defend his people from organized crime. And I saw his report, thought it was interesting, and started to collect his stories. But then I deleted them because I didn't want to make another violent story like that, to dedicate another 2 or 3 years to something that was going to be hard and violent, so I preferred to change the style.

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L.L.T.: *Do you think that cinema has a role, a purpose?*

F.P.R.: There are educational films. There are social films. Some films are fun. And the most difficult and interesting is when you can achieve all this in one film. Give two or three levels of reading. It can be a simple story, but if you interpret it, it can give you another dimension. And also the proposal of making a better world. A mission to change people's lives. But in general, I like to be able to change reality. Create new worlds. Create other situations that perhaps would not happen in real life. In the sense of the absurd. This is the creative freedom that I like about cinema.

L.L.T.: *And do you think you have achieved those things with your films? Do people think that you have different levels of interpretation?*

F.P.R.: Yes in some cases. For example, when I presented *Escrito con Sangre* at universities, there were very long debates with the students about morality, about what they would have done. That left a lot to think about. And also in *Tiempo real*. I had many international debates, including in Bucharest, at the Cinemateca,

a Q&A session of more than an hour and a half. Despite the differences of generations among the audience, it has been interpreted and understood very similarly. With the other films, I didn't have encounters with the public.

However, I think that the author is not always aware of the many levels of interpretation in his creations and the educational function of the film. The author lets himself be carried away by the story, by the inspiration he has, without always being aware of his meanings that can be deciphered more by people specialized in semiotics who can give you different levels of interpretation. If the author tries hard to symbolize something profound, it isn't natural afterward. It is forced. It is an intellectual film by force, not because it comes out naturally. It is better to get carried away by the idea itself.

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L.L.T.: *How do you see the relationship between cinema and the changes in society and social issues like feminism, activism, and politics?*

F.P.R.: It is good to make social cinema that has to do with politics and social issues. I've been watching many international films recently that have to do with immigration issues and racism. There have been many films that have fictionalized situations. I think it is good to try to open our eyes. However, in history, unfortunately, humanity is still selfish in the end. Even if we make a lot of films, we must try to change our mentality and create more solidarity among human beings. Because there is a lot of segregation. That is one of the functions of cinema: to connect people or make them think about those deeper things.

L.L.T.: *What about Mexican directors? Are they concerned about these topics?*

F.P.R.: Yes, yes. For example, I have seen the ones that are in the festival that I organize, the Festival Mundial de Cine de Veracruz. We screen films that are not distributed in cinemas or platforms because they are very independent. But there are a lot of topics about women. Also, in the last edition, we had a film about the inclusion of Down syndrome, *La Laguna Rosa*, and we had a presentation where many children with Down syndrome came. And they filled the room. It was very emotional. And it teaches how to treat all beings as human beings. The same. Not special. Not different. Or not less. So, I think that yes, there are those problems. But the Mexican commercial cinema does not refer to these topics; it's more an imitation of Hollywood cinema. Independent cinema allows you to be free, to express ideas that worry you, and to talk about deeper, more profound themes.



Fabrizio Prada Rojas © Prada Films

L.L.T.: *You mentioned the Festival Mundial de Cine de Veracruz that you've been organizing for 12 years now. How did you come up with this idea?*

F.P.R.: At first, it was called the Extreme Film Festival because it involved films with extreme production conditions. But the word extreme created a lot of confusion because there were people who thought it was about extreme sports or that it was an extreme horror genre festival. So, we removed the word extreme. And now it's just the World Film Festival of Veracruz. It is a festival dedicated to films from all over the world that are more than independent. When I did *Escrito con Sangre*, I realized that a film could be made without money. I wanted to know if there was a similar thing in other countries. I thought it was a thing only in Third-World countries. When I launched the call to make a festival dedicated to this type of film, I also received films from the First World, from large countries like France, Germany, and even Australia. I thought that they didn't need to make non-budget films, but the filmmakers from those countries also had the same difficulties in being able to access funds for their films. There were excellent films from all over the world, made without money. I realized that it was a global expression.

What I wanted to do was make it a movement and integrate more filmmakers. I would like the filmmakers to come to Veracruz to get to know each other and to come up with plans and new ideas. But unfortunately, I have not yet managed to create this network where we all know each other. It's difficult since we do the festival with no money. We do have several associations with other festivals, so we also project winning films from other festivals, which are also small.

L.L.T.: *Does that mean that your experience in Romania inspired you to create this festival?*

F.P.R.: Yes, it inspired me a lot. In Romania, I also wanted to make a feature film, but I only managed to make two short films, which you edited. I chose Romania because I first thought of a country that was not as competitive as France or other European countries, and since I already had Romanian friends, I thought it could be something strategic to be there, to meet other directors, other producers, and so on. Of course, being there, I saw that it is very complicated... If it is complicated for Romanians to produce, for a foreigner it is even more difficult to get funds.

L.L.T.: *What do you think of the co-productions of the international teams? Is it an opportunity for new ideas?*

F.P.R.: There is a program called Ibermedia, dedicated to all the countries of Latin America and Spain. And they have a common fund, where two or three countries must come together to be able to do a co-production. But that means that many countries should come together and put together a department. Sometimes it is not so natural; for example, to have a Spanish character in an Argentine film, it is a little bit forced, but in some cases it is natural. So, it is a trend that works, and many people take advantage of that. I wrote a comedy film script to be shot in Mexico and Romania titled “Tacos Transilvania” ... still looking for a co-producer.

L.L.T.: *What do you think of independent cinema in Mexico? What topics are they looking for? Do young people get the opportunity to realize their ideas, raise money, and have their audience? How is the independent world of the arts in Mexico?*

F.P.R.: I think that many young people, even if they are independent, are very interested in horror. And I think that also happens in Europe. In Spain, for example, young people want to do films featuring a very bloody terror. Whether it is independent or not, they are looking for that trend. But yes, in Mexico and all of Latin America, films look more at the social sense, the human sense, family stories, and stories of communities. I think that even independent documentaries are more committed to the social issues, the ethnicities, the pre-Hispanic culture, and the cultures that still exist in Mexico after more than 500 years since it was colonized. There are still many cultures, and although they don't live like in ancient times, as one would think, they wear the type of clothing we do, but they keep their language and customs. So, there is that ethnic cinema, stories about how the government or the rich, powerful people take their lands, their water... There is cinema about women, stories of women, about their struggles, and social cinema in general: many migration films in different circumstances, and, of course, all cinema genres. But unfortunately, there are not so many opportunities to see these creations. We sent many of our festival films to more than 15 small Mexican

towns that don't have cinemas. We didn't send features, only shorts, because it was easier. And there was an impressive public - a larger audience in those towns than in the city. It was a new experience for us. Now we managed to get some of the films that were selected for our festival distributed on Amazon Prime, and we have a new agreement with a film distributor interested in Spanish-language features.

L.L.T.: *Do you have a favorite film of the ones you've made?*

F.P.R.: Each one of the films I've made has something that I like. My latest short film, for instance, *Hijo de Perro (Heir of the Dog)*, which got 11 international awards, is a step towards my own illogical language, and I dream of making a feature out of this idea.

But my favorite is *Tiempo real*. It's still the one I consider the most important because it was the first film made without cuts in the history of cinema. A couple of weeks ago, I was invited to present it at a cultural center, and I watched it again, and I liked it again. I think it's an idea that comes once in a lifetime.

L.L.T.: *Is there someone who has inspired you throughout your career and whom you want to thank?*

F.P.R.: I have great gratitude for my parents. My father Renato, being a great Bolivian writer, was enthusiastically involved in writing scripts with me: *Tiempo real* and *Chiles Jalapeños*, as well as a few others that have not yet been produced. And my beloved mother, Elda, who never tires of pushing me and motivating me and who has risked a lot so that I can make my films. I always count on all her love.



Festival Mundial de Cine de Veracruz, Director: Fabrizio Prada Rojas.
In 2024, the Veracruz World Film Festival will hold its eleventh edition from November 25 to 30, organized by the 500 Years of Vera Cruz Foundation, Mil Mentas por México, and Prada Films, screening exclusive world, continental, and national premiere films.

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