

Original article in portuguese:

<https://congressoabraji.wordpress.com/2025/07/11/e-a-historia-da-minha-vida-diz-autor-de-livro-reportagem-que-inspirou-o-filme-vitoria/>

'It's the story of my life,' says the author of the investigative journalism book that inspired the film *Vitória*

In an interview, Fábio Gusmão discusses the production of the investigative journalism book "Dona Joana Vitória da Paz" and its recent film adaptation, starring Fernanda Montenegro in the lead role



Interview by Regina Lemmi and Ricardo Thomé | Art by Regina Lemmi

In 2003, an 80-year-old woman recorded the movements of drug traffickers through the blinds of her apartment window, located in Copacabana, overlooking Ladeira dos Tabajaras, Rio de Janeiro. This is the story of the fictional film *Vitória* (2025), starring Fernanda Montenegro and Alan Rocha, and of Fábio Gusmão's series of reports, which earned him the 2005 *Esso Prize* and, later, the investigative journalism book *Dona Vitória da Paz* (2006) — in a new edition, *Dona Vitória Joana da Paz* (2024).

A journalist for 30 years, Gusmão is the editor-in-chief of the public security section at *Jornal Extra*. He has also won the Embratel Award (2005), the 22nd Human Rights Journalism Award (2005) and the Tim Lopes Investigative Journalism Award (2012) — in addition to receiving an honorable mention in the Vladimir Herzog Award.

Fábio Gusmão will also be present at the 20th Abraji Congress, on the panel “I'm Still Here and Dona Vitória: how journalism becomes cinema?”, alongside Marcelo Rubens Paiva (online) and moderated by Juliana Dal Piva. The panel takes place today (12), from 4:30 PM to 6 PM.

The editorial team spoke with the journalist to understand the production of the Dona Vitória case stories and, more recently, their adaptation for the big screen. Check out the interview:

What were the biggest challenges in writing the book-report?

The biggest challenge in writing a book is composing its form. We are used to editing in print, with limited space and a more direct narrative. Although it is a book-report and also adopts that language, you can go deeper. When you compare the original — a six-page notebook — to the book, the notebook only shows a part of her life. In the book, we understand how this woman is forged throughout her life. It was my first book and, 20 years later, I re-edited it in order to tell the complete story and reveal her identity. Before, we were careful not to reveal too many details. But I had the name: Dona Vitória da Paz. And only she and I knew that "da Paz" was her last name. I even imagined that whoever looked at the title would imagine it was something symbolic, about the dream of living in peace.

What was it like meeting Dona Joana?

There were several visits to her house. It was very important not to take notes in front of her, precisely to make her feel comfortable while she told her story. It took time for her to be able to tell more profound things, and I always respected that. This relationship with the source is precisely what is often condemned in universities, especially in relation to journalistic ethics. This closeness made her trust me and allowed me to understand her better. It wasn't a simple negotiation: we were talking about her safety. That's why it was a slow process.

No one is just one layer, and we built a character in the film who wasn't a poor thing — because Dona Joana wasn't a poor thing. She didn't have children or grandchildren; she was a strong-willed woman, sometimes grumpy and stubborn, but good-humored. The book opens up the possibility of immersing oneself in who she was and in my relationship with her. In a news report, that's difficult.

How has this story changed your professional and personal life?

This story is amazing because it's still changing my life today. I already had a solid career, but I had the feeling that things would change, that this was the story of my life. It's a kind of luck that comes from the hard work of being out there in the field. It might be something older journalists do, but it's sorely lacking today.

At the time, I would get emotional when I talked about the story and said I would never have another story like that. The fact that the film was released 20 years after the events shows that a story with this kind of power doesn't age. It's more relevant than ever, in fact.

What did you think about the film? Are there limits to its adaptation?

It's fiction. If you assume it's fiction, it doesn't have to have limits. The limits are always ethical. When negotiating a work for film, one of the issues is the freedom given for adaptation. Some authors don't give that freedom, but I think that if you're representing something, it's already fiction. Breno Silveira (1964-2022) called me to talk and showed me the script. And there was a preamble to discuss the role of fiction in relation to reality. This

was done kindly so that I would look at it in a less critical way. And he said something important: “Reality is imperfect. You don’t always have the hooks and endings that a fictional work has.”

The screenwriters (Paula Fiuza and Breno Silveira) manage to create sensitivity through the characters. When, for example, the children are discussed in a very harsh way, the subject is later revisited, but in a more concerned manner. To address this, Paula creates a character, Marcinho. I'm passionate about the character and about Thawan Lucas, who plays him. The scene of Alan Rocha portraying me when he sees the images for the first time made me travel back in time. But this story still deserves a documentary, because nothing will be more important and impactful than reality.

In public safety coverage, is it possible to avoid falling into stereotypes?

It's impossible for newspapers, over the years, not to have used stereotypes. You fall into traps, especially in the beginning. The journalism practiced in recent years is much more attentive, which demonstrates an evolution of society. And the stereotypes in newspapers are the ones that society uses daily. We have a need for labels; it's a mental model of human beings that, with much effort, has been transforming.

It's important, in this work, to understand that we have an obligation to listen to both sides and that you can't do journalism with activism — and I'm not talking about right or left. You should always seek balance by presenting the facts. If you come across as convinced, you immediately open the possibility of making a mistake. And injustice will always be bad, regardless of the target.

The official coverage of the 20th International Congress of Investigative Journalism is carried out by students, recent graduates, and journalists who are part of the Reporter of the Future Laboratory Newsroom, under the coordination of OBORÉ and Abraji. This edition has the partnership of Jornalismo Júnior (ECA/USP) and institutional support from UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization / Montevideo Office. This text may be reproduced provided the source is cited.